

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 19 - VIA DOLOROSA

TEXT: MARK 15:16-22 (ESV)



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March 8, 2009

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Friday Morning

In the Old City of Jerusalem, there is a street named “The Via Dolorosa,” (Latin for “The Way of Sorrow.”) It follows the path some suggest Jesus walked as He carried His cross to Golgotha where He was crucified. Many churches display “the stations of the cross”—descriptions of 14 moments which were said to have taken place as Jesus moved along this road. Today we’ll trace our way along the Via Dolorosa, as we examine the journey that took Jesus from Pilate’s headquarters to the Mount of Crucifixion at around 8:30AM on Good Friday. We’ll read from and unpack Mark’s account.

Mark 15:16-22

¹⁶And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ¹⁹And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

²¹And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. ²²And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull).

A Holy Moment

To almost everyone present at Jesus’ trail and the subsequent beatings, they knew little if anything about this man. Yes, they knew about the charges of insurrection and blasphemy, but no one in the crowds personally witnessed these things. Jesus was just a man caught on the wrong side of the Roman Law. The challenge for us today is to remember this as we examine these events, while also remembering what we do know of Him from the pages of Scripture. To most, this was a criminal matter. But God’s word tells us that something much greater was happening here. This was a brutal moment. But it was also a holy moment.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah tells us what was really happening as Jesus walked this Road of Sorrows: *“³He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray; We have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* (Isa 53:3-6)

Brothers and sisters, it’s happening. The Man of Sorrows is bearing our griefs along the Road of Sorrows. He is being wounded for our transgressions. God is putting on Him the iniquity of us all. The redemption God promised for His people is happening. But hardly anyone saw it—and this is a blindness we still bear. I have to imagine that in this moment if you had asked the average person in the crowd about the presence of God in that place, they would have looked at you blankly. These are not the sorts of proceedings God shows up for.

Are you walking a road of sorrow now, figuring God will show up on the other side, but for now, this is a civil matter? Are you looking at your life wishing this moment was a holy moment—one that God showed up for? May I submit that if this is how you feel, it is not because God isn’t present. It’s because you’re seeing it wrong. He is “*with you always, to the end of this age.*” (Mt 28:20- last words of Matthew) The point today is not to chastise you for failing to see God’s presence. Rather, I want us understand why no one saw this as a holy moment as Christ walked the Via Dolorosa, and ask what we see now that they couldn’t see then.

The Way of Sorrows

There is a charge on the table—Jesus claims to be King. It is a specific charge, one people could sink their teeth into. Though the charges against Jesus started off as a scattered collection of tattling, claiming Kingship was language everyone understood. Pilate asked Jesus directly if He was a King. Jesus said, “*You have said so.*” When the Chief Priests brought this charge, His reply to them was even stronger, “*I am, and the time is coming when you’ll see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, coming with the clouds of heaven.*” The charge itself carried momentum, and Jesus’ response to it only moved things along faster.

Today when you hear about an executive embezzling money, what comes to your mind? For me, it’s always the same image of a man in a black pin-striped suit shoveling arms-full of cash into canvas cinch-sacks with dollar signs stenciled onto the side. It’s my “*Corporate Exec Embezzlement*” stereotype. We all do this to some degree. Stereotypes exist because they generally convey more truth than fiction. In Jesus’ day, an insurrectionist in the hands of Rome followed a predictable storyline. The soldiers would mock, beat and eventually execute the man. It was a public spectacle so people would form clear impressions (or stereotypes) of what happens to those who oppose Rome.

Jesus entered Pilate’s headquarters around the same time the battalion of soldiers reported for duty. A full Roman battalion consisted of 600 men. Whether Mark meant the full 600 here is unlikely. He was probably referring to the “day shift.” Still, Pilate’s verdict coincided with the arrival of soldiers coming to work, and this verdict told them how they’d spend their day.

Rome was known for its cruelty toward political prisoners. Mockery and scourging were part of the execution. Some might cast these soldiers’ inhumane brutality toward Jesus as being extra-evil—as if it was gratifying to treat this particular prisoner worse than most. But I think they never considered anything beyond what they were told when they showed up for work: there was a man claiming to be both divine and the King of the Jews. Their superior Pilate had interrogated him and sentenced him to be crucified. Their job was to carry that out. So they did.

Imagine the incredible capacity for disgrace these soldiers had. They were probably mostly young men. Not much was off limits for them in terms of how they treated prisoners. And they did their most brutal work in groups. Who among us would do well in those circumstances? They went to work on Jesus and here's what they did. First, they stripped Him naked and flogged Him with 39 lashes. (Mt 27:26, Mk 15:15) Then they covered His shredded back with a royal robe of purple and pressed a crown of thorns into His brow to complete the ensemble. (Mt 27:28-29, Mk 15:16-20, Jn 19:2-3)

3) They took turns pretending to bow to Him, shouting, "Hail, King of the Jews," as they doubled over in laughter. Then they spit on Him and hit Him with sticks. (Mt 27:29-30, Mk 15:18-19, Jn 19:3)

I wonder how this went down. I'm speculating, but I've been with groups of boys where things got cruelly out of hand, and most of you men have been too. Maybe one of the soldiers who was always joking came up with the idea for the purple robe. Maybe a few of his friends kept it going by feigning homage to this "king." And from there things just escalated. They were entertaining themselves by putting their prisoner through agony. Would you have been the lone holdout? Me? I doubt it.

When they'd had enough, they took back their purple robe, again stripping Him naked, and put His clothes back on Him. (Mt 27:31, Mk 15:20) They marched Him out into the streets and began to walk the Via Dolorosa. Everything is escalated. Pan out and picture the scene—hundreds of soldiers pressing in, doing their cruel best to leave an impression on the crowds gathered for their holy Feast. People begin to follow, Luke says, mourning and lamenting what they are seeing. And Jesus is unrecognizable as a man, bloodied, swollen—the obvious nucleus of attention. Even those who weren't paying attention before were now fixated on this moving mass of military and mourning pilgrims.

Simon of Cyrene

Now zoom in. In the crowd there is a man—the father of two boys, Alexander and Rufus. His name is Simon, from Cyrene in northern Africa. Beyond this, we know little of him except that as Jesus was carrying His cross, (Jn 19:17) He physically gave out just in the place where the crowds had parted leaving Simon exposed to the soldiers who needed a strong back to finish what Jesus was unable to do. And invoking their military right, the soldiers made Simon join this journey and carry the cross beam the rest of the way to Golgotha for the Messiah.

Is Simon a hero? There's nothing that indicates his action were heroic. The soldiers compelled him to carry the cross. In fact, Simon had no more information about this prisoner than the soldiers. Maybe he'd heard Jesus claimed to be King, but there was certainly nothing kingly in His appearance, and who in their right mind would sign up to follow Him where He was going?

On the surface of things, it might look like Simon was being brought into a Roman crucifixion, but Mark makes a comment that suggests so much more—Simon was being brought into a relationship with Jesus. What does Mark say to suggest this? He tells us which Simon this was—Alexander and Rufus' father. Who are Alexander and Rufus, you might ask? That's a good question, because Mark names them as though his readers know who they are—leaving us to wonder if this was because Simon's sons were known to the church as believers. Both sons had common names, but at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans, he greets a believer there named Rufus. (Rom 16:13) Is this the same man? That is God's secret, but He has left it open for us to wonder. And how many people come to faith because God arrested their parents and brought them into His story?

A King and a Kingdom

Even though they cannot see it, the soldiers and Simon, like everyone else, are in a holy moment. God is working—bringing hope to a desperate world. I don't know how you think God works—but maybe you think it's mostly about feelings, lessons and blind faith. It's like we imagine Christ before Pilate and then Christ on the cross, but give little thought to what the Via Dolorosa demands that we recognize—God acts in space and time. Every step on those ancient streets was real. God sees your desperate need and He doesn't just inspire. He acts! Every moment of your life is a holy moment because God is in it!

When the soldiers pretended to bow to Jesus, they stood in the presence of the King of all Kings, feigning to doing something then they've all done now for real. They've all bowed the knee to the Lordship of Christ—because "God exalted and bestowed on Him the name above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." (Phil 2:9-11) Just because they didn't recognize Jesus as King didn't mean He wasn't King. That was a holy moment.

How do you tell a true king? By His Kingdom. By His power and authority. By His people. Though the Roman Empire is long gone, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ remains, and people still testify that every good thing in their lives comes from His hand, and every good thing taken was also by His hand. His people say, "Naked I came into this world and naked shall I leave. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21) They say it through tears, but honestly. Jesus Christ remains seated at the right hand of God forever, ruling for all eternity, world without end. His word tells us we will either acknowledge that in this life or in the life to come, but either way, we will all acknowledge it because it is absolutely true.

Is there hope for you if you find yourself among those who have mocked Christ? Did those who participated in His crucifixion have any hope of forgiveness? Yes. Some of them, only minutes later, would hear Christ praying for them as they lifted up His cross; "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (Lk 23:42) What a mercy this prayer is. Those soldiers had no idea they were brutalizing and crucifying the Son of God come in the flesh. Nor did they have any idea that what they were doing was God's will long before Pilate ever drew breath. This was a holy moment because God was present in it and He meant to use this event to redeem even some of those who nailed Him there. One soldier, observing the way Christ loved and died—and the way the heavens responded to what was happening—confessed, "Surely this was the Son of God." (Mt 27:54)

Have you been dragged into someone else's story? Do you feel like you're being dragged through your own—as if life is happening to you, but you aren't really living it? Do you wonder where God might be, or why He won't act? Are you feeling overlooked? Here's what the Via Dolorosa teaches us: there was a road Jesus had to walk for our salvation, and not just a spiritual one, but one paved with ancient stones. One foot in front of the other, the Man of Sorrows bore our grief and then He did something real with it: "God made us alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." (Col 2:13-14) If you are a Christian, you have been brought into Christ's story. The King of all Kings is your King. He is with you this very moment. As bad as things may seem, every moment is a holy moment because God is with you.