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Title: The Way of the Cross

Text: Mark 15:20-39

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, also known as Passion Week. It is the time from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday. Passion Week is so named because of the passion with which Jesus willingly went to the cross in order to pay for the sins of His people. Passion Week is described in Matthew chapters 21-27, Mark chapters 11-15, Luke chapters 19-23, and John chapters 12-19. Passion Week begins with Jesus' Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday on the back of a colt as prophesied in Zechariah 9:9. Passion Week contained several memorable events: 1. Jesus cleansed the Temple for the second time (Luke 19:45-46), then disputed with the Pharisees regarding His authority. 2. Jesus gave His Olivet Discourse on the end times and taught many things, including the signs of His second coming. 3. Jesus ate His Last Supper with His disciples in the Upper Room (Luke 22:7-38). 4. Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray as He waited for His hour to come. It was here that Jesus, having been betrayed by Judas, was arrested and taken to several sham trials before the chief priests, Pontius Pilate, and Herod (Luke 22:54-23:25). 5. Following the trials, Jesus was scourged at the hands of the Roman soldiers, then He was forced to carry the cross through the streets of Jerusalem along what is known as the Via Dolorosa (Way of Sorrows). 6. Jesus was then crucified on Golgotha (on the day before the Sabbath). 7. Jesus was buried and remained in the tomb until Sunday and then gloriously resurrected. It is referred to as Passion Week because in that time, Jesus Christ truly revealed His passion for us in what He willingly went through on our behalf.

As I see it, there is no more significant week on the Christian calendar. If it wasn't for the Cross and Resurrection, we would not be here this morning. The church wouldn't be here. The pulpit wouldn't be here. There would be no reason for a sermon. There would be NO EASTER! BUT there WAS a DEATH, BURIAL, and RESURRECTION! Because of His passion revealed for us, we should be passionate in our worship of Jesus and in our proclamation of His Gospel!

This morning I want us to look to the Cross and the Savior. In the first century, the Romans executed criminals by crucifixion. It was intended to be both a humiliating and an agonizing experience. In Rome there was no concept of death with dignity for convicted criminals. After a man was sentenced to die, he was stripped of his clothes and paraded through the streets of the city so that his punishment would be seen by all. He was required to carry a 50-pound cross-piece (or sometimes the entire cross, which weighed about 200 pounds), and as he stumbled toward his place of execution, the soldiers would follow closely behind, whipping him along the way. When they arrived at the place of execution, the criminal would be both nailed and tied by rope to the cross beam, and then would be lifted up on to the cross. I've been told that a rather common inaccuracy seen in films and paintings of the crucifixion scene is that the cross didn't tower high above the crowd. Part of the point of the crucifixion was that the criminal should experience the torment of dangling just above the ground, and his tormentors could easily look him in the face. The position in which the condemned man hung made it difficult for him to exhale. That's why his legs were bent and his feet nailed near the base of the cross – so he could push his torso up a few inches and gasp for breath, until the pain in his legs became unbearable and he collapsed again. The process was intended to be slow and agonizing. Sometimes they died because of shock. Sometimes it was dehydration, but most often it was because the criminal lost the ability to support his weight and therefore suffocated. It was not uncommon for death to take two days. Whenever the authorities decided (for whatever reason) to expedite the criminal's death, his legs would be broken so that he could no longer push himself up for breath, and he would suffocate within a matter of minutes. Throughout the history of the Roman Empire, thousands were executed in this fashion. As enlightened as their society might have been in many ways, they didn't place much value on human life, especially the life of one Jewish peasant from Galilee. After Pilate sentenced Jesus to die, he turned Him over to the soldiers, whose job it was to lead Him to His execution. The soldiers mocked Him with words such as "Hail! King of the Jews!" They beat Him and spit on Him and placed a crown of thorns upon His head. *"When they were finally tired of mocking him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him again. Then they led him away to be crucified"* (vs. 20).

Today I want us to see three spiritual truths that are found in the story of the Savior's crucifixion; three lessons that will help us experience His healing presence in our lives.

1. JESUS COULDN'T CARRY HIS OWN CROSS... Since Mosaic Law required that executions be made outside the city, criminals were put to death on a hill outside the city limits. Roman custom was to position places of execution near well-traveled roads so that people could easily see what became of those who opposed Caesar. It was now time for Jesus to

begin on the journey to His death. Jesus had already endured the scourging with the Roman whip, so it is not surprising that He was physically unable to carry His cross. *“A man named Simon, who was from Cyrene, was coming in from the country just then, and they forced him to carry Jesus’ cross”* (vs. 21). Cyrene was a Greek settlement on the North African coast of the Mediterranean, in what is now modern Libya. It had a large Jewish population, and since “Simon” is a common Jewish name, he had probably come to Jerusalem as a pilgrim to celebrate the Passover. (Because of where Cyrene is located, it is often conjectured that he was black.) The Bible says he was just a passer-by when he was recruited by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus’ cross for Him. Most likely it was against his will, but Roman soldiers had the authority to demand such things, and since he was able-bodied, he could not refuse. Mark includes an additional detail about this man... *“(Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus.)”* (vs. 21). This implies that Mark believed his readers would know who Alexander and Rufus are – they probably were believers active in the church in Rome, where Mark wrote his gospel. The apostle Paul also mentions a Roman Christian named Rufus (Romans 16:13), and this could be the same person Mark refers to. When this man – Simon of Cyrene – was pulled out of the crowd and compelled to carry the cross of a convicted criminal, maybe he saw something in Jesus that caused him to want to know more about Him, and ultimately he became a follower. Jesus couldn’t carry His own cross, and so this man – a man just like you and me – had to carry it for Him. This is ironic, but one of the most important lessons of the crucifixion is that even though Jesus couldn’t carry His own cross...**HE IS THE BEST ONE WHO CAN HELP YOU CARRY YOUR CROSS.** Mark 8:34 – *“When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, ‘Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’”* Do you know what it is like to have more on your shoulders than you can possibly bear? Do you know what it is like to feel absolutely helpless? Absolutely powerless? Jesus does. In the Passion story we see Him standing strong and bold and courageous in the face of the worst kind of abuse. And now, with the end so near, His body completely gives out. He cannot take another step in His own strength. When you come to the place in your life when you cannot take another step in your own strength, I want you to know that Jesus has been there, too. Remember the verse from Hebrews 4... *“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin”* (vs. 15). Whatever the cross you have to bear in life – illness, weakness, trials, temptations, mistreatment – whatever it may be, you don’t have to bear the burden alone. Jesus will help you carry your cross. Earlier in His ministry, He spoke these words... *“Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28). Jesus came into this world to identify with the human race, to experience all that we experience – the same challenges, the same temptations, the same desperation. He understands you. He knows what it is like not to be able to go on. He will be there to give you strength in your time of need. Wherein Jesus couldn’t carry His own cross...**HE IS THE CHOICE ONE WHO CAN HELP YOU CARRY YOUR CROSS.**

2. JESUS COULD NOT SAVE HIMSELF... *“And they brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha (which means Skull Hill). They offered him wine drugged with myrrh, but he refused it”* (vs. 22-23). There’s some scholarly speculation about what the wine drugged with myrrh was intended to do. It might have been a drug intended to deaden His pain. It might have been a poison intended to expedite His death. Either way, Jesus didn’t accept the offer. He had been destined to “drink the cup” of His sacrificial death, and He intended to remain fully conscious until the bitter end. *“And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take. Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS. With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And He was numbered with the transgressors.’ And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!’ Likewise, the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, ‘He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.’ Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him”* (vs. 24-32). Oftentimes executed criminals were the subjects of taunts and mockery from a crowd of spectators. It seems like there’s something in human nature that causes some to want to gloat in the punishment of others, doing everything possible to add to their agony. We see this even today. When a person is executed, there are almost always two groups gathered outside the prison walls: 1. An ANTI-DEATH PENALTY GROUP holding a candlelight vigil and 2. ANOTHER GROUP who have gathered specifically to CELEBRATE THE EXECUTION OF THE CRIMINAL. They often carry signs that say things like “Burn in Hell, so-and-so” and “We hope you suffer like your victims,” etc. I don’t want to get off track here into a debate about the merits of the death penalty, but I’ll say this: Most people who support the death penalty DO NOT support the festive atmosphere that takes place at executions. I can’t imagine considering such an event an evening’s entertainment! In first century Jerusalem, there were some who considered crucifixion that very thing. When a man was condemned to die, they would follow the procession out of town to the hill called Golgotha and entertain themselves at

the dying man's expense. As Jesus hung on the cross, stripped, beaten and bloody, He was an easy target for ridicule. They taunted Him as the one who supposedly had claimed He could destroy and rebuild the temple in three days; seeing Him dying helpless and alone must have made His claim seem laughable. Some of the leading priests were also there, saying, "Let this Messiah come down off the cross so that we can see it and believe in Him." We know now that Jesus could have done that. He could have saved Himself, just as He could have prevented Himself from being there in the first place. He was there, not because He was the victim of circumstances beyond His control, but because HE CHOSE TO LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD. Earlier He had said to His disciples... *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I lay down my life that I may have it back again. No one can take my life from me. I lay down my life voluntarily. For I have the right to lay it down when I want to and also the power to take it again"* (John 10:11, 17-18). As Jesus was arrested, He said to His disciples... *"Or do you think that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?"* (Matthew 26:53). In THAT sense, Jesus COULD have saved Himself. But there is another sense in which He couldn't save Himself. This is an important lesson in the crucifixion. Jesus could not save Himself...**BECAUSE HE WANTED TO SAVE YOU**. Saving you, forgiving your sins, and giving you eternal life meant that He had to die on the cross to pay the price for your sins – and He was willing to do it. He was willing to die so that YOU can live! He was willing to die so that you – and everyone who chooses to believe in Him – could be reconciled to God! Paul said... *"Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. For He made Him who knew no sin TO BE sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19, 21). Jesus died on the cross because that's what it took to bring about our reconciliation, and that was a price He was willing to pay. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He had prayed, "if it is possible, take this cup from me" – but it was not possible. He HAD to go to the cross. So, in spite of all the power available to Him, He couldn't save Himself, because He wanted to save YOU. It wasn't the nails (or ropes) that bound Him to that tree; HIS LOVE FOR YOU held Him there. Jesus could not save Himself...**BECAUSE HE WANTED TO SAVE YOU**.

3. JESUS EXPERIENCED SEPARATION FROM GOD... *"At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. Then, at that time Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"* (vs. 33). This is the most difficult part of the story for me to tell. It's the part that Mel Gibson couldn't capture on film. We saw Christ's anguish in the garden. We saw the injustice He suffered at the hand of Pontius Pilate. We saw the mistreatment He endured from the Roman soldiers. Each of these scenes were heartbreaking. But this scene is beyond our ability to understand. At that precise moment, His own Father abandoned Him, because at that precise moment, the words spoken in Isaiah came true... *"...the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all"* (53:6). As I read earlier from Paul... *"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). In that one horrifying moment, Jesus experienced separation from God...**SO THAT YOU CAN EXPERIENCE RECONCILIATION WITH GOD**. Jesus cried *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* so that you will NEVER have to cry those words. Here is the heart of the Gospel – the reason for it all. We can be reconciled to God. We can be in a right relationship with Him. We can be forgiven of our sins and receive everlasting life through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Listen to the words of Paul... *"But now God has shown us a different way of being right in his sight – not by obeying the law by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago. We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done"* (Romans 3:21-22).

CONCLUSION. A comment I have heard from many who have seen the Passion movie is that it gives a person greater understanding of what Christ did for us. That's true. The movie tells us WHAT Christ did for us, but it doesn't really tell us WHY. It shows us His sufferings, but it doesn't explain them to us. I'm not sure any movie could, but the Bible does. The Bible says... *"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed"* (1 Peter 2:24). Peter is quoting a verse from Isaiah. It's the verse that appears on the screen as the movie begins... *"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed"* (Isaiah 53:5). The passion of Christ – His suffering and death – is for our healing and our salvation. Through His wounds we can experience the healing of our wounds. So, I encourage you to meditate on the Passion of Christ. Remember the garden. He was all alone in His agony, but you are NOT alone in yours. When you face your Gethsemane, He is there with you, and through praying a "Gethsemane" prayer, you will experience power over temptation. Remember His trial. He was declared guilty of crimes He did not commit and received a death sentence He did not deserve, but He endured this injustice so that you WON'T

have to face justice for your sins – you can instead experience God’s mercy. Remember His crucifixion. He could not save Himself, BECAUSE HE WANTED TO SAVE YOU. He experienced separation from God SO THAT YOU CAN EXPERIENCE RECONCILIATION TO GOD. Moments before Jesus died, He cried... *“It is finished”* (John 19:30). And then He said... *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”* (Luke 23:46). Though His work is finished on the cross, HIS WORK IS NOT FINISHED IN YOU. He wants you to experience the fullness of a relationship with Him. He wants you to come alive with His life inside of you. He wants you to experience the power of His resurrection. That is why He gave His life for you.