

## The Cross Mark 15:25-32

This week I was picked up lunch from a restaurant in town and the woman who brought my meal out was clearly at a low point. She was overwhelmed. She was struggling. As she handed me the bag I asked, “Is everything okay?” She said, “I’ll be okay.” And I pressed a little more because she didn’t seem okay and we spoke for a bit and she finally said, “I just don’t know why God would let this happen.”

The Corona Virus is causing people to ask “Where is God? What is He is doing?”

Last week the British theologian, N.T. Wright, one of the best-known Christian teachers in the world, wrote an article for Time Magazine where he claimed Christianity has no answer for Corona Virus. Another article I saw quoted Christians from all over the map sharing their opinion about what God is doing through the Corona Virus—everything from preparing us for the second of Jesus to changing the way we live to holding America accountable for our multiplicity of idols. One pastor called it a “Divine reset.” Some Catholic Priests said the virus ‘unleashed intense demonic activity’ because God has given evil a free hand.

The woman at her low point who brought my lunch simply said “I think God wants our attention.”

The Corona Virus and its fallout, like any tragedy, tempts us to put God on trial, to wonder what He is doing, and how our life and our world will be impacted. We can ask God hard questions from a point of faith. Our loving God is not above our questions. He hears our allegations, heartaches, doubts and anger. The most mature Christians I know have questions for God.

Amazingly enough when Jesus was amidst His greatest trial, His greatest betrayal and greatest persecution and pain we learn more about who God is and what He is doing today than at any other point in the Scripture.

That day Jesus was crucified, Jesus was not questioned by the faithful or even hopefully skeptics. His enemies mocked Him. The religious leaders who made sure He was crucified mocked Him. Passers-by jeered. The guilty crucified alongside hurled insults.

There were three basic ways they misunderstood Jesus. But if we hold to these three basic truths about Jesus, it will inform, it will illuminate, it will inspire our questions about Jesus and what He is doing amidst the Corona Virus or any other difficult time we are facing.

First, **Jesus is King.**

Second, Jesus destroys religion.

Third, Jesus can save us.

First, what does Jesus' Kingship look like?

And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."

#### Mark 15:25-26

Roman law stated that the condemned had their charges displayed so the world could see the crime they had committed. It was written on a board in three languages, smeared with gypsum. It was carried by the accused or worn around their neck and in Jesus' case it was also apparently nailed to the top of the cross. It was known as the *titulus*—which is Latin for bill or placard.

Jesus was not only mocked for His supposed Kingship by those who surrounded him at the cross, but in the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, a legion of Roman soldiers, 600 men, were called together to watch Him—which meant that Jesus was treated like an enemy of the state and a dangerous threat. After they beat Jesus until He was nearly dead, they dressed Him in the costume of a king.

And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him.

#### Mark 15:17-20

The idea of this seemingly insignificant man from Galilee could be a king, seemed outrageous. That's why they put a royal purple robe on His back lashed to ribbons with a whip. That's why they mashed a crown of six-inch long thorns onto His head. That's why they mockingly kneeled down to Him, to show their incredulity of this humble, servant of a man being any kind of king.

They did not know how wrong they truly were. Against all appearances, Jesus, this unassuming, unpedigreed man from the backwaters of Galilee was a King. And not just King of the Jews. He is the King of Kings. He is the Lord of Lords. He knit together in their mother's womb every single one of those 600 soldiers. And every one of those soldiers who bowed down in mock homage to Jesus, will bend their knee to Him again someday—along with the whole of creation. Because this man who stood at great pains, battling to conscious, bleeding profusely under His crown of thorns with His purple robe sticking to the deep gashes on His body is a greater King than

they could ever imagine. Years later a man who was a resident of Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified, was surely aware of Jesus' trial, and wholeheartedly approved of His crucifixion death—a man later named Paul—would say that Jesus' Kingship literally holds the cosmos in place:

**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.**

**Colossians 1:15-18**

God's power, His sovereignty and Lordship over all creation appears at times and places and in a manner that often do not suspect and may even be incredulous about or even offended by. Jesus displays His unquestioned Lordship by making Himself a servant and a slave. Jesus Kingdom does not need proving. Jesus Kingdom does not need to be established, so the King enters into desperate circumstances and hopeless situations.

One of my favorite paintings is a famous work called the "Isenheim Altarpiece." (insert) It is a starkly realistic and even unsettling picture of Jesus hanging on the cross. His hands are twisted in an unnatural position. He is nearly unconscious. You can count the ribs on His gaunt figure. But what disturbs most people are the sores on Jesus' skin. He appears not so much injured from His beatings but deathly ill from sickness.

That was intentional on the part of the artist. The altarpiece was commissioned for a German monastery, the Brothers of Saint Anthony, that ran a renowned hospital for the treatment of a disease. Saint Anthony in Roman Catholic belief is the patron saint of skin diseases and the disease the Brothers treated was known as Saint Anthony's fire. It caused painful lesions all over the skin and even attacked the central nervous system causing hallucinations. The artist who painted Jesus on the cross intentionally suffering from Saint Anthony's fire. As the men and women in the hospital run by the monks stared at the painting, there was the unmistakable message, "God is with me."

They might have even thought about **Isaiah 53:4** and **Matthew 8:17** that promise:

**He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.**

Jesus displays His Lordship, His absolute reign over this world not by reigning from on high, waving a scepter and adjusting His crown. Instead He displays His

Lordship taking our illnesses, bearing our diseases, not separating Himself from imperfections, our infirmities and our sin but by making them His own.

If we suffer, the reality of the cross promises we do not suffer alone. And we know that all suffering in Jesus eventually ends in triumph because Jesus is King.

Second, Jesus destroys religion.

And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

On a stone hill, cracked down its center, standing only twenty feet high, Jesus made religion irrelevant.

What is religion?

Religion is humanity’s quest to meet God and achieve something eternal. We all have our religion. We all have that thing we think gives our life meaning—whether it is work or success or family, sports, self-righteousness or relationships.

Following Jesus is not religion. Following Jesus is faith. Faith in Jesus is the assurance, that on that blood soaked hill, God met us and gave us eternity.

Religion will not satisfy us like God Himself will. If religion is what we are after, we will abandon it as soon as something else comes along that makes us feel better. The French writer Albert Camus was not a Christian but he was a brilliant observer of human nature. He wrote a novel called, “The Plague” about town that infected with the plague and it was placed under quarantine. At first, Camus said, people turned to religion, until they realized religion could not help them:

In the early days, when they thought this epidemic was much like other epidemics, religion held its ground. But once these people realized their immediate peril, they gave their thoughts to pleasure.

If feeling good is what we’re after, we have a lot of ways to be satisfied. The British apologist C.S. Lewis famously said, “I didn’t go to religion to be happy. I always knew a bottle of port could do that.”

Jesus does not give us good feelings. Jesus gives us God.

It was a short walk from the Praetorium where Jesus was sentenced and beaten to Golgotha. An average person can walk it in about 4 minutes. Golgotha was just outside the Garden Gate, just a few hundred yards away. Golgotha sat right outside the city walls and alongside the main road that rain from Jerusalem to Jaffa—the

main port city of Israel along the Mediterranean Sea. (insert picture of Golgotha and Jerusalem)

Golgotha was in an old stone quarry, dug out in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, leaving a little hill, about 25 feet high or so. The stone of that hill that resembled a human skull was not suitable for building because it was too soft. That hill of stone had and still has to this day, a giant crack in it making it unusable.

Jesus was crucified atop a hill of rejected stone. And the stone taken from this quarry, was not used to building any old structure, but stone that was rejected for building the Jerusalem Temple—the center of religion for the Jewish people—the very place where they sacrificed and sanctified themselves in order to please God. As Jesus hung on the cross, He would only have had to turn His head slightly to see the Jerusalem temple just a few hundred yards away.

None of this surprised Jesus because He predicted His own people, Jewish people, would reject Him and choose religion instead:

**Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “ ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?**

**Matthew 21:42**

Jesus described Himself in terms a stonemason would use. And when He died on the cross, it was on a hill of rejected stone. The cross on which the sins of humanity were forgiven was planted into the heart of a stone hill that was found unusable, rejected for to build a religious shrine.

Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith, rejected because by very devout, very pious people who chose instead religion, the unique human practice of working our way God.

Jesus promised, as His disciples gawked at the majesty of the Jerusalem Temple, that He would tear it down and rebuild another temple. He promised that not one of the massive stones of the temple would be left upon another. What was the temple and what was its purpose? The Jerusalem Temple was a place of a sacrifice. It was where the priests sacrificed the sheep, doves and cattle that people needed to atone for their sin. But it was also the place where the Jews believed the presence of God dwelt, the Holy Spirit of God.

Jesus promised a new temple. Jesus promised a new place for the Holy Spirit of God to dwell.

Where is that new temple?

That new temple is you. It is me. It is every believer in Jesus Christ, every disciple. We are the new dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. As soon as Jesus died,

when cried out and gave up His life on the cross, we are told that the Holy Spirit loosed from the temple, poured out upon the world. In the very back of the Jerusalem Temple was a room known as the Holy of Holies. It was built over the very top of the mountain, a large piece of exposed stone. And it was there that Jews the Holy Spirit made His dwelling place.

Between the Holy of Holies and the rest of the temple was a massive curtain separating the dwelling place of God from the rest of the temple and the whole of the earth. According to one ancient source it was sixty feet high and 30 feet wide. It was about the thickness of the palm of your hand and it was so heavy, it took 300 priests to carry it.

That curtain, that massive curtain, when Jesus died was ripped in two from its very top to its very bottom, demonstrating that Jesus' death had let loose the Holy Spirit into the world.

**And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.**

**Matthew 27:51-53**

**(insert picture of curtain being torn in two)** And you may wonder, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, why were the tombs open and why were the dead raised and restored to life walking around Jerusalem? The Holy Spirit raised them to life. The Holy Spirit animated their dead bodies in the same way that the Holy Spirit would raise Jesus from the dead three days later, before dawn that coming Sunday morning.

Jesus Himself spoke about this very event to His twelve disciples on the very day before He was crucified.

**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.**

**John 14:16-17**

If religion is our attempt to get to God, then Jesus has destroyed religion because He has ensured God is already with us, that God dwells with us and is in us. We cannot work our way to God anymore than we can work our way to our own heart or our own soul because He is that close. By dying on a hill of rejected stone, Jesus destroyed even the most well-intentioned and earnest attempts to get to God. When He preached, "The King of God has come near," this is what He meant—that God

Himself has descended into our very lives.

The cross and the events around the cross promise us that God has come to us, that Jesus meets us where we are and religion is unnecessary, redundant and futile.

Third, Jesus saves.

**So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.**

**Mark 15:31-32**

The masses mocked Jesus for not saving Himself by miraculously coming down from the cross. They wanted to see Him do something spectacular, something to make their spirits tingle. But in the end, all Jesus did on the cross that day was follow the will of His Father and pay for the sin of humanity. But, as He took His last breath, the Roman soldier in charge of His crucifixion called out:

**Truly this man was the Son of God.**

**Mark 15:39**

In the end, there are only two responses to Jesus—either we receive Him or we reject Him. Either we receive His salvation or we reject it. Either we cry out Jesus save us or we whisper Jesus leave us.

When we all look back on the battle against Corona virus, we are going to be able to name a low point—a place where we just felt very little hope, where we reached our limit and simply wanted someone to do something.

Some parents will be pushed to the edge being with their children in the house all day. Others will struggle not seeing their aging parents who are quarantined. Kids will miss school or maybe even the last few weeks of their Senior year. Others are losing a precious season of baseball, softball or track. Some will have a low point losing a job and others get sick or know someone who is sick or maybe even experience worse than that as the deaths continue to rise.

There will be a point where we will want to cry out for someone to save us.

When that time comes, I hope we don't cry out to the government, or to mind-numbing escapes, work or busyness.

I hope we cry out to Jesus.

Jesus saves is not just a bumper sticker, a sign people hold up at football games or a slogan. It is a creed. It is a life-saving truth. It is the one unassailable answer to the problem that something is not right with this world and something is not right with us.

Behind every despondent waitress who wants to know what God is doing during Corona and every magazine article seeking Divine intent, there is the desperate cry: “Jesus save us.”

Have you cried that prayer during the last few weeks?

How can we know He will?

If Jesus did not crawl down from the cross, if He did not call upon a legion of His angel army to destroy every Roman soldier, every religious leader, every slack-jawed gawker walking past Golgotha along the road from Jerusalem to Jaffa—then how we can know He will save us from our sin?

How can we know He will save us now?

We know because we are here today. The Romans crucified hundreds of thousands of people, it was their way to exert their authority, to say that the power of Rome was unmatched and to intimidate anyone who dared claim otherwise.

And yet today here we are worshipping one of those men as God.

Why? Because His tomb was empty as we’ll celebrate next Sunday.

Yes.

But also, because Jesus has ensured that we are still here. He has preserved His Church, protected and prospered His Church in every age, every place, everywhere. He has preserved His Church through war, famine, persecution, genocide, pestilence and yes even disease. Jesus saves. From the very first days of the Church, this world has tried to stomp out, remove, by any means necessary, Jesus’ followers from the world.

And we are still here.

Ideas come and go. Living languages become dead tongues. Institutions succeed and disappear. Cities thrive and fade. Civilizations flourish and collapse. Nations rise and fall. Economic structures blossom and wither.

But the Church is still here. We are still here. Why?



Because we are so good?

Because we are experts at what we do?

No...because Jesus chose to save us.

What is Jesus doing? In the middle of this battle against the Corona Virus, what does Jesus' battle on the cross show us?

He shows us He King.

He shows us God is with us

And He is saving us.

Jesus save us.