“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”

Mark 15:1–41

Key Verse: 15:34

“And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ (which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)”

Today’s events take place on Friday, the culmination of Passion Week. Very early in the morning, Jesus is tried before Pilate. At nine in the morning he’s crucified. At noon there’s darkness, and just after three, he dies. In his account, Mark, unlike the other Gospel writers, doesn’t give extra details; he writes quietly and simply, keeping the focus on Jesus. He repeatedly mentions that Jesus is called “the king of the Jews” (2,9,12,18,26,32). Through it all we see Jesus’ dignified silence. We see how a guilty man Barabbas is released, while innocent Jesus is condemned. We see how the soldiers sarcastically mock him. We see how people tempt him to save himself from the cross. And Mark records only one thing Jesus says. It’s his cry when he feels forsaken by God. In this study we mainly want to reflect on what Jesus’ cry means to us. May God speak to us through his word today.

Read verse 1. These religious leaders are up early in the morning. But it’s not to pray; it’s to carry out their plot. As we’ve seen, they’ve actually been up all night trying Jesus, looking for evidence to put him to death. Finally, when Jesus says he’s the Son of God, they think they’ve got what they want. To the Jews, it’s blasphemy; to the Romans, it’s a claim to an authority that challenges Caesar. But the Jews, under Roman occupation, were not allowed to carry out the death sentence; they needed Pilate to do it. Pilate usually resided in Caesarea. But during Passover, he came and stayed at a palace in Jerusalem, to keep the peace. At that time Roman officials would see clients each day from dawn until noon. So these religious leaders had to get Jesus to him quickly. Their handing Jesus over to Pilate fulfilled Jesus’ own words (10:33).

Read verse 2. It’s the first question Pilate asks Jesus. He’s trying to determine if Jesus is seeking to lead another rebellion against Rome as king of the Jews. If he is, it’s high treason, punishable by death. But Jesus only answers, “You have said so.” His answer shows that he himself is not claiming to be a king, especially in the sense Pilate means (cf. Jn18:33–38). Jesus is a spiritual king, not at all a political king. By giving such a passive answer Jesus is also showing he has no intention of fighting to defend himself. From the start, Pilate can’t see any motive in Jesus that’s worthy of death.

Read verses 3,4. According to Luke 23:2, they're accusing Jesus of subverting the nation, of forbidding the paying taxes to Caesar, and of claiming to be a king. When Pilate remains unconvinced, they repeat that Jesus has been spreading rebellious teaching all over the country (Lk23:5). After hearing all the chief priests’ accusations, Pilate turns to Jesus, to get him to clarify what really happened. Read verse 5. Jesus has already been silent before the Sanhedrin; now he’s silent again, even when it’s the last chance to defend himself. He’s surrounded by hostility and unbelief, and by people saying so many wrong things about him. But Jesus has the silence of the suffering servant of God, the lamb led to the slaughter (Isa53:7). Pilate is amazed because most people accused of crimes would say so many things in their own defense. Silent Jesus before his accusers is our example.

Read verses 6–8. The custom at Passover every year was for the Roman governor to release a prisoner, no doubt to celebrate how God helped the Jews escape bondage in Egypt. Here Mark introduces us to a man named Barabbas. He’s in prison now, charged with leading a rebellion against Rome during which some people had been murdered. Barabbas is clearly a guilty man. At this point in the morning, a crowd appears at Pilate’s palace, asking for the customary prisoner to be released.

Read verses 9,10. Pilate thinks this is his opportunity to get Jesus released. He refers to Jesus as “the king of the Jews,” because he thinks this crowd of ordinary people *wants* Jesus to be their king. But why does Pilate want to release Jesus? It’s because Pilate can see Jesus is no threat to Rome. And he can see that the chief priests have handed Jesus over to him “out of self-interest.” In Greek it literally says “out of envy.” Even Pilate can see how jealous these religious leaders are of Jesus. They’re jealous not only because Jesus is so popular, but also because Jesus has the integrity they lack. Sadly, Pilate has turned Jesus’ trial into a political game based on popular opinion. And Pilate’s clever plan backfires.

Read verse 11. The chief priests here are like those making political commercials today, getting people to change their views. They stir up the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead of Jesus. These religious leaders will do or say anything to get rid of Jesus. We wonder how they got people to change their minds. Probably they told people that Jesus was threatening the temple (29). Probably they also said that Jesus was refusing to fight for them before Pilate, but that Barabbas was their real hero.

Read verses 12–14. Pilate again mentions that Jesus is the king of the Jews. But to his shock, the crowd shouts for Jesus to be crucified, and they keep shouting it, louder and louder. How treacherous and scary people can be! How foolish to make decisions based on popular opinion! The Bible condemns this crowd for disowning the Holy and Righteous One and asking for a murderer to be released (Ac3:14). Living in popular culture people will always prefer a corrupt, outrageous person over a holy, righteous one. But all of us in some way share in the guilt of this crowd, especially when we choose the world instead of Jesus.

Read verse 15. Pilate should have upheld Roman law, which required truthful evidence to support a charge. But as governor he’s not just a judge; he’s a politician who wants to keep his job by pleasing people. So he does what the people want, instead of doing what’s right. It says he has Jesus “flogged.” They used the dreaded “flagellum,” a whip made of leather straps imbedded with pieces of bone or lead. The prisoner would be stripped naked, and several soldiers would take turns using the whip, until the man’s flesh would be hanging in bleeding shreds; sometimes the person’s inner organs and bones could be seen. People would often collapse and die from it. This is what was done to Jesus. Jesus was wounded so badly so that we could be healed (1Pe2:24b).

Read verses 16–20. This all happens in the place right next to the governor’s palace, where the Roman soldiers lived in barracks. “The whole company of soldiers” was about 600 men. After the flogging, they’re all called together and start making fun of Jesus. It’s a rare opportunity for entertainment, and as Romans they have a racial bias. They especially mock Jesus’ kingship. They find an old purple robe to put over his mangled body. They twist together a crown of thorns to stick on his head. They call out to him again and again, “Hail, king of the Jews!” They repeatedly crack him on the head with a staff, spit on him, and fall on their knees in front of him, to mock him. There are surely bursts of men’s laughter. Jesus is just standing there, helpless and quiet. Their mistreatment again fulfills what Jesus predicted must happen, according to the prophecies (10:34; cf. Isa50:6). Their mockery reveals the ironic truth that Jesus really is the king, not just of the Jews, but of all people. He’s the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev17:14; 19:16). But why did he have to be mocked like this? We’re the ones who deserve to be mocked, because of our sins and hypocrisy. But Jesus was mocked in our places. He took all the punishment and shame we deserve, so that he could give us peace (Isa53:5).

Read verse 21. Cyrene was a place in modern-day Libya, in northern Africa. Some people think Simon of Cyrene was one of the diaspora Jews coming late to Passover. Others think he may have been a Gentile convert to Judaism, and a black man. In this verse Mark mentions Simon’s two sons, Alexander and Rufus, because by the time Mark wrote, in the early 60’s A.D., these men, along with their mother, were likely members of the Christian community in Rome (cf. Ro16:13). Up to this point their father Simon was not a Christian. But when he’s forced to carry Jesus’ cross and witness the crucifixion, something happens in his heart, and he influences his whole family to become disciples of Jesus.

Read verse 22. The soldiers took Jesus through busy streets. They wanted people to witness this and be intimidated. This “place of the skull” or “Golgotha,” (in Latin called “Calvary”) was outside the city walls of Jerusalem, on a road where many people came and went (Jn19:17,20). It was called “the place of the skull” because it was a place of execution.

Read verse 23. This happened just before the crucifixion. Wine mixed with myrrh was a crude narcotic Jews would use to deaden the pain. It was typically offered by Jewish women sympathetic to somebody about to be crucified. But Jesus refused to drink it because he wanted to experience the full force of the cross, in obedience to God’s will (14:36).

Read verse 24. Crucifixion was the worst form of Roman punishment. First, a person would be stripped naked. Some would be tied to a cross, others would be nailed to it. Jesus is nailed with iron nails through his hands and one big nail through both his feet (Lk24:39,40). When his cross is erected, he’s not near the ground, but high up, because later that day a soldier has to use a stick to lift a sponge up to him. It’s the soldiers’ prerogative to get the personal effects of the victim. They don’t care about who they’re crucifying; all they’re thinking about is what they can get. They’re so calloused and so petty. But even their gambling for Jesus’ clothing fulfills prophecy (Ps22:18).

Read verses 25,26. This written notice was probably first hung around Jesus’ neck as he’s marched out to the place of execution; now it’s fasted to the top of his cross. The purpose is to identify the crime for which he's supposedly guilty, to show people what happens to those who commit such a crime. But it has a deeper meaning. Jesus on the cross becomes the King of the Jews, and the true King of all people. Because he died on a cross for our sins, he’s worthy to be our King, worthy of all our love and loyalty, worthy to pour out our whole lives in serving him (Rev5:9,12).

Read verse 27. They crucified Jesus in between two criminals to make him look guilty, but this, too, fulfills prophecy (Isa53:12). On the cross he’s bearing all our guilt, all our shame, all our disgrace. According to God’s law anyone hung on a pole was cursed by God (Dt21:23). That's exactly what the religious leaders want; they want Jesus executed on a cross so that people will think Jesus is cursed by God, not blessed. But on the cross Jesus bore all the curse for us (Gal3:13). On the cross Jesus took way all the curse of our sin, all our fatalism. When we believe, he truly sets us free.

Read verses 29,30. Jesus’ crucifixion has now attracted a crowd of people passing by. Mark notes that they’re hurling insults at Jesus and shaking their heads. It fulfills another prophecy: “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads” (Ps22:7). Mockery may seem a light matter, but it’s verbal violence that wounds and leaves scars. These people previously listened to Jesus with delight (12:37), but now they’ve turned on him with vindictive sarcasm. They mock his challenge to their beloved Jerusalem temple. Now that he looks so helpless on the cross, they mock his previous powers to do miracles.

Read verses 31,32. The religious leaders join in the mockery. They characteristically demand yet another miracle, even from the cross. In a sense, Satan is using them to tempt Jesus to come down from the cross, which in fact he could have done. Satan still uses many means to get us to put down our cross. But in their mockery is an ironic and powerful truth: Jesus saved others but he couldn’t save himself. In this world most people’s lives revolve around saving themselves first and foremost, in many ways. But Jesus refused to save himself so that he could save others. He gave his own life so that we could live. This is how he fulfilled his mission. He’s our example. As Christians, we should ask ourselves: Are our lives characterized by saving others or by saving ourselves? Jesus said, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (8:35).

Read verse 33. Here we see an unnatural darkness in the middle of the day. The Jews considered this a sign of God’s displeasure and judgment (Ex10:21–23; Dt28:29; Am8:9; Je15:9). During this darkness the mockery stops for a while; everybody gets really quiet, and really scared. It lasts for three hours, while Jesus is hanging on the cross, bleeding and dying.

Read verse 34. This cry of Jesus is actually the first verse of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” This psalm is full of prophecies of Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus intentionally cries from this psalm to show that he’s fulfilling it. But he’s also experiencing it. So, after six hours on the cross and three hours of darkness Jesus says these words “in a loud voice.” It’s really painful to be forsaken. It means to be abandoned or deserted. It hurts so badly; we feel totally crushed. Jesus was abandoned by all his most beloved disciples. But while on the cross, he now feels that even God the Father has abandoned him.

Why? It’s because on the cross, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn1:29). It requires a just payment for sin (Ro3:25b,26). Our sin separates us from God (Isa59:2). Our sin alienates us from God and makes us his enemies (Col1:21). On the cross God made Jesus who had no sin to be sin for us (2Co5:21a). On the cross Jesus took the full fury of God’s wrath against sin, in our places (Jn3:36; Ro3:25a; 5:9; Eph2:3–5; 1Th1:10). In this way, on the cross Jesus gave his life to ransom us (10:45).

At this time many of the early Christians in Rome were being persecuted under Nero’s reign. They were being betrayed by beloved family members and close friends on account of their faith. In that crowded, powerful city they felt so marginalized and many were suffering more than we can know. Mark emphasizes Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It was to help them know that Jesus understands their suffering, because he experienced it himself. Jesus knows our deepest pain, our coldest loneliness. He wants us to cry out to God like him. And he wants us to know that in him, we’re reunited with our Father God, through his grace of forgiveness. Through faith in Jesus we have the closest relationship possible with our loving heavenly Father. May we personally experience the amazing love of Jesus our King who took all God’s wrath in our places, so that we might be close to God.

Look at verses 35–37. People misunderstand the word “Eloi” and think Jesus is calling Elijah for help. They give him a sour drink to spite him even more, and mock his faith one last time. With a loud cry, Jesus breaths his last.

Read verse 38. This big, heavy curtain separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, which was entered only once a year, and only by the high priest. At the death of Jesus, all this is no longer necessary, because through the death of Jesus we now have full access to God’s holy presence, wherever we are (Heb6:19; 10:19,20).

Read verse 39. A centurion was a Roman army officer in charge of 100 soldiers. He was there no doubt to ensure that Jesus was crucified. But as he stands there witnessing the death of Jesus, witnessing the darkness, witnessing Jesus’ cry from the cross, he’s convinced that Jesus really was the Son of God. This is what Mark has wanted us to see about Jesus all along (1:1,11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:61,62). Jesus the Son obeyed his Father’s will even unto death on a cross (Php2:8; Heb5:8,9). He wants us to learn his obedience. In the midst of many hard-hearted folks, there’s an unlikely pure-hearted man at the cross who comes to see God through the death of Jesus. This gives us hope still.

Look at verses 40,41. Mark concludes by mentioning the women watching from a distance. The men had to flee to avoid Roman arrest, but the women could stay there unthreatened. They had been following Jesus from Galilee and caring for his needs. Now they stay there to witness his death. Three are named, two Marys and a Salome; many are not. They stay there out of love for Jesus.

Today we mainly thought about Jesus our true King and his cry from the cross. May God help us believe in the death of Jesus, so that we can draw close to God in the full assurance that faith brings (Heb10:22). May God help us to experience his great love through the cross of Jesus. And may God help us to follow his good example, to quietly obey God’s will and save others, not ourselves.