

The Death of Jesus

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a three-part series

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Mark 15:33–47 (NIV)

³³ At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 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?”).

³⁵ When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.”

³⁶ Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said.

³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸ The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

⁴⁰ Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹ In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

⁴² It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

Romans 5:1–11 (CEB)

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness combined with our faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God’s glory.

³ But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, ⁴ endurance produces character, and character produces hope. ⁵ This hope doesn’t put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁶ While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. ⁷ It isn’t often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. ⁸ But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. ⁹ So, now that we have been made righteous by his blood, we can be even more certain that we will be saved from God’s wrath through him. ¹⁰ If we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies, now that we have been reconciled, how much more certain is it that we will be saved by his life? ¹¹ And not only that: we even take pride in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom we now have a restored relationship with God.

Crucified, dead, and buried.

The long hours of pain and suffering, humiliation and scorn, have come to this. Darkness settles across the city as Jesus hangs on the cross, striving to lift himself so that he can breathe. With the passing of hour, the lifting and the breathing come harder and harder. One hour, two, three hours . . . four, five, six hours.

After the sixth hour on the cross, Jesus cries out, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” The roman soldiers probably didn’t understand Jesus as he cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,” but everyone else did. Jesus turned to Psalm 22 to express his sense of utter separation from God. It is a psalm that begins in anguish but ends in triumph. Surely, however, no one gathered around Jesus and his cross could apprehend

a bit of triumph in what they were witnessing. Even as a bit of sour wine is lifted to Jesus' lips, the mocking goes on.

And then, Jesus died. Too weak to life himself upward anymore, Jesus could no longer find the breath to go on, but only for one last loud cry. At that moment, the world was shaken to its core. The curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was torn in two, signifying that by his faithfulness to death, even death on a cross, Jesus had closed the chasm between God and humanity. And one of the soldiers cried out, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" This Gentile is the first person in the Mark's gospel to declare Jesus to be God's Son. Mark expects us to grasp that in this soldier's exclamation, we see that Jesus' faithfulness was not only for the Jews but also for the whole world, Jew and Gentile alike.

Why "Good" Friday?

I get this question often. It is certainly understandable.

The etymology of the "Good" here is not clear. Some think it comes from "God's Friday." Other scholars believe it simply derives from the German, *Gute Freitag*. But regardless of where the English term came from, the theology of "Good Friday" can be embraced by all Christians.

Calling it "Good Friday" acknowledges that out of the horrible tragedy of Jesus' crucifixion came the greatest possible good – God's victory over sin and death.

Standing at the foot of Jesus' cross on Friday, it would have been impossible to see any good in it at all. Without Easter, Jesus' story would have been a tragedy. The memory of his actions and teachings might have been cherished by his immediate followers, but he would have gone down in history as one of several well-meaning but failed messiahs in the first century.

But Jesus' resurrection meant that he had triumphed over death and, because death was the consequence of sin, he had triumphed over sin as well. Jesus' resurrection meant that God had acted in the present world to restore humanity and all of creation to a right relationship with himself. What could be a greater "good" than that?

Mark tells us that some of the women who followed Jesus were standing nearby. The men were nowhere to be seen; presumably in hiding for fear that they would be picked up too. It is important to Mark to note the presence of the women, for it will be women who discover the empty tomb early Sunday morning.

Only a few hours remained in which to take down Jesus' down from the cross and get it to a suitable tomb. After sundown, the Jewish Sabbath would begin and no one could touch a dead body without becoming ritually unclean.

In these few hours, one man did step forward. He had the means and the stature to help. His name was Joseph and he was from Arimathea. N. T. Wright tells us a bit more about Joseph and his task.

It was a moment of great potential risk. To show any sympathy with someone who had just been crucified on a charge of sedition was bound to raise suspicions. Peter had been scared out of his wits by the mere suggestion that he was associated with Jesus. Joseph, Mark explains, had been eagerly longing for the kingdom; we must assume that this means he had been a keen, though secret, supporter of Jesus. He must have decided that if Jesus had died he had nothing more to lose by doing what he knew to be right.

It also meant, of course, that he would make himself ritually unclean, and unable to engage in some of the normal sabbath practices that evening and the next day. Joseph was treating Jesus as if he was a close member of the family, for whom it was his duty to see to burial before nightfall—as well as to fulfil the old biblical law not to let hanged corpses remain in place overnight. For this he was prepared to face uncleanness, suspicion and possible charges as an associate of Jesus.

Joseph's activities involve quite a lot of quick movement between three o'clock and the deadline of sundown, when the sabbath begins. He has to go from Golgotha to Pilate's headquarters, buy a shroud on the way back through the city, and finish the job in short order. He is kept waiting by Pilate, who summons the centurion from his post at Skull's Place to check that Jesus not only appears to have died but has in fact been dead for some time. This tells us why Mark has bothered with all this detail; one obvious retort to the early Christian claim about Easter was that Jesus had not really died, and that Joseph had cunningly taken him down half-dead in order to revive him later. There are, of course, other objections to this line of thought; but Mark is keen to squash it before it even begins.¹

The burial practices of the Jews in Jesus' day were quite different from our own. The dead were not "buried" in graves. Instead they were laid out in tombs until such time that the dried out bones could be collected and put in a box for storage.

The Basics of Jesus' Burial

The Jews of Jesus' day practiced a two-stage burial. When a person died, family members would wrap the body in cloth and place it on a ledge in a cave or a man-made family tomb. Perhaps a year later, when the body had decomposed, the family would return to the tomb and place the loved one's bones in a box. The bone box, called an ossuary, would then be stored in a crypt along with the bone boxes of other family members.

Jesus was crucified and died on Friday afternoon. Because Jews could not touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday, Mary and the others had to move quickly. Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, quickly wrapped in some linen, and then carried to an unused tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. Like most such tombs, a round stone was used to block to the entrance. The stone would keep animals out but still enable the family to come and go as they tended to the bodies and bones. There, Jesus' wrapped body was laid on a stone slab. The women planned to return at dawn on Sunday, after resting on the Sabbath, to finish preparing Jesus' body for the year or more it would lie in the tomb.

In the Apostles' Creed we say that Jesus was "crucified, dead, and buried." But the process isn't really the point here. Why do we bother saying that Jesus was both dead and buried? Isn't that a bit redundant?

Yes, it is redundant and that is exactly the point. We are affirming that Jesus' crucifixion resulted in his death, that Jesus was dead, dead, and dead. No swooning or fainting from which Jesus later recovered. Not merely near death or all-but-dead. Jesus was dead – just as all humans die. No heart beat. No brain waves. Dead. . . . guess I've been clear. The Roman death squad accomplished their task. That is what Mark wants us to grasp at each point in his story of Jesus' death and burial.

Why is this point so important? Because Mark is about to make the most astonishing claim: that this dead man, Jesus, was resurrected by God! Not resuscitated, not brought back to life . . . but brought by God through death to the other side, to a life-after-death, and a life-after-life-after-death, the newly-embodied life that is resurrection.

Finally, there is one more point to be made about Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus died, just as all of us die. He was fully and completely human. The laws of physics and biology applied to him just as to us. But, you may ask, isn't he also fully and completely God? And if so, are you saying that God died?

In a way, yes. It is inescapable that one person of the Trinity, Jesus, dies on that cross. But did the Father die? No. The Spirit? No. So . . . what does all this mean? . . . Beats me. I just know that Jesus died. Not just part of him, but all of him. It is a fool's errand to try to figure out all the mysteries of God. All we can do is look ahead to Easter morning and our proclamation that He Lives!

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Mark for Everyone* (220). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” (Psalm 22:1)

The following is from Alan Cole’s commentary on Mark in the *Tyndale NT* series.

But what was the meaning of this cry? Had God indeed deserted him? No, clearly not, for this was God’s path, and not what the Son would have chosen for himself, if it had not been God’s will; this is the whole meaning of the agony in the Garden (14:36). More, it was God’s path as made plain to the Son from the commencement of his ministry, as the threefold prediction of his death to the disciples makes plain (see 8:31, 9:31, 10:33). It has been well said that the opening words of the cry, *My God*, are in fact in themselves an affirmation of faith. Since this same Psalm 22 from which they are quoted ends in a cry of triumph, it is reasonable to suppose that Jesus chose it with this in view also. Otherwise, there were many suitable passages (e.g. in Lamentations) which express the endurance of suffering without any final consciousness of victory, and any of these Jesus might well have used. So here we have the agony of one suffering the experience of abandonment by God, and yet certain by faith of ultimate vindication and triumph. But to what, and why, was he abandoned? To betrayal, mockery, scourging and death—yes: but to limit the explanation to these things would be superficial exegesis, for all of these he had faced and foretold for years. There was a far deeper spiritual agony which Jesus endured alone in the darkness, an agony which we can never plumb and which, thanks to his endurance of it on the cross, no created being need ever now experience. No explanation is adequate other than the traditional view that, in that dark hour, God’s wrath fell upon him. Because wrath is no abstract principle, but a personal manifestation, this means that his unclouded communion with the Father, enjoyed from all eternity, was temporarily broken. Some commentators have held that Christ suffered all the pangs of hell in that time; and if hell is at root a separation from God, then he certainly did. But on such mysteries Scripture is silent, and Mark tells us nothing here. If there was a barrier between the Father and the Son at that moment, it could only be because of sin; and the Son knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so it could only be our sin that cost him such agony. Here is the heart of the cross; here is the mystery which no painting or sculpture, with distorted face, can ever begin to show, because we fail to realize the true nature of the punishment for sin, as separation from God, and therefore the true nature and depth of the agony borne by him. Both spiritual punishment and reward are ultimately to be seen in terms of God and our relationship to him, either utter severance from him or the closest communion with him; all else is consequent definition. This is not to minimize the seriousness of the concept of eternal punishment and reward; instead, it projects them on to a far wider screen, and gives them a moral depth unthinkable otherwise.

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