

PM Mark 15:21-39 Where is God?

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[0 : 00] Now from Mark's Gospel, chapter 15. Mark chapter 15, reading from verse 21 through to verse 39.

Mark's Gospel, most believe, was written with Peter as the eyewitness that Mark relied on.

It is trendy, I guess, in biblical scholarship, unbelieving biblical scholarship, to say of the books of the Bible, well, whoever wrote this book, it definitely wasn't the person who it says it was.

So Mark didn't write Mark and Paul didn't write Paul's letters. But actually, if Mark didn't write Mark, you know, why would anyone pretend it was?

If you're writing a letter, if you're writing a fake epistle, like the Gospel of Thomas that some of us have heard of, you would associate it with an apostle, you would call it after an apostle.

[1 : 16] If you're making up a Gospel account, if you're claiming to be someone, you wouldn't claim to be someone insignificant like Mark, who wasn't an apostle.

But Mark, we believe, got his information from Peter. Mark writing, and this will be significant as well, writing in Rome, as far as we, I think that's our best guess, and not just a guess, there's different reasons for that, to Christians who were in Rome, and Christians facing persecution, the heat was being turned up.

So Mark's Gospel, chapter 15, we'll read from verse 21. And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha, which means place of a skull. And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them to decide what each should take.

And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, The King of the Jews. And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.

[2 : 44] 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.

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. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, Lema, Sabachthani, which means, My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? And some of the bystanders hearing it said, Behold, he is calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, Truly, this man was the Son of God.

[4 : 03] Amen. Romans chapter 16, Romans chapter 16, the final chapter of Romans. And we'll read from verse 1 through to verse 16.

A list of names which don't mean very much to us. And there are different things we can learn even from that. Most of God's people down through the years have just served away.

And they haven't been, their names haven't, their deeds at least haven't been preserved down through history. And yet here's a little snapshot that God recognises these people faithfully serving away.

And there are also at times these names we can connect in with what we read elsewhere in the scripture. And we'll see. Maybe you'll notice a connection between this and our earlier reading from Mark.

But if not, we'll be coming back to it shortly. So Romans 16, reading God's word from verse 1. I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Kencyr, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and help her in whatever she may need from you.

[5 : 27] For she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.

Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Eponetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.

Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apellas, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.

Greet my kinsmen, Herodian. Greet those in the Lord, who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphena and Tryphosa.

[6 : 29] Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord also, his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegion, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers here with them.

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nerus, and his sister, and Olympus, and all the saints here with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ, greet you.

Amen. Well, before we come to, and our focus will be particularly on verses 21 through 32.

We live in a world of terrorist attacks, of cancer, of murder, injustice, deceit, physical and mental illness, trauma of various kinds, and death.

Why doesn't God intervene? Why doesn't he do something about it? Those are questions that many people are asking.

[7 : 43] Those are questions that perhaps you have asked, or even are asking tonight.

Maybe what you're facing at the moment is so raw and real. Perhaps God seems distant. Or at least, it doesn't seem like he's intervening in the way you thought he was going to intervene.

Well, the verses in front of us this evening record something on the face of it that is extraordinary. In the face of the worst crime that has ever taken place on this earth, God does nothing.

Or so it seems. As Jesus hangs on the cross, he's mocked by those around him, specifically because he seems so powerless.

In his hour of need, God seems to be absent. And so if you doubt at times whether God is still active in the world, if you wonder whether he is unable or unwilling to work in your life, if you're frustrated when you look at Christ's church and see little happening, then these verses encourage you to look at things from a different perspective.

[9 : 02] They remind us that even when it seems like God isn't paying attention, we can be absolutely sure that he's at work. These verses show us that even when it seems that Jesus is powerless, he's achieving more than we could ever imagine.

Even when it seems Jesus is powerless, he is achieving more than we could ever imagine. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ this evening, these verses are here to strengthen your faith.

And if anyone is not yet a believer, these verses will show you the futility of trying to resist the sovereign Lord Jesus.

We're going to look at the events recorded here from two angles tonight.

Firstly, we see God's hidden activity. So God's hidden activity, particularly verses 21 through 26. As the most momentous event in human history begins to unfold, a little known Bible character is right in the midst of it.

Boys and girls, maybe you haven't heard of him before. His name is Simon of Cyrene. Cyrene is just the place where he was from.

[10 : 25] He's only mentioned here in the Bible in this one verse, and in Matthew and Luke's accounts of the crucifixion. He's someone we could easily skip over as we approach the most significant moment in world history, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

But actually, if we stop and look at Simon of Cyrene, there's a lot we can learn. So who was this man, and why is he significant?

Well, we aren't told whether Simon was a Jew or a Gentile, but we are told that he was from Cyrene, which was on the north coast of Africa. And there were many Jews living in Cyrene in the first century.

So it may well be that this Simon was a Jew living in Africa who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. And that Simon is coming into Jerusalem from the country.

He's seized, grabbed, and compelled by the Romans to carry Jesus' cross. A condemned man normally carried his own cross, or at least the horizontal cross beam, to the place of crucifixion.

[11 : 45] But Jesus was apparently so weak after being flogged by the Romans that he can't carry it. And that's not surprising. The flogging itself was so severe that people often died from it before they could be crucified.

And so Simon, a passing foreigner, is forced to carry Jesus' cross. Surely the symbolism here is significant.

Jesus had said back in chapter 8, 34, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And here Simon of Cyrene becomes the first person to literally fulfill that command.

Jesus' own disciples deny him or run away when trouble comes. And so in this moment, Simon is picturing for us what following Jesus looks like.

For many people today, being a Christian simply means that they were born in a Christian country, or that they were baptized once upon a time, or that they tick the census box every time the census comes around.

[12 : 57] They tick the Christian box. But it's something that doesn't really affect their lives too much. But to be a disciple of Jesus means living a radically different life.

It's not that living a radically different life saves us. But once we're saved, we enter a whole new realm of existence. Have you encountered people who think of church membership as a symbolic gesture?

Something to be done when you reach a certain age, or when you get married, or want to have your children baptized? But try telling Simon of Cyrene, as he carries Jesus' cross, that being a disciple is a symbolic gesture.

It is real. And it comes at a cross. It comes at a cost. So Simon becomes the first person to literally take up a cross and follow Jesus.

But then what happened to him? After he carried the cross to Golgotha, the place of a skull, did he just disappear, relieved that he wouldn't have to think about Jesus again?

[14 : 11] Is Simon merely a symbol of what a disciple should look like? Or did Simon himself become a disciple?

Well, I think we can safely say that Simon's carrying of the cross was the beginning, not the end of his relationship with Jesus.

That's not just a guess or wishful thinking. In verse 21 here, Mark describes Simon as the father of Alexander and Rufus.

So what does that tell us? If he says that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus, well, he's clearly expecting his readers to know who Alexander and Rufus are.

Boys and girls, if there was someone tonight who you had never met before, and I said, boys and girls, this is Norman's son, well, that sentence would make no sense if you didn't know who Norman was.

[15 : 17] And in the same way to say that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus, it doesn't make any sense to people who've never heard of Alexander and Rufus. So how would Mark's readers possibly know who the sons of a man from Cyrene are?

Only if they became part of the church. And there's evidence of exactly that happening. Because in Romans 16, which we read earlier, in his list of greetings, Paul says, greet Rufus chosen in the Lord.

So we know that in the church of Rome, there was someone called Rufus. And where were the people living who Mark was writing his gospel for? Rome. There are three gospels that mention Simon of Cyrene, but there is only one gospel that mentions that Simon's sons are called Alexander and Rufus.

And that is the gospel written to the city where we know somebody called Rufus was living. So we can be almost certain, I think, that Simon's son, Rufus, and likely Alexander as well, became part of

the church in Rome.

They became believers. Who did Simon's children learn about Jesus from? Surely it was their father.

[16:43] What a powerful thing it is when the gospel breaks into a family. Perhaps you have people in your congregation who are the only believer in their family.

Well, by God's grace, perhaps they will not be the last. Brothers and sisters, we should pray for those who are currently the only Christians in their families. We should pray for them because of what a tough situation that is.

And a situation that is becoming increasingly more common in our day. So praying for them, but also praying that God would graciously let the gospel break into the life, not just of one individual, but also into whole families.

It's interesting, even as Jesus calls his disciples, you have those two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John.

God delights to work in families. So do you see God's providence here? It looks like God is doing nothing.

[17:59] It looks for all the world like the soldiers have grabbed a random passerby and forced him to carry Jesus' cross. But what does Paul say in Romans?

He says, Great Rufus, chosen in the Lord. And if that Rufus is Simon's son, well we can say that God had chosen from before the foundation of the world to save people in Simon's family.

So to come back to our big theme tonight, where is God when the Roman soldiers grab the first person they see? It looks like he's absent. But actually God is putting in the plan, in the action his plan to give spiritual life to a whole family.

God is at work even when it looks like he isn't. I notice as well here that God is at work in Simon's life in a way that he wouldn't have chosen.

It says here that Simon was compelled to carry the cross. Boys and girls, I'm not sure if you know the word compel, but to compel means to make someone do something they don't want to do.

[19:13] If you don't want to tidy your room, if your mum or dad asks you to tidy your room and you say, I don't want to, they say, well you need to go and tidy your room. That is you being compelled to tidy your room.

And in the same way, this man Simon, he was compelled, he was forced to carry Jesus' cross. He didn't choose the experience. He would have got out of it if he could, but God used it for his good. And brothers and sisters, God will be at work in your life in ways that you wouldn't have chosen. He'll bring things into your life that you would have avoided if you could have.

And yet he'll use those things for your ultimate good and for the good of those that you love if you will respond rightly to them. And God can also use the tough experiences that you go through in the lives of others in ways that you could never predict.

Paul will also say in Romans, greet Rufus chosen in the Lord, also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. So who's Rufus' mother? Simon's wife. So Simon's wife it seems has been converted as well.

[20:31] Simon's most likely dead by the time Paul's writing. But his wife, his widow, has become like a mother to Paul. She has cared for the great apostle who wrote most of the books of the New Testament.

And all because of a seemingly chance incident in her husband's life years ago that he would have avoided if he could have. And so do not despair when it seems that God is absent from your life. Don't assume that he's not at work whenever a tough situation comes into your life. God worked in Simon's family through an event that none of them would have chosen.

And he can do the same in yours. God's activity in these verses is hidden, but he's still very much at work. We see that as well in the seemingly random events of the next few verses.

Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh to try and dull the pain. Then the soldiers have the bright idea of casting lots for his clothes. And he's crucified between two robbers.

[21:43] All seemingly random events. God isn't mentioned. And yet each one is the fulfillment of centuries old prophecies about how Jesus would die.

Psalms 69, 21 For my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. Psalm 22, 18 They divide my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots.

Isaiah 53, 12 He was numbered with the transgressors. Even the simple statement they crucified him. It fulfills Psalm 22's description of crucifixion centuries before such a method of punishment was even invented.

Where the psalmist says they pierced my hands and feet. So God isn't mentioned as doing anything in these verses.

In fact the bystanders are convinced that God isn't at work. He trusts in God they say of Jesus let God rescue him now if he desires him. It looked to those around the cross that God had abandoned Jesus.

[22 : 56] But actually in every detail of what happens to Jesus God is working out his plans and purposes. The soldiers and the chief priests mock Jesus because they think he can't be the Christ.

But actually the very things that they are doing to Jesus prove that he is the Christ. Because they are unknowingly following the script that was written down in the Old Testament scriptures.

Just in case it's not clear enough that God is at work verse 26 God causes Pilate to write words in mockery which were truer than he ever realised. The king of the Jews.

Roman and Jewish custom required the cause of crucifixion to be fixed to the cross. The Jews wanted Pilate to write we're told this man said he was the king of the Jews but Pilate is stubborn and he writes up for all to see what's going on.

The long awaited king has come to his people and they've crucified him. Now the hand that wrote the words the king of the Jews it may have been Pilate's. But it was guided by God.

[24 : 09] God was using human hands to write his verdict on what happened that day. So firstly tonight God's hidden activity. Reading through these verses it doesn't seem that God is at work but every single thing that happens is part of his plan.

And so take heart believer in Christ this evening. It might look like God isn't doing much in your life. It might look like you're the victim of circumstances or of other people.

But Romans 8.28 remains true. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

So God's hidden activity the second of our two points tonight we see Jesus apparent inactivity. Jesus apparent inactivity verses 27 to 31.

A couple of weeks ago it became clear that many people around the world had got it badly wrong in their assessment of what was going on with the princess of Wales.

[25 : 22] many people were convinced that they knew and yet the reality was that here's a mum with a young family coming to terms with the fact that she's got cancer starting chemotherapy and trying to work out how to tell her children.

People's perceptions many of them were totally off base but never have the perceptions of people watching on been so wrong as they were at the crucifixion of Jesus.

When Jesus is crucified he looks absolutely powerless. He doesn't even have the physical strength to carry his own cross. He suffers all their mockery.

He's knelt to the cross and then he hangs there apparently helpless as those around him deride him as the chief priests laugh at him and as even the thieves either side of him use some of their final breaths to mock him.

In verse 32 the chief priests and scribes say let the Christ the king of Israel come down from the cross that we may see and believe. Does that sound familiar?

[26 : 35] It's not very different from what many people say today. If God does this then I'll believe in him. If he cures me of cancer if he stops my child from dying then I'll believe in him.

people set the conditions for what God must do in order for them to believe and if God doesn't play to their tune they're not going to believe.

But actually if God really is a God worth worshipping then his existence doesn't depend on him jumping through the hoops we set up for him. If God really is a God worth worshipping then his existence does not depend on him jumping through the hoops that we set up for him.

And as the cross shows if God doesn't do what we want him to do it's because he's got his own good reasons. God takes into consideration things that we don't take into consideration because he can see the big picture and we can't.

Just take that demand for Jesus to come down from the cross for example. What would happen if Jesus came down from the cross? Well he would have been disobeying his father he would have failed in the great task he came into the world to achieve the salvation of his people.

[27 : 59] As someone has said wicked men demand from Christ such a proof of his power that by proving himself to be the son of God he may cease to be the son of God. People want Jesus to prove that he's the son of God in such a way that he would cease to be the son of God.

If we say I'll believe in God if we would be saying I'll only believe in a God who does what I want him to do. And that wouldn't be the real God at all it would be a God made in our image.

But in the Bible we have a God who makes us in his image. We do not make God in our image.

Who are we to lay down criteria for what God can and cannot do?

Who are we to call what God does unfair? If it should please God for his own holy and perfect reasons to bring disaster and calamity into our lives.

May God give us the grace to respond like Eli. It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him. Or like Job who lost children and everything he had and refused to sin or charge God with wrong.

[29 : 15] Instead he simply said the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. That might sound like fatalism or defeatism but it's not.

We can be sure that God is not inactive and not simply that he is in control but that he is working everything together for his glory and our good.

Those hard situations that God brings into your life maybe that you are even facing right now I am sure it seems that your life would be better off without it.

But actually God withholds nothing that we need and everything that he sends we do need.

Not because our lives will be better because of the trial in and of itself but because of what God is doing in your life through it. If you'll learn the lessons that he's trying to teach you.

[30 : 27] What's the greatest example of this? Well it's the death of Jesus. If Jesus' disciples had been able to stop him being crucified they could have boys and girls what does Peter try and do when Jesus has been arrested he gets out his sword.

If Peter could have stopped Jesus going to the cross he would have. If the disciples could have rewound to the way things used to be they would have done it.

But in actual fact the death of Jesus horrific as it is will open the gates of heaven to them. Perhaps we think at times if only we could rewind to a time when life was easier.

But God had something better for the disciples and we need to trust that he has something better for us too. In verse 31 the chief priests and scribes are more right than they realise.

He saved others he cannot save himself. Notice the first part of what they say he saved others.

Even Jesus his most vicious enemies they don't try and deny that he had saved others.

[31 : 38] No one in Jesus time denied that he had done miracles. They couldn't deny it. We live in a day when many people don't believe that Jesus did miracles. For someone to believe today that Jesus did miracles it's relatively rare.

Oh he wasn't walking in water there was just a bit of sand that he was walking across. So there's not many today who believe Jesus did miracles but even then a mere belief in miracles is not enough because even the people who crucified Jesus believed that he did miracles.

Even the people who crucified Jesus they could not deny that he had done miracles. So he saved others. That's the testimony of Jesus enemies.

I'm not sure if you've seen the book I haven't read it it came out from Banner of Truth a couple of years ago that the gospel according to Christ's enemies that take some of the statements in scripture that Jesus enemies say such as probably it's better for one man to die for the people something like that.

Here I'm not sure if this is included but this is the gospel according to Christ's enemies he saved others. But then they go on he cannot save himself. Were they right?

[32 : 54] Were they right? He saved others but he can't save himself. Well in a sense they were right. Of course Jesus had the power to get down from the cross.

He says he could call 12 legions of angels but he couldn't get down from the cross and still save us. If he wanted to give eternal life to others he couldn't save himself.

If Jesus hadn't faced God's wrath for his people we would have had to face it ourselves. And so in that sense he couldn't save himself. So why do they think that he can't get down from the cross?

Well because they assume that Jesus' ultimate goal is self-preservation. That if Jesus really was the Messiah he would save himself. And yet back in chapter 10 45 he had said even the son of man came not to be served but to serve.

And to give his life as a ransom for many. Those who crucified Jesus had no concept of someone who would choose willingly to suffer for the sake of others.

[34 : 06] Now Jesus' death is more than an example of self sacrifice but it is not less than that. He denied himself for the sake of others. He didn't just do what was easy.

And how sad it is to see at times those who profess to God's people profess to be God's people can live a life where they look out for number one. Where they look on church as a place not where they can serve but where they can be served.

Where their needs can be met. They limit their involvement in church to what suits them not what will most benefit or encourage their fellow church members. But for those of you here that I know I know that that is not the case for you.

that you're following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus who came not to be served but to serve. And so let me encourage you in that brothers and sisters to keep going because you're following in the footsteps of your saviour.

Yes it is hard but you're following the footsteps of your saviour. Jesus took up his cross and he calls us to do the same.

[35 : 22] And just as we close this evening there's another way that Jesus is active here when it looks like he's helpless. I wonder did you detect another voice calling out in these verses behind the voices of the passers by and the chief priests and the thieves either side of him.

Well there's three different sets of voices but there's another voice behind them all. It's the voice of the serpent and what's it saying? Save yourself and come down from the cross.

It's the same temptation Jesus had faced since he began his public ministry. The temptation to avoid suffering, not to go through with his great task, not to drink the cup of God's wrath that would be poured out.

And so as Jesus hangs there apparently powerless, he's actually resisting the devil with every ounce of the strength. Any of us would have crumpled at the first hurdle but he fights the temptation all the way to the end.

And so this beaten and bloodied man hanging from a cross is far from inactive. He's far from powerless. He's achieving an eternal salvation for every last one of his people that could never be taken away from us.

[36 : 41] So where is God in the hard circumstances of your life? He's right there. Why doesn't he intervene in the way you wish he would?

You may never know exactly why in this life. But you can be sure that his reasons are good and kind and loving. His ways are not our ways.

grace. And when we look at the cross we're reminded just how glad we should be that that is the case. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Enough! relax. wy oui