

WEEK 4

JESUS – HIS DEATH

BEFORE THE TALK

Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 20 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called GROUP DISCUSSION 1 with their group.

THE TALK

Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to explain the significance of the cross, and explore the different reactions to Jesus' death as described in Mark's Gospel.

I was once in Australia staying with a friend, and he took me to a beach on Botany Bay. The beach was empty, the sun was out and the water was crystal blue and as calm as a millpond. So I decided I had to go for a swim. I was just taking my shirt off, when my host said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm going for a swim." He said, "But what about these signs?" I looked around and saw a huge sign that read: "Danger – Sharks. No swimming." I said, "Oh, don't be ridiculous, I'll be fine." He looked at me and said, "Listen, mate, two hundred Australians have been killed by sharks over the years. You have to work out whether those signs are there to save you or to ruin your fun. You're of age – you decide." And with that he walked off, up the beach. Well, I just sat there and rather sheepishly put my shirt back on. I hope you see my point. Jesus' words are like a huge danger sign for us. We are free to decide whether to ignore it or not, but he warns us for a reason.

Last week we saw that, according to Jesus, each of us has a serious "heart problem." In Mark chapter 7, verse 20 he says this: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean' [by "unclean" Jesus means "sinful"]. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery," and so the list goes on. This means that we're all in danger, whether we realize it or not, because ultimately our sin will lead us to hell.

But as we also saw, the wonderful news is that Jesus does not want us to go there. As he said himself: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." He wants to rescue sinful people like you and me. The question is: how does Jesus do that?

Turn with me to Mark chapter 8, verse 31.

Read aloud Mark 8:31.

So Jesus taught his followers that he *must* suffer and be rejected. It was something he had to do. But why?

We get the answer in Mark chapter 10, verse 45, where Jesus tells us this:

Read aloud Mark 10:45.

So that's what Jesus says he came to do, "to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus went to his death willingly and deliberately. In fact, he knew it was necessary.

I recently looked at a biography of Winston Churchill and it was interesting to see that in over three hundred pages only three were about Churchill's death.

If you look at most biographies, the writers want to talk about the person's life, not their death. In fact, their deaths are often glossed over. And yet, one *third* of each Gospel talks about Jesus' death.

Not only that, but Christians never stop talking about the cross. This seems strange because crucifixion, the manner in which Jesus died, was considered terribly shameful. The ancient Roman writer Cicero described it like this: "But the executioner, the veil that covers the condemned man's head, the cross of crucifixion, these are horrors which ought to be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts and his gaze and his hearing. It is utterly wrong that a Roman citizen, a free man, would ever be compelled to endure or tolerate such dreadful things."

Crucifixion was deliberately made cruel and gruesome so that any slave considering rebellion would pass by the crucified victim and conclude that it could never be worth the risk. It was the ultimate deterrent.

So why has the cross become the universally-recognized symbol of Christianity? Christians could have chosen a manger to remind them of Jesus' birth, or perhaps a scroll to remind them of his amazing teaching. But no, it's a cross – a reminder of his death. And certainly no other religion celebrates the death of its founder. The answer is simple. The cross is so important because Jesus' death is the only way we can be saved from our sin. It is how Jesus rescues people. To understand exactly what that means, we need to read an account of Jesus' death, so let's look at Mark chapter 15, verses 22 to 39.

Read aloud Mark 15:22–39.

We learn three striking things from that passage:

Display the following headings and read them aloud.

God was angry.
Jesus was abandoned.
We can be accepted.

GOD WAS ANGRY

Firstly, God was angry. Verse 33 states: “At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.”

Mark is counting hours according to the Jewish system, so the sixth hour would have been noon. At the moment when the midday sun should have been at its brightest in the sky, a darkness fell over the whole land and remained until three in the afternoon. It could not have been an eclipse, because Passover always fell on a full moon and a solar eclipse is out of the question during a full moon. And, don't forget, solar eclipses never last more than about six minutes. This darkness lasted three hours. So, something supernatural is going on.

Time and again in the Bible, light symbolizes God's presence and blessing, while darkness is a sign of God's anger and judgement. So when Jesus dies and darkness comes over the land, we know right away that God is angry.

Now, we won't understand this if we see anger as something that is unpredictable and wild, the product of a quick temper. God's anger is not like that. It is his settled, controlled, personal hostility to all that is wrong. And a God who cares about injustice is right to be angry about sin, and right to punish it.

God is a God of holiness, of blazing purity, and he hates what is evil. When it comes to evil he doesn't lean back in a rocking chair and pretend nothing has happened. No, evil matters to God. So lying matters to God, as does selfishness. Likewise, adultery matters to him. Greed matters to him. Murder matters. The deaths of Kosovan women and children because they are from the wrong ethnic group matter to God, as do the deaths of those in the World Trade Center, and he will not simply overlook them. Surely if we care about the injustices we see in the world, we cannot expect our loving Creator to care any the less.

So, as Jesus was dying on the cross, darkness came over the whole land. God was acting in anger to punish sin. But that leaves us with a question: whose sin was God angry at? The staggering answer is that God seems to be angry at Jesus.

JESUS WAS ABANDONED

That brings us to our second heading: Jesus was abandoned. Verse 34 says: “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’ which means, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Now there is no doubt that Jesus suffered physical agony on the cross, but what is being spoken of here is spiritual agony – being forsaken by God. And the word Jesus uses for “God” here is “*Eloi*.” Normally Jesus uses the word “*Abba*,” which is close to our word “Daddy.” But “*Eloi*” has none of that warmth or intimacy.

On the cross, Jesus was abandoned by God. It was Jesus that God was punishing. But Jesus had led a sinless life. Not even his fiercest enemies could find any fault with him. So why should God be punishing him? And why has Jesus allowed himself to be subjected to this?

Answer: so that we can be rescued. How can this be?

Hold a blank video tape in your right hand.

I'd like you to pretend that this video is a record of your life. The Bible says: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." So everything that we've ever done, said and thought is on this video. Now the first thing I want to say is that there's lots of stuff on here that's great. Perhaps there's a loving home, selfless acts, academic achievements, success in the arts or on the sports field, there might be a flourishing career.

But there is also a lot on this video that you're ashamed of. Things you'd rather people didn't see. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, sent a telegram to the twelve most respectable people in London as a joke one night. The telegram read: "Flee – all is revealed." Within 24 hours, six of the twelve had left the country.

Like them, we all have secrets that we would hate to have exposed. But the Bible tells us that it's all recorded. And not just the way we've treated others, but the way we've treated God is also recorded. The Bible's way of describing what's on the video is "the unfavourable record of our debts."

Now let's suppose that my left hand represents me,

Hold out your left hand, palm uppermost.

and the ceiling represents God. The Bible says that between us and God is this "record of our debts," and it separates us from God.

Place the video on the upturned palm of your left hand.

In fact, the Bible says that God is so pure, that even if only one second of my life were recorded on this video, it would be enough to separate me from God. My sin cuts me off from God; I am utterly forsaken. But let me illustrate what happens at the cross.

Hold out your right hand, palm uppermost. Your left hand should still have the video on it.

Suppose that my right hand represents Jesus, and remember that the ceiling represents God. As Jesus hung on the cross there was no barrier between him and God. He always perfectly obeyed the will of God. But, while Jesus was on the cross, he took my sin.

Now transfer the video from the left hand to the right, upturned hand.

That's why Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" as he hung on the cross. It couldn't have been *his* sin that made him feel separated from God, because the Bible tells us that Jesus was free from sin. No, it was *our* sin that separated him from God. In those agonizing moments, Jesus was taking upon himself all the punishment that our sin, everything on this video, deserves. The Bible says "we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Jesus died as my substitute, in my place, taking the punishment I deserve.

Refer people back to your left hand, now empty, with your palm upturned.

The result of Jesus' extraordinary self-sacrifice is simply this: we can be accepted by God. Jesus paid the price for sin so that we never have to. The amazing truth is that Jesus loved me enough to die for my sin. He died for my sin, and for the sin of everyone who puts their trust in him.

WE CAN BE ACCEPTED

And this leads us to the third point: We can be accepted.

Let's look again at verses 37 and 38.

Read aloud Mark 15:37–38.

Now, here Mark records the exact moment of Jesus' death, but then he turns our attention to something that happens simultaneously at the temple, which is on the other side of the city. He wants us to understand that the two events are connected in some way.

When Jesus dies, the thirty-foot high curtain in the temple, which was as thick as the span of a man's hand, was torn from top to bottom. Why is that significant? Well, this thick curtain used to hang in the temple, dividing the people from the place where God was said to live. The curtain was like a big "Do not enter" sign. It said loudly and clearly that it is impossible for sinful people like you and me to walk into God's presence.

Then, suddenly, as Jesus dies on the cross, God rips this curtain in two, from top to bottom. It's as if God is saying: "The way is now open for people to approach me." And that's only possible because Jesus has just paid the price for our sin.

And it's not as if Jesus is some innocent third party, being picked on by God. As Paul says in Colossians, "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus]." The remarkable truth is that God himself is making peace with us by willingly sacrificing himself.

Mark's description of Jesus' death focuses not only on Jesus, but also on the reactions of those who witness his death. And it's interesting to see how they respond.

You will need to have the following headings ready for display, gradually revealing each of the headings as the talk progresses.

Reactions to the cross:

the busy soldiers
the self-satisfied religious leaders
the cowardly Pontius Pilate
the detached bystander
the Roman centurion, who recognized that Jesus was “the Son of God”

THE BUSY SOLDIERS

To begin with there are the soldiers, responsible for carrying out the execution. We first meet the soldiers in Mark 15, verses 16–20.

Read aloud Mark 15:16–20.

And this is how they react to the cross in verse 24.

Read aloud Mark 15:24.

For these soldiers, the main legacy of the cross is Jesus’ clothes. They are absorbed in just doing their job. They see nothing special about this man. They’d seen it all before. No doubt they did their job well but, in doing their duty, they missed the true legacy of the cross.

Many go through life doing their duty, working hard, saving for the mortgage. Intent on their day-to-day activities, they are too busy to notice what the cross means for them.

THE SELF-SATISFIED RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The second group of people to witness the crucifixion is the religious leaders. Mark tells us that they mock Jesus among themselves. Look at what they say in verses 31–32.

Read aloud Mark 15:31–32.

These self-righteous religious leaders are convinced that they know the way to God, and Jesus Christ is not a part of that route. As far as they’re concerned, they already have a relationship with God. They already consider themselves to be spiritual people, and they certainly see no need for the cross.

It is often those people, who have created their own religion with their own formula of religious or moral observance, who are the most vicious enemies of the cross.

THE COWARDLY PONTIUS PILATE

And then there's Pontius Pilate. He orders a sign to be attached to the cross. It reads: <BSC>the king of the jews<ESC>. All the Gospel writers assure us that Pilate was convinced of Jesus' innocence. He offers to release Jesus, but the crowd want a man called Barabbas released instead. Time and again, Pilate sticks up for Jesus. But eventually he hands Jesus over to be crucified. So why does Pilate hand over an innocent man? Look at verse 15.

Read aloud Mark 15:15.

Pilate was a crowd-pleaser. Although he knew that Jesus was innocent, peer pressure caused him to lose his nerve and made him give in to the evil desires of others. Here was a coward who abandoned Jesus. When he faces a world that despises Jesus, his good intentions are overcome.

THE DETACHED BYSTANDER

Mark also records the reaction of some other bystanders. They hear Jesus cry out and think he's calling to Elijah. In Jewish legend Elijah, who was an Old Testament prophet, was celebrated as a helper of those in need. Then Mark records the reaction of one man in particular. He says this in verse 36.

Read aloud Mark 15:36.

This man has just come for the show. He wants to see Elijah perform some spectacular miracle and rescue Jesus. The sight of Jesus on the cross doesn't move this man at all. Instead, he is totally detached and refuses to get involved.

There are lots of people like that. They know about the cross, they come to church at Christmas and Easter for the show, but they don't see that Jesus' death affects them personally.

By showing us all these different reactions, it's as if Mark is saying, "OK, this is how others responded to what happened at the cross. What about you? What will you make of the cross?" Are we too busy like the soldiers? Too self-satisfied like the religious leaders? Too cowardly like Pilate? Or are we too detached like the bystander?

There is, however, one other possible response to the cross.

THE ROMAN CENTURION, WHO RECOGNIZED THAT JESUS WAS "THE SON OF GOD"

Mark records it for us in verse 39. It's the reaction of a Roman centurion, a hard-bitten soldier who was a high-ranking military officer. He had doubtless fought in many campaigns and seen many men die, but he had never seen a man die like this. This is how Mark describes it:

Read aloud Mark 15:39.

And that is our final option as we look at what happened at the cross. We can recognize that Jesus is telling the truth: that he is indeed the Son of God.

If you look across the skyline in London you can see the Old Bailey, the home of British justice. On top of it is Pomeroy's magnificent golden statue of the goddess Justitia holding the scales of justice in one hand and the sword of wrath in the other. She is blindfolded, unable to show partiality, and the message is clear: if we are found to be guilty, then the sword of judgement must fall.

But just across the London skyline, on top of St. Paul's Cathedral, is another golden symbol. It is a cross – a powerful reminder that the sword of God's judgement did fall. But it fell on Jesus Christ.

So what will you do with your sin? Will you take it to the cross to be forgiven or will you take it with you to the grave and to the judgement that must fall?

AT THE END OF THE TALK

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

Display the following questions and read them aloud.

- Can you identify with any of the reactions to Jesus' death on the cross?
- Jesus said he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). How do you feel about that?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 2**.*

AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION

Before next time, use the HOME STUDY section in your *Study Guide* to help you as you continue to read through Mark.

Tell participants that there will be a weekend or day away in a few weeks. Give them a brief idea of what will happen, and ask them to block out the time.