

The Shameful Scorn of Jesus Christ

Scripture: Mark 15:16–21

Code: 41-80

Let's open the Word of God to the fifteenth chapter of Mark...Mark chapter 15. We come in our study of this gospel to Mark's account of the crucifixion of Christ. And as I said, a moment ago, we're going to be looking at this in three parts.

For this morning, I want you to look at the text beginning in verse 15...verse 15, Mark 15 verse 15. "Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

"The soldiers took Him away into the palace. That is the Praetorium. And they called together the whole Roman cohort. They dressed Him up in purple and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him. And they began to acclaim Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews.' They kept beating His head with a reed and spitting on Him and kneeling and bowing before Him. After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him and they led Him out to crucify Him. They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear His cross."

We'll stop our reading at that point. When you think about the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ, typically speaking and traditionally, what most often people focus on is the physical suffering. The usual images in people's minds have to do with the profound nature of agony endured through scourging, or flogging, and being nailed to a cross. We all have the images of Jesus that have been depicted for us really for centuries, Jesus set up against the sky, hanging on a wooden cross, suspended by massive spikes driven through His hands and feet, blood flowing from His wounds, starting with the wounds to His head from the crown of thorns, blood running down His face and drying on His face and blood coursing down His body from His wounds. We have seen the image many, many times, and it is a horrifying image.

People are repulsed by the idea of hanging virtually naked in the blazing sun, and worse than that, for all the people to gape and gawk at, when you add to that the horrors of scourging, flogging, one can only conclude that this is the most horrendous kind of torture that has ever been devised by men.

But as bad as that was, that is really not what the Scripture focuses on. It was not the physical suffering that traumatized Jesus in the Garden. What was so wrenching to Him that caused Him to sweat drops of blood was the anticipation of divine wrath falling on Him, drinking the cup of God's wrath against sinners for whom He was the substitute and punishment. That's why in three separate prayers, He prayed the same thing. "Remove this cup from Me."

So from His viewpoint, it wasn't the physical suffering that posed the horror of the cross. Nor from our perspective, as we look at the descriptions of His crucifixion in the Scripture, are we to be caught up in the physical suffering. The four gospels are very restrained in describing the physical suffering.

Simple words without adjectives, they are not lengthy detailed description of the features of crucifixion or even the features of scourging, simple statements. That is because what happened to Jesus physically was not unique. There were 30 thousand, or so, according to historians, people crucified in the land of Israel around this period of time. Thirty thousand of them would have endured the same kind of physical pain, and there were a couple of thieves on either side of Him who were going through exactly the same agonies.

What the Bible writers do focus on is not the physical suffering, it is the abuse of Jesus that they are interested in. What do I mean by that? The ridicule. The word for mock or mocked appears in the text I read in verse 20, that is really the unique feature of the execution of Jesus. It is riddled with scorn and mockery and disdain. The crucifiers saw Jesus as a joke. In fact, Philo tells us that life was cruel in that part of the world in that day. And that one of the things that people did in that day was taunt those who were mentally deficient. He even writes about it, the teasing and the mockery and the scorn that was heaped on quote/unquote the village idiot.

It is that kind of mentality that is behind the treatment that I just read. Jesus fits into the category as far as the soldiers are concerned, of a village idiot, a lunatic who in a deluded way thinks himself to be a King and whom the Jews also try to pass off as some threat to Caesar. Jesus is a joke and Calvary is a comedy played out.

In fact, from the time that Pilate handed Jesus over to be scourged and to be crucified, as it says at the end of verse 15, His treatment is nothing but an extended farce, it is a comedy. That is its feature. That is all sort of summed up in verse 18 when they began to acclaim, "Hail, King of the Jews." In verse 19, they were kneeling and bowing before Him.

The Romans hated the Jews and they loved to label this man, this deluded lunatic man as the King of the Jews, they loved that and especially Pilate loved that, that's why he put it over the cross in an inscription. The Romans hated the Jews, because the Jews hated the Romans. There were among the Jews the Zealots who went around stabbing Roman soldiers. There were numerous insurrections against the Romans which had to be put down, Barabbas having participated in one of them and very likely aided and abetted by the two thieves that were crucified at either side of Jesus. The Romans had no love for the Jews. The Jews had no love for them, that this man, this man who was no threat to anybody, could be labeled as their king made the joke all the more humorous to them.

This is no surprise, by the way, to our Lord, this treatment, because in chapter 10 of Mark's gospel much earlier, verses 33 and 34, He described exactly He would be treated. How He would be taken and how He would be beaten and how He would be mocked and how He would be spit on. He had prophesied the details of this ridiculing mockery.

Now just to set you in the event, Jesus is in the custody now of Pilate. He has gone through three phases of a Jewish trial, before Annas, Caiaphas, first two phases. Phase three was a public daylight rehearsal of what had been decided illegally in the middle of the night so that the people would see it as some kind of just trial which had to be conducted in the daylight. They conducted it at night, but they put a demonstration on the morning in the daylight, to make it look legal. So there were three phases of the Jewish trial.

Now He comes to Pilate. And in the custody of Pilate, there are three phases to the Gentile trial.

First, before Pilate. Pilate declares that He is innocent, that He is guilty of nothing, no crime that concerns Rome. Pilate then sends Him to Herod. Herod, the Idumaeen, local king puts him through a question and answer session, concludes the same thing, that He is no threat. Sends Him back to Pilate for the final third phase of the Gentile trial.

Pilate then says to the people, because he was typically allowed to do this by the Roman powers and did it at the whim of the people, to release a prisoner that the people desired, sort of placating the people, an act of amnesty on their behalf. He suggests Barabbas, an insurrectionist, thief and a killer. And they want Jesus. Pilate's not ready to kill Jesus because he knows He's innocent of any crime. Sees Him as a rather pathetic figure. So He has Jesus scourged before he hands Him over to be crucified. And that's how verse 15 ends.

Now we backtrack as we come to verse 16. We backtrack as we come to verse 16. He hasn't yet been handed over to be crucified. The soldiers take Him away from Pilate's tribunal and they take Him into the palace that is the Praetorium. But before we get to that, just a word about what has happened. You can see that all Mark does is refer to scourging and doesn't describe it. And that is exactly what I was saying to you, there's a very restrained perspective on the physical issues regarding Jesus. Jesus is scourged. It is after He is scourged that He is then taken away into the palace. And I'll tell you what's going on.

Pilate feels that maybe he can appeal to the sense of mercy and compassion in the part of the Jews if he shows them a beaten, battered, bruised, scourged Jesus. Maybe that will satisfy their blood lust for Jesus. So it is Pilate's idea to have Jesus scourged first, and then show Him in that condition to the people, declare His innocence and hope that the people will have had enough. So He's first handed over to be scourged. The word "handed over" or the word "delivered" at the end of verse 15 is *paradidomi* and it's a technical word that can be used to refer to handing over a prisoner to judgment. That's exactly what he did. According to Luke 23:16, Pilate said, "I will punish Him and release Him." In other words, He's not guilty of anything, my sense of justice will not allow me to kill Him. I will punish Him, that should be enough for the people. So Mark simply says he had Jesus scourged. This was a flogging, wooden handle wrapped with leather, the leather extended in multiple leather thongs, at the end of those thongs, embedded into the leather were bits of sharp bone and stone and metal. And the beating was carried out by two lictors who alternated blows and they kept it up until the flesh was destroyed virtually on the back.

Just to add to that, some thoughts that help us to understand how horrific this was. The body was stretched. And in some cases, stretched on a flat table with the arms extended and then locked in that position and the legs extended so the back is taut and the lashing occurred that way. Other times, tied to a post with suspended feet so that the back was stretched. Other times hung from the ceiling with suspended feet. And then the blows were given. The flesh was torn and lacerated all the way down to the bone itself. And the record tells us that deep veins and arteries and sometimes entrails and organs were exposed and sometimes death occurred, the muscles were shredded as well as the skin. And after the scourging and before the crucifixion, is when we pick up the story in verse 16. This is a scourged Jesus that the soldiers take away into the palace.

Pilate hasn't rendered his final verdict yet. Jesus is still there in the palace in that scourged condition...in the care of the soldiers who decide to extend their comedy, a ribald kind of mockery like you would heap upon a witless man, or a witless boy. So let's call movement one in this account of the crucifixion, the soldiers parody...the soldiers parody, p-a-r-o-d-y.

Verse 16, “The soldiers took Him away into the palace,” that is the praetorium, “and they called together the whole Roman cohort.” Roman cohort members had come into the garden to arrest Jesus, remember that? A cohort would be 600 Romans, one tenth of a legion which was six thousand men. Some of these cohort members who had been assigned to arrest Jesus are now assigned to guard Him after His scourging. And their task is simply to hold Him as a prisoner until the final verdict is set, until the final disposition comes down. He will be ultimately taken to the hill to be crucified but that hasn’t been determined yet, so He’s in the custody of these soldiers.

He’s not where you might think He would be, in Fort Antonia, the military fort right next to the temple ground. Rather He is in the palace. This is a palace built by Herod. It was begun...it was begun in 23 A.D. It was a massive palace. It was used by the Herods and it was also the dwelling place of Roman governors when they came into Jerusalem, so it was the house occupied by Pilate. It’s called Praetorium because the elite troops were the Praetorian Guard. And they gave name to the very place where they were quartered. It was a massive palace, a real palace, a formidable one in the ancient world and both Josephus and Philo tell us it was huge, big enough to have bed chambers for as many as a hundred guests. It was in the courtyard of that palace, possibly, that Jesus was scourged and kept by these soldiers. It doesn’t say He was scourged there, but it’s very obvious that that would be perhaps the place. Why would they shift Him from somewhere else and hold Him in the palace? So likely He was scourged there at the palace and He was kept there in the custody of these soldiers.

When the soldiers had done what they needed to do in scourging Him, and there He was in their presence, they were waiting for orders as to what to do with Him, they decided to carry out their little comedy. They wanted everybody in on the fun so verse 16 says, “They called together the whole Roman cohort.” It wouldn’t take 600 men to guard Jesus, not in that condition. And the other men may have been dispersed in various places but they got them all together for the fun. And so the whole *speiron*, the whole cohort comes together and they begin the parody. They dressed Him, verse 17, up in purple, mock royal robe.

It’s interesting. The integrity of Scripture is remarkable, sometimes in the smallest ways. Matthew 27:28 says, “It was a scarlet robe...It was a scarlet robe.” I love the fact that it says purple here and in John, and scarlet in Matthew. There’s so much integrity in that.

You say, “Well wait a minute? That’s a contradiction.”

It isn’t a contradiction. It is so readily and easily explained because Roman soldiers wore as a matter of their uniform issue, a scarlet covered mantle. But a scarlet colored mantle worn by a soldier over a long period of time, that rough, hard, stiff mantle would have faded in the brilliant sun as the months and years passed by. And so what started out very likely as a scarlet robe, was a faded red that resembled a purple somewhere in between.

They threw on Him this coarse wool robe on His bare exposed back and then after twisting a crown of thorns, they crushed it down onto His skull. And some writers describe the plant as having thorns that were as long as twelve inches. This was a mock, gold leaf wreath, laurel wreath replicated in gold that Caesar would wear. This was to mark Him out as a mock king. In crushing it on His head, it would have punctured His head where there is much blood and cause the blood to run down all over

His head and neck and flow down and be mingled with the blood that was still oozing out of His back and running down the rest of His body. And some of the lashes would have come around to the front and bloodied the front as well.

Matthew adds that in setting Him up to look like a king, in their little comedy, they put a reed in His hand. They put some kind of a mock scepter in His hand which kings held. And Matthew then says in Matthew 27:29, "They knelt down before Him and mocked Him." And that's what Mark says. They put themselves in front of Him at the end of verse 19, kneeling and bowing.

Verse 18 says, "They began to acclaim Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews.'" That's the essence of the mockery because that's what they would have said to Caesar, Hail Caesar, Hail Caesar. Here it's "Hail, King of the Jews." The fun has descended to the worst kind of blasphemy at this point and He is being toyed with as if He is bereft of His senses.

And in verse 19 it even gets uglier. "They kept beating His head with a *kalamos*," the Greek word *kalamos* means a stick...a stick. *Kalamos* is used to describe bamboo-like sticks that grow both along the Jordan River and the Dead Sea in some places. But the word *kalamos* means stick and it is the word used for arrows. So it can be a firm and solid stick. And the evidence here in the language is that they kept on beating His head with a stick. What would ever give them the idea to do that?

Well, back in chapter 14 verse 65, those same soldiers had Jesus in their custody when He was under trial at Caiaphas' house. And the chief priests and the Sanhedrin, the elders, all of them began to spit at Him, verse 65, "Blindfold Him and beat Him with their fists and then slap Him in the face." They took their cues from the Jewish Sanhedrin, can you imagine the Supreme Court of Israel, the religious leaders of Judaism.

And by the way, Jesus said it would happen. I told you back in chapter 10 verse 34 they would mock Him and they would spit on Him, beat Him. But Jesus wasn't the first to describe this, Isaiah was in Isaiah chapter 50 and verse 6. "I gave My back to those who strike Me and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard. I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting...and spitting."

I think even today, spitting in someone's face is the ultimate act of disdain, isn't it? And then they kneel before Him as if He is a King. They're having a party, it's a celebration. It's a comedy. It's a parody. And they're doing this with the God of heaven.

At this point we have to turn to John 19 to get the story. So open John's gospel to the nineteenth chapter for the rest of the story. Here we pick it up. The soldiers twisted, verse 2, a crown of thorns, put it on His head, put a robe on Him, purple robe. That's exactly what Mark said. And they began to come up to Him and say, "Hail King of the Jews," and give Him slaps in the face. So that's where we are.

Then we read this. "Pilate came out again, and said to them," Out to the people. "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." What a coward he is. He has allowed Jesus to be abused like this, lashed, battered around the face, spit on, bloodied, and he every time referring to Christ declares His innocence. But he thinks this might be enough. When they see Him with the blood all over Him, running down His face, everywhere else, when they see Him in

this horrendous condition, certainly that will be enough. So he says, "I'm going to bring Him out so that you may know I find no guilt in Him." I'm not sure how those two go together. If you find no guilt in Him, why have you put Him in this condition? Why have you beaten Him virtually to a pulp if you find no guilt in Him?

But that was his thinking and that's another affirmation of His innocence. He wants the people to see Jesus as helpless, pathetic and in need of some compassion. So he brings Jesus out in verse 5. Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.

Pilate said to them, *Ek kehomo*, that famous statement, "Behold, the man. Behold the man." As if to say, "Isn't that enough? There He stands, the Son of God, the glory of heaven, covered with blood, bleeding from gashing wounds across His back, blood from droplets of sweat that have come through His flesh and blood streaking down His face and neck and His face pummeled into a condition where it may not have been recognizable, cruel disfigurement. Isn't that enough? Is not that enough? Behold the man. Here's your King. Does He look like a threat to Rome, to you, to anybody? Look at Him. Isn't this enough for an innocent man that you accuse of being a King and a threat to Rome?"

He thinks if he can show them a bloody, pathetic piece of beaten flesh, they'll be satisfied. Foolish Pilate, cowardly Pilate. They had tasted blood and now they wanted more. They're like a beast who with the first taste of flesh ravenously goes after all the rest. Hardly had this appeal come out of the mouth of Pilate when the chief priests in verse 6 and the officers saw Him, they cried out, saying "Crucify, Crucify."

Nothing had changed. Pilate had already known why they wanted Him dead, because of envy. Because Jesus was more popular, more powerful, more truthful, far more pure than any of them. They are what Paul describes as past feeling. They hounded Jesus to death. And they hounded Pilate to his own self-destruction. It is a maddening mob of shrieking, frenzied fanatics. And so, Pilate says in frustration in the middle of verse 6, "Take Him yourselves, and crucify Him. For I find no guilt in Him. You kill Him."

Remember what it said back in verse 31, Pilate said that earlier, "Take Him yourselves, judge Him according to your Law." And the Jews said to him, "We're not permitted to put anyone to death." To fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke signifying by what kind of death He was about to die. When Pilate earlier in the trial said, "You kill Him, I give you the permission. I relinquish Rome's right to you, you kill Him.

They said, "Oh, we can't do that. We're not permitted to do that. It's against Roman law." And that, of course, kept Him from being stoned. Couldn't have been stoned because if you died being thrown down, you're not dying being lifted up, and He said He would be lifted up.

Pilate was a desperate coward. He tries one more time to get them to take Him and do whatever they want with Him because he finds no guilt in Him. He says it again in verse 6, and their response is, "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die because he has made himself out to be the Son of God." Now they articulate the real issue. He's the Son of God. And they're going to hold to their ground. They're going to force Pilate to do this. They don't want, they don't want this to be their job, they want it to be his. They want to give a measure of compliance to Roman law so that they can

uphold their positions and their power before Caesar because of their obedience to the Roman laws.

A careful comparison of the four gospels indicates there were seven indictments against Jesus that were articulated. Number one, that He was a threat to destroy the temple. Number two, that He was an evildoer, John 18:30. Number three, that He was perverting the nation. Number four, that He was forbidding taxes to be paid to Caesar. Number five, that He was stirring up the people. Number six, that He claimed to be a king and was a threat to Caesar. And all of that had been laid at the feet of Pilate and none of it had any traction at all, none of it could be verified, none of it could be proven, none of it was even rational or reasonable. So they finally came to the only thing that would ever be able to be said about Him truly, and this was it. He made Himself out to be the Son of God, and that's true...that's true. He did claim to be the Son of God because He was the Son of God.

But for them, that was blasphemy. And the divine providence here is so interesting. Let history record that the Jews killed Jesus because He claimed to be the Son of God. If they had been able to convince Pilate, that He was going to destroy the temple, or that He was an evildoer, or perverted the nation, or forbid the Jews to pay tax to Caesar, or if He was a threat to Caesar, or stirring up a revolt, then one could argue that they crucified Him because they saw Him as a social disrupter, as a rebel, as a threat to society. Let it be said, let the record of history say when the thing finally came down, they wanted Him dead because He claimed to be the Son of God. And the truth of the matter is, they were at the pinnacle of apostasy. It wasn't about politics. It wasn't about social order. They were of the Kingdom of darkness, belonged to Satan, though they pretended to belong to God. The Jews condemned God's Son because He was God's Son. That's how far from the truth they were. So they are without excuse.

Well, Pilate now is in a very difficult position. "Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid." He doesn't want to kill Jesus. And he doesn't want to kill Jesus just because they want him to kill Jesus, because he doesn't want to be their pawn. And he has a sense of justice, after all, he is the leading judge representing Rome in that part of the world. But when they say He is the Son of God, He claims to be the Son of God, that's the blasphemy. It says that he becomes more afraid.

Why would he become more afraid of that? He's already afraid of the Jews. He's afraid of the intimidation. He's afraid of the delicate situation he's in because of previous offenses against the Jews, we talked about last time. What's he afraid of now? He's afraid that Jesus may in fact be one of the gods or one of the demigods that appear to men. In his paganism, in his ancient exposure to religion, there were many such occasions where people believed that the gods came down and appeared to men. You can read about it in Acts 14 where they thought Paul and his companion were gods. So they were very superstitious about the gods coming down.

Now Pilate is really afraid, what has he got on his hands, is this one of the gods? Spurred by this new superstition then, he calls for a private meeting with Jesus. He entered into the Praetorium in verse 9. Said to Jesus, "Where You from?" Now he knows He's Jesus the Nazarene, so he's not asking about the geography. "Where are You from?" Jesus gave him no answer.

Now you have to understand what's going on with him. He's in a situation he doesn't want to be in. Now remember, I told you that two of the great incidents in the past with Pilate and the Jews set him up for this situation. When he came to town originally, to rule, 26 A.D., when he rolled into town originally to rule, he came in with banners flying and the Jews were infuriated because they saw

those banners with images of Caesar as idols and they reported him to Rome for bringing idols into their country and offending their religious sensibilities.

Later on he brought in shields with images on them and names of people to be honored and put those shields up in the palace. And the Jews reported him again to Tiberius Caesar and Tiberius was angry with him and said, "Take them down, and take them and put them in a pagan temple down by Caesarea, get them out of there because you're infuriating the Jews." So here he is again, after a couple of these very, very serious violations of the religious sensibilities of the Jews, confronted again on a situation where they are rising up and saying, "This is someone who says he's a god, we reject false gods and this man must die." He knows exactly how the drama is playing out and it is diabolical on the part of the Jews.

So he says to Jesus, "Where are you from?" Jesus gave him no answer. Sad words. Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate has slipped into eternal night. Pilate hardened his heart, Pilate hardened his heart, now Jesus has nothing more to say. So Pilate said, "You do not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and I have authority to crucify you?"

At that point, Jesus does speak. "And He said, 'You would have no authority over Me unless it had been given you from above. For this reason, He who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.'" "You can't do anything with Me unless God allows it, Pilate. Don't overestimate your power. Earthly rulers can only function within the purposes of God, within the will of God, within the design of God. Pilate, you're guilty. You are tragically guilty. You are eternally guilty. But your guilt is not as great as the guilt of those who turned Me over to you." Who's He talking about? Caiaphas, Annas, the Sanhedrin, the screaming Israelites, they delivered Jesus to Pilate. They are the real criminals. Pilate will spend forever, is spending forever in hell but the hell of Pilate is not as severe as the hell of those who turned Jesus over to him. There are degrees of punishment in hell.

"Pilate terrified, verse 12, goes back to the people. And he made efforts to release Jesus. But the Jews cried out, saying, 'If you release this man, you are not friend of Caesar.'" And now they're back to Jesus being self-proclaimed King who is a threat to Caesar. And everyone who makes himself out to be a king, opposes Caesar. They move from the blasphemy of saying you're God, to the threat.

This is the *coup de grace*, this is the killing blow. We're going to tell Caesar and we're going to tell him that you tolerated a rebel who was a threat to him. Someone who was not only a threat to Caesar, but someone who was a blasphemer of our religion, and you tolerated Him, you are a traitorous and an inept governor. And he knows he can't survive another such thing.

Therefore in verse 13, "When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat." He brings Him now out for the public. This is the final verdict. "After his private consultation with Jesus, he comes out and says, 'Isn't that enough? Let me release Him.' They will not respond except to scream, 'Crucify.' He brings Jesus out one final time, sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew *Gabbatha*." We're not exactly sure where that is, but in the vicinity. "Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover. Everybody was getting ready for the Passover which began at sundown that night, the Judean Passover. It was about the sixth hour," that's Roman time. It goes from midnight to midnight, Jewish time, from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. So third hour, Jewish time, nine o'clock. Sixth hour Roman time, 9 o'clock. It's nine o'clock and he said to the Jews, "Behold your King. Behold your King."

And one final expression of disdain. He would not pronounce the verdict. He refused to pronounce the verdict. He let them do it. Verse 15, "They cried out, 'Away with Him. Away with Him. Crucify Him.' Pilate, 'Shall I crucify your King?'" And the chief priests and one unbelievably hypocritical statement said, "We have no king but Caesar."

So that's what happened between the verses in Mark. Let's go back to Mark 15. Now pick it up at verse 20. "After they had mocked Him, after all this had happened, after the final verdict had been given by the people, they took the purple robe off Him, put His own garments on Him and it's now that they led Him out to crucify Him. They led Him out to crucify Him," soldiers parody.

I want to give you one other movement here. Verse 21, the stranger's providence...the stranger's providence. This is such fascinating record. "They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear His cross." A stranger appears out of nowhere here. According to Plutarch, around 46 A.D., Greek historian, Greek biographer, the victims of crucifixion had to carry their own cross piece. Some say they carried the whole cross, dragging the end of it. Others say they carried the *patibulum* as it was called, the crosspiece attached at the upright piece at the point of crucifixion. But this victim would parade through the street with a crime around his neck, in this case this is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, which was later placarded up on the top of the cross. And he would be carrying this piece. John 19:17 says that Jesus began to carry this cross. But apparently not for long because in verse 21 they pressed into service a passer-by. Why? Why? Well, from a human viewpoint He was hungry, sleepless, amount of blood loss would be, I suppose, serious enough to weaken Him in a major way. He was suffering from pain. The mental stress of the abuse, the laceration of His back. All those things could add up to this being a very difficult thing to carry this crosspiece on His back. Maybe He's moving too slowly for them.

But I think there's something else at play here and that is God has a certain timetable as well. He needs to be on the cross soon because He needs to die at three in the afternoon when the Passover lambs are slain. No time can be wasted in the plan of God. Who knows what motivated the soldiers. Suppose they could have allowed Jesus to go at whatever pace He could manage to get to the top of the hill to be crucified. But they're impatient. He's going too slowly and so they press into service. They had absolute authority, Roman soldiers, according to Matthew 5:41 had absolute authority over everybody. They seized, *angareuo*, they seized or forced this guy out of the crowd. Maybe he looked like a big strong man. He had come from Cyrene. His name was Simon, that's a very common name. He is a Jew who lives in Cyrene who has come to the Passover. You are familiar with Cyrene, but you don't know it. That you have been seeing the area of Cyrene on television in recent weeks because that's Tripoli in Libya. So this is a collection of Jews who live in Cyrene on the north African coast.

Josephus tells us there was a large Jewish community there. There is even in Jerusalem, during Bible times, during the New Testament time, a synagogue for Cyrenian Jews in Jerusalem. So when they came, they had their own synagogue. You can find that in Acts 2:10 and Acts 6, Jews from Cyrene there on the day of Pentecost in a synagogue for Cyrenians.

So here was one of the Jews from Cyrene who had come with Jews from all over the world to celebrate the Passover. He's there. He's just come in from the country. Wherever he's been outside the city, he comes in and sees what's going on and is conscripted immediately. All it says about him

is he's the father of Alexander and Rufus. And it's so important for us to know that. You're asking why does it tell us this? What's the import of this?

The import of this is simply understood if I put it in a personal context. If you say to somebody, I met a person called Simon from Cyrene. You wouldn't know him but he's the father of Alexander and Rufus. What would you be endeavoring to convey to them? That you don't know him but you know some people who are connected to him, right? That's exactly what Mark's doing. Mark is writing this gospel in Rome, listen, to Romans. He's writing this to the church at Rome. And he's saying to them, "Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus is the father of Alexander and Rufus whom you know." A connection with the readers.

These are two men known to the Roman believers who will immediately be able to make the connection with Simon. According to Acts 11:20 there were strong churches in Cyrene, by the eleventh chapter of Acts. By the thirteenth chapter of Acts, verse 1, they're strong leaders in the church in Cyrene. The question is, how did the church in Cyrene get started? Well, we can assume that it started among the Jews and it would have had to have started with Jews who met Jesus. The story must go something like this. From this experience, Simon was brought face-to-face with Jesus. Later was saved. Went back to Cyrene. Was part of the church in Cyrene. And later went to Rome with his family because in Roman 16:13 Paul says, "Greet Rufus, a choice man in the church and his mother," who would be Simon's wife.

People in Rome would say, "Wow, Rufus whom we know. Alexander whom we know, and their mom. That's the family of the man who carried the cross of Christ and whom God used to help begin the church in Cyrene. And now his children are a part of the church here in Rome." Used by God, used by God, those Roman soldiers, witlessly, mindlessly, cruelly to grab a guy out of the crowd who in the providence of God is brought face-to-face with Christ and becomes a part through his family of the church.

It's as if God is in control of absolutely everything. In the middle of the comedy, there is a divine providence that goes on and on. And the very church in Rome where Mark is and to whom he writes has a connection to this man. That's how God orders history.

Well next time we'll go to the third point, the Savior's punishment...the Savior's punishment—the cross.

We are profoundly enriched, Lord, to be taken through these portions of Scripture which touch our minds, first of all, and grip our hearts as well. We thank You for the record of holy writing, for the inspired text of Mark and all the other writers. The beauty of these texts, the truthfulness of them, the integrity of them is such a wonder to us. But beyond that is the wonder of the person of Christ, His majesty shines even in the midst of these horrors. In all of this He is doing for us, bearing in His own body our sins, that that which You plan from eternity past, the redemption of sinners might be accomplished. We thank You that He was willing to give His life for us. May we be willing to give our lives for Him as well, in Christ's name, amen.

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