

The Man on the Middle Cross

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[0 : 00] Please turn your Bible to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 15. And we are nearing the completion of our sermon series in the Gospel of Mark.

! Sermon series in the Gospel of Mark. And up to this point, Mark has been laboring in his gospel to help us to help us to help us to know the true identity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And here in chapter 15, we have come to what can really be rightly described as Mark's closing argument to show the identity of this one who is going to be crucified on a cruel Roman cross, that he is the Son of God.

And in this concluding section of Mark's Gospel, if you have an English Standard Version Bible like I do, you'll notice the following headings, each of which is a scene.

The crucifixion, Mark 15, 21 through 32. The death of Jesus, Mark 15, 33 through 41.

[1 : 20] Jesus is buried, Mark 15, 42 through 47. And then the resurrection, Mark 16, 1 through 8. We're not going to be covering verses 9 through 20, because, again, if you have an ESV Bible, you'll see a footnote that indicates that the earliest manuscripts don't have this particular section, these verses included.

These verses, they're not contradictory to anything, but the earliest manuscripts just don't have them. And so this morning, we're going to be covering the first three of these scenes.

And next week, we'll conclude the entire sermon series in Mark that we've been in for quite some time with the final scene, which is the resurrection. And this morning, what I'll be doing is, rather than reading the whole of the text, we'll be considering verses 21 through 47, but rather than reading the whole text right up front, I'm going to read the text in sections, because it nicely is broken down into three different scenes, and I'll read the text for each part as the sermon progresses.

And now we begin with the first text for the first scene. Mark chapter 15, verses 21 through 32. Please follow along as I read.

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.

[3 : 00] And he 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. 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, the scribes, mocked him to one another, saying, He saved others. Cannot save himself.

[4 : 11] Let the king, the, 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.

Would you pray with me? Father, we are grateful this morning to have your word and to hear your word.

Would you in these moments speak to our hearts as only you can. And Lord, I especially ask for your anointing by your spirit.

And I pray that above my voice, your voice will be heard in every heart. We trust you now in Jesus' name. Amen. Just imagine for a moment if you were, without any context, 2,000 years ago in the

city of Jerusalem.

And you happen to be there when Jesus was taken up to this place called Golgotha and was crucified between these two men.

[5 : 26] And you happen to be passing by and you just decided, because of all that was going on, that you would watch. I believe that as you observed that scene and you heard the insults and the mocking and the scoffing and the derision that was directed to the Lord Jesus Christ.

While there are three men who are being crucified, all the attention is being directed to this one man, the one in the middle. I believe if you were a stranger and you took the time to stop, you'd probably ask the question, who's that man on the middle cross?

And perhaps you may even ask, well, what has he done? What has he done differently that all the attention is focused on him, all of the derision, all of the scorn or the mocking is focused on him, and even the ones on the side are doing the same.

I think you'd be compelled, even if you didn't ask out loud, to wonder, who is that man on the middle cross? That's a question that Mark has been laboring to answer throughout his gospel, but it comes into full focus in this particular section of his gospel.

And it's a question I want us to consider this morning. Who is the man on the middle cross? And I want to help us answer this question this morning by working through three of these four closing scenes in Mark's gospel, beginning with the first one, Jesus is crucified, verses 21 to 32.

[7 : 20] We read in Mark 15, verse 25, and it was the third hour when they crucified him. The third hour is 9 a.m. in the morning. And in the next section that we're going to read shortly, we see that Jesus died shortly after the ninth hour, which is 3 p.m. in the afternoon.

So for six hours, Jesus would have hung, nailed to a cross, in blazing heat, gasping for breath, and each breath that he took was through excruciating pain as he hung on the cross.

But rather than talk about the cruelty of the crucifixion this morning, I want us to direct our attention to the things spoken to Jesus as he hung on the cross.

We read in verses 29 and 30, These were people who obviously were familiar with Jesus.

To some extent, they were familiar with his teaching, so much so that they took something that he said, and they were ridiculing him based on their misunderstanding of it.

[8 : 43] It's recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 2. When Jesus said to them, Destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it again in three days. He was referring to the temple of his body, not to the physical temple that was there, but they misunderstood it.

So now they're mocking him. But Jesus, when he said those words, was speaking prophetically, and he was speaking parabolically in parables. And Jesus was prophesying his death and his resurrection.

And he was speaking parabolically because he was also telling them that he was the true temple.

And here, as he hung on the cross, fulfilling those very words, fulfilling every single detail of the sacrificial system in the temple, he was doing the very thing for which they mocked him about.

In their ignorance, they said to him in verse 30, Save yourself and come down from the cross, not realizing that if Jesus had saved himself, he could save no one else.

He certainly could have saved himself. He had the power to prevent them from putting him on the cross in the first place. I mean, the power to come down off the cross if he wanted to, but instead of saving himself, he stayed on the cross.

[10 : 09] And by staying on the cross, he became a savior to all who would believe. Because on the cross, he was taking the place of undeserving sinners like you and like me.

We deserved to be there justly, but he took our place, and he didn't come down. So we, who trust in him, do not have to pay the price for our sins.

But they said to him, Save yourself and come down. Friends, he couldn't save himself and save us. And so he stayed on the cross.

But they were not alone. The passerbys were not alone. The chief priests and the scribes, they joined in. The mockery and the scoffing.

And they uttered similar words in verses 31 and 32. We read, So also the chief priests and the scribes mocked him, saying to one another, He saved others. He cannot save himself.

[11 : 19] Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross that we may see and believe. Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. Again, Jesus could not both save himself and others.

In order to save others, he had to stay on the cross. And the only way that we would believe is if he stayed on the cross. If he came down, there would be no basis for faith, no basis to believe. Notice again, Mark tells us that even the two robbers on the side of him, they joined in. And again, imagine if you are a visitor in the city of Jerusalem and you're seeing all this, you have to be asking the question, who is the man on the middle cross? And what has he done? Why is everyone piling on him? On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter, as he was preaching to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem, we read in Acts 2, 22, these words. [12:30] Here's how Peter described Jesus to the crowd. He said, men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst and you yourselves know.

That's the man who's hanging on this middle cross. A man attested by God. A man who had done mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him. He was hanging on that middle cross. And so why did they hate him so? Why would one like him be between two thieves and even receive more derision and mockery than the two thieves themselves?

I think John answers the question. He answers the question well in John 3, 19 through 20. He writes, and this is the judgment.

The light has come into the world and people love the darkness more than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who hates wicked things, hates, everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed.

[14:03] Friends, that's why they hated Jesus. That's why Jesus was hated in his day. That's why Jesus is hated today. He is the light who has come into the world. And men love darkness and they hate the light lest their deeds be exposed.

So who is the man on the middle cross? He is Jesus crucified. crucified. He could have saved himself. But he saved others by staying on the cross.

But not only is the man on the middle cross Jesus crucified, he is also Jesus forsaken. This brings me to the second scene of my second point.

verses 33 through 41. 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, lemma sabaksani, which means my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[15:28] And some of the bystanders hearing it said, behold, he is calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled the sponge with sour wine, put it 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.

Now, while the heading for this section is the death of Jesus, I believe that the larger and more important point of these verses is the forsakenness of Jesus.

Because we're told in verse 33, and when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the land until the ninth hour.

[16:39] So Jesus died shortly after the ninth hour. So what was going on during the period of time from the sixth hour to the ninth hour when the land was engulfed in sudden darkness?

Notice that verse 33 is actually a transition verse, and it signals that no longer is the focus on the voices of the enemies and of his accusers.

They had their say from 9 a.m. until 12 noon. And suddenly at 12 noon, the brightest hour of the day, there's sudden darkness over the entire land, and Mark tells us it lasted for three hours.

And no doubt there was vocal reaction to that. No doubt this, if we just were engulfed in darkness, there'd be some audible reaction, but Mark doesn't tell us.

I believe he doesn't tell us because it's not important. We read in verse 34, 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?

[18:01] So in the midst of the darkness, over this three-hour period of time, Jesus is silent. And only at the ninth hour does he cry out these words that were misunderstood by some who were

standing there, and that could be misunderstood by us, even though in a different way.

And so I want us to consider why the darkness? why this sudden engulfing of the land in darkness? Well, scripture helps us to see that darkness is used often to describe sin and fallenness. And the darkness that engulfed the land for some three hours was no doubt the atmospheric confirmation of what was happening to the man on the middle cross.

this was no fluke in God's universe taking place. This was the result of the God of the universe who controls every single aspect of his creation bringing darkness in that moment as the confirmation of what was happening to the man on the middle cross.

The Romans and the Jews, they had their say, they had their way from 9 a.m. until 12 noon. And now, in the midst of the darkness, the man on the middle cross was experiencing the justice of God in pouring out his wrath on him, wrath that we deserved, and while at the same time as he poured out his wrath, he was expressing his gracious love for people, people like you and me, who because of what Christ did can be reconciled to him and not be judged for their sins.

[20 : 12] Jesus was enduring our darkness. And why the cry? Why this cry of forsakenness?

I think it's important for us to note how weighty and significant this must be. Jesus didn't protest when he was arrested.

He didn't protest when he was falsely accused. he didn't protest when he was beaten and when he was spit upon and when he was mocked. He didn't even protest.

He didn't protest when he was crucified and nailed to the cross. But at the ninth hour, after enduring this darkness for three hours, and after experiencing the unrestrained wrath of God that was being poured out on him for sin, he could stand it no more, and he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Theologians call it a tortured cry, that it was the heart of the atonement, that it was the crucifixion within the crucifixion. The late Dr.

[21 : 38] C. Sproul calls it the most agonizing protest ever uttered on the planet. The most agonizing protest ever uttered on the planet.

There's been no just grumbling or protest ever uttered except this one. He said it was the scream of the damned.

Jesus has uniquely experienced what none of us will ever experience. what he experienced on Calvary's cross was Gethsemane realized he drank the cup of the wrath of God that he agonized over in Gethsemane saying, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

This was a unique suffering. No one ever has and no one ever will die in this way. he suffered as our mediator.

Some say that Jesus cried out because he felt forsaken. But brothers and sisters, he was forsaken. And he was forsaken because God in that moment had to and did treat him exactly the way we deserve to be treated.

[23 : 13] God could treat him no other way. God could not give Jesus any less than what our sins deserve because if he did, it would not be the full payment for our sins.

We deserve to be rejected. We deserve to be separated from God. We deserve to be engulfed in darkness. And because Jesus was, we who put our trust in him will never have to.

he was abandoned by God so that we who trust in him will never be abandoned by God.

He experienced judgment in darkness and forsaken in darkness that in our darkest hour, we never will. Mark tells us in verse 37 that Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.

And then in verse 38 he tells us something miraculous happened. Something unusual happened. Something as unusual as the atmospheric darkness that was taking place.

[24 : 29] He says when Jesus uttered this cry a distance away in the temple, this thick curtain was torn in two from top to bottom.

Not from bottom to top, which is what a human might do, but it was torn from top to bottom. And the immediate manifestation was that as a result of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, this thick curtain that separated the most holy place from the holy place that sinners could not go into, ordinary people could not go into, the priest could go in there once a year, but now it's torn and it points to it being obsolete, it points to Jesus having fulfilled it all.

It points to the fact that the true Lamb, the Lamb of God, the final Lamb who takes away the sin of the world has been crucified for sinners, but there needs to be no more sacrifice.

for sin because his was a once and for all sacrifice. No more lambs and bulls and goats.

The perfect Lamb was sacrificed. So who was the man on the middle cross? The man on the middle cross was Jesus forsaken.

[26 : 00] Jesus forsaken in the place of undeserving sinners. Let's now consider the third and final scene.

This is 42 through 47, which brings me to my third and final point. When evening had come, since it was the day of preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council who was himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead.

And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And Joseph brought a linen shroud and taking him down, wrapped him in a linen, taking him down and wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in the tomb that had been cut out of the rock.

And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Joseph, saw where he was laid.

[27 : 34] There are all kinds of conspiracy theories about the resurrection of Jesus. No one who respects history will refute that there was a man by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, a doer of good who was crucified by the Romans.

But there's a lot of dispute and conspiracy around the resurrection. resurrection. And some say that Jesus just miraculously came down off the cross.

Others say that he really didn't die. They thought he was dead. He was unconscious. And then after they took him down, he revived and he was able to escape. But here in this section, Mark is careful to establish that Jesus did in fact die and Jesus was in fact buried.

first Mark introduces us to a man of the Sanhedrin council. He doesn't just say a member from the Sanhedrin council, he tells us who it is. He says Joseph of Arimathea.

He was a respectable man. And so what we read in verse 43 is Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God to courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

[29 : 08] Mark tells us who it was. And Mark tells us that this man, obviously a very quiet follower of Jesus, he was on the Sanhedrin council and so no doubt he had to navigate that very delicately so he was clearly one who followed Jesus discreetly.

But he took courage in the midst of his death. courage. He took courage because he knew that this was the Son of God. He went to Pilate and he asked for the body of Jesus that he might give him a proper burial.

And he goes to a man who was quite the opposite of him. Joseph of Arimathea was a man of courage.

He took courage in that moment and he went to a coward. He went to Pilate, a man who knew that Jesus was innocent. And he complacently went along with the jealous religious leaders and their ploy to crucify Jesus.

But here we see Joseph's example of courage that he took in the face of the death of Jesus while Pilate remained a coward.

[30 : 27] Lord. We read in verses 44 through 45 that Pilate had one concern. He was surprised to hear that Jesus had already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead.

And when he learned that from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Jesus. He was dead. The centurion would have presided over enough crucifixions to know when somebody was dead.

And Jesus was dead. And so Pilate released the dead body of Jesus to Joseph. We read in verses 46 and 47 that Joseph himself, he didn't delegate this, Joseph himself did this, he brought a linen shroud and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb.

A tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb and Mark tells us, he says, Joseph of Arimathea didn't just do this and do his hands and come and say, I just buried Jesus.

He says, no, there were witnesses. He says, Mary Magdalene saw and Mary, the mother of Joseph, saw where Jesus was laid. He died and he was buried.

[31 : 54] Mark is careful. people to state these facts. And Mark is writing very close to the time of these particular events. And what Mark is doing right here is he is nicely setting up the next scene that we're going to hear next Sunday, which is on the resurrection.

But here in this final section, Mark wants us to see that the man on the middle cross was Jesus Christ, who certainly died and who was certainly buried.

Mark is doing all of this because he wants us to be certain about the man on the middle cross. That the man on the middle cross was Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, who came and gave his life as a ransom for many.

the very last voice that Mark records at the scene of the crucifixion is the voice of the centurion.

Mark tells us that when the centurion facing him saw that in this way he died, how he breathed his last, he said, truly this man is the Son of God.

[33 : 24] The centurion who had seen perhaps hundreds crucified, he saw this one die. He saw the other two die as well, nothing distinguishing about them, but in that moment God opened his eyes that he was able to say truly, this is the Son of God.

Friends, that's who was on the middle cross. The one who was on the middle cross was God in the flesh, the Son of God and the Son of Man who came to this earth to live a life that none of us could live, a life that perfectly pleased God, and then to die a death that every single one of us deserved to die for one reason, so that whosoever would put their trust in him will be saved.

My prayer for us is that we would be persuaded like the centurion. My prayer for us is that God would open our eyes and our hearts and we would be able to say this is the Son of God.

And friends, this is a special, this is a special revelation. This centurion was not more moral than all the other passerbys and the people who were there.

If we were to maybe check his record, we would probably find that he was a most hideous person. The job that he had and the things that he had to do because of that job, but in that moment, God opened his eyes.

[35 : 14] And we reminded the amazing grace of God that at this scene, there's this perhaps least expected, undeserving one who sees.

It's the Son of God. It is God opened his eyes. May God be pleased to open all of our eyes. Those of us who have already come to trust in Jesus, may we leave this morning more convinced that indeed he is the Son of God who took our place on the cross.

If you've not yet become convinced, my prayer for you is that your heart will be open, your eyes will be opened, that God will, as he did for the centurion, enable you to see this is truly the Son of God. Let's pray together. Father, thank you for your word this morning. Thank you for the illumination of the Holy Spirit who enables us to see the Lord Jesus Christ crucified, forsaken, buried, and who was raised from the dead and who ascended and will come again one day to receive to himself all those who belong to him.

Lord, those of us who have trusted in Jesus, may our faith deepen and those who have not yet done so, would you have mercy on them and open their eyes in Christ's name.

[36 : 53] Thank you.