

Week 4: Jesus – His Crucifixion

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Good evening and welcome to week 4 of Christianity Explored.

Allow me to paint a brief picture for you.

Imagine that you're with a good friend on a beautiful deserted beach.

The sun is shining down,
the sea is crystal blue and
as calm as a millpond.

So you decide to go for a swim.

You are just stripping off, when your friend points out a huge sign,
which reads: 'Danger - Sharks. No swimming.'

Now is that sign there to save you or to spoil your fun?

Do you feel cheated, or do you feel grateful that you have been warned?

And what are you going to do about that sign?

Are you going to ignore it and go for a swim anyway,
or are you going to obey it and put your clothes back on?

Your choice.

In a similar way we left you last week with some huge danger signs from Mark's Gospel.

[OHP 1]

Mark chapter 7, verses 20-22 says:

"Jesus said: 'What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.' "

Mark chapter 9, verse 43 says:

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out."

These are the warning signs.

[BLANK OHP]

And, the film Titanic brilliantly illustrates the assessment we all have to make about the danger we are in.

The scene where Rose confronts Mr Andrews the ship designer goes like this.

Rose: Mr Andrews, I saw the iceberg and I see it in your eyes.
Please tell me the truth.

Mr Andrews: The ship will sink.

Rose: You are certain.

Mr Andrews: Yes, in an hour or so all this will be at the bottom of the Atlantic. Get to a boat quickly.

Rose says, "Please tell me the truth".

Rose wants to know the reality of the situation they are all in.

If there's no danger then have a cup of tea and forget about it.

But if there is danger, if this is reality, then we need to get to a lifeboat.

We all have to work out:

A. What is the truth.

B. What do we do with that truth.

And of course the Bible is clear on what the truth is.

We are rebels against God, deserving hell.

But the wonderful news is that we have a lifeboat in Jesus.

Last week we looked at Mark chapter 2, verse 17:

"It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

So Jesus came to rescue guilty rebels in God's world, like you and I.

But how?

How does he rescue rebels?

Please turn to Mark chapter 8, verse 31 on page 1012.

[Mark 8:31]

"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again."

Now the word "must" used here
literally means "necessary for certain great ends".

So Jesus is not only saying that he will die but
that it is necessary for him to die.

[OHP 2]

The same teaching comes through in Mark chapter 10 (v45), where we
read that

*"even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and
to give his life as a ransom for many".*

Here we read that Jesus came to die,
to give his life in order to rescue rebels by
paying the price to set them free.

[BLANK OHP]

And this is why the symbol at the heart of the Christian faith:

- isn't a crib to remind us of Jesus' birth;
- isn't a light to remind us of his life;
- isn't a book to remind us of his teaching
- isn't a stone to remind us of his resurrection.

The symbol at the heart of the Christian faith is a cross,
to remind us of his death.

And no other world religion celebrates the death of its founder
so there must be something unique about his death.

Now most of us prefer to avoid talking about death, especially a ghastly injustice which cuts short a brilliant life, like this one.

And crucifixion is a particularly horrendous means of execution.

This is how the Roman orator Cicero described it.

He wrote: *"It is the most cruel and shameful of all punishments. Let it never come near the body of a Roman citizen.*

Indeed let it never come near his thoughts, or eyes, or ears or let the word pass from his lips."

Crucifixion was known as the slave's punishment.

Any slave would look at a crucified man and think, *"However terrible my lot, rebellion is not worth it."*

It was the ultimate deterrent.

And yet, the early Christians **boasted** about it.

"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ", the Apostle Paul said.

It was not an embarrassing postscript to the life of their religious hero.

It was the very pivot of their message.

"We preach Christ crucified", is the cry of the early church.

So why?

Why is this symbol of universal loathing transformed into a badge of honour?

Why is a symbol of execution so precious to countless Christians?

Why **do** Christians cherish the cross above all else?

Answer: Because it is the lifeboat.

It is how Jesus rescues people.

So let's look at what happened when Jesus was crucified.

If you would turn to Mark chapter 15 on page 1023 and we'll read verses 21-39.

²¹ *A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.*

²² *They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).*

²³ *Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.*

²⁴ *And they crucified him.*

Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

²⁵ *It was the third hour when they crucified him.*

²⁶ *The written notice of the charge against him read:*

THE KING OF THE JEWS.

²⁷ *They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.*

²⁹ *Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ come down from the cross and save yourself!"*

³¹ *In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves.*

"He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!

³² *Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."*

Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

³³ *At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.*

³⁴ *And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice,*

"Eloi, Eloi, lama 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 *One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, 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, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said,*

“Surely this man was the Son of God!”

In the biography of Winston Churchill 3 pages of the 300 page book are given over to his death. That’s just one percent of the book.

In the Bible about one third of each of the 4 Gospels is given over to Jesus’ death.

His death is **absolutely** central.

And in this passage we learn three things about the cross, all of which are crucial to our understanding of this central event in human history.

[OHP 3]

They are:

- God was angry
- Jesus was abandoned
- We can be accepted

[BLANK OHP]

Firstly, God was angry.

Verse 33 states: "*At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.*"

The sixth hour is actually noon.

So at the moment when the midday sun should have been at its brightest in the sky,
the land was plunged into darkness which remained there for 3 hours.

3 hours of darkness is clearly not normal.
Something supernatural is going on and the message is that God is angry.

Throughout the Bible we see darkness in the daytime as a sign of God's anger and judgement.

For example, one of the ten plagues that God brought on Egypt was a plague of darkness.

Time and again in the Bible,
light symbolises God's presence and his favour,
while darkness tells us God is acting in punishment.

So when Jesus dies and darkness comes over the land,
we know straight away that God is angry.

Now we may not like the idea of God being angry.

We tend to see anger as something that is unpredictable and wild, associated with a quick temper.

But God's anger is different.

It is his settled, controlled, personal hostility to all that is wicked and sinful.

God is a God of holiness, of blazing purity, and he hates what is evil.

When it comes to evil he doesn't lean back in his chair and pretend nothing has happened.

No.

Evil matters to God:

lying matters to God;

selfishness matters to God;

Kosovo and Afghanistan, the World Trade Centre,

six million Jews,

they all matter to God.

God is not just angered by sin, by rebellion against him.

He also has the power to punish it.

I get angry enough about things,

but often I am powerless to do anything about it.

But when God gets angry against evil, against our rebellion,

he has the power to punish it.

Now it is actually a good thing that evil matters to God.

Those terrorists who hijacked the planes on September 11th (2001) may have escaped justice in this life,
but they are not going to escape God's justice.

Hitler may have escaped the war crimes tribunal but
he will not escape God.

Would you want to live in a world where evil didn't matter?
Where people got away with the evil that they do?

We cry out for justice,
and we can feel so frustrated when justice is evaded.

As a Christian I know that there is one whose justice can not be evaded,
not even by dying.

If God didn't get angry at evil,
he would not be a God that I would want to worship.

So as Jesus dies on the cross darkness comes over the land,
showing that God is angry.

But that leaves us with a question:
With whom was God angry? Who was he punishing?

Last time we saw that Jesus had come to rescue us from our rebellion against God,
from his judgement and from Hell.

"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners" as Jesus said.

The thing is, Jesus never rebelled against God, but I have.

So it must surely be me that God should punish.

But the staggering answer – is that God was punishing Jesus.

And so we come to our second heading.

[OHP 4]

Jesus was abandoned.

Verse 34 says: *"And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice,
"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"*

That cry tells us that Jesus was abandoned.

On the cross, Jesus was abandoned by God.

It was Jesus that God was punishing.

[BLANK OHP]

Now there is no doubt that on the cross Jesus suffered physical agony.

But what is being spoken of here is spiritual agony,
of being forsaken by God.

He is saying, "*God, why have you rejected me?*
Why have you thrown me away from your presence?"

Deep in his soul Jesus experienced what it is to be away from the good things of God.

Jesus is separated from him as he dies.

Now whenever Jesus spoke of God, he always called him "*Father*" or "*Abba*" which is equivalent to Daddy.

Even when he was agonising at Gethsemane just prior to his arrest, he still calls God "*Abba, Father*".

At the moment I'm trying to get our daughter Rebecca to say "Daddy", without much success, although she says "Mummy" readily enough.

"Mummy" and "Daddy" are intimately loaded words.

Out of all the children in the world,
only Rebecca has the right to call me "Daddy".

But here as the Son of God is separated from his Father,
Jesus uses a detached word, which literally means "God".

I guess it would be something like my daughter calling me
"Mr Coleman".

Jesus is being forsaken, abandoned by God,
separated for the first time in all eternity from the Father who loves
him.

He'd never rebelled against him, he did not deserve this.

I'm the one who has rebelled, I'm the one who deserves to be punished.

Not Jesus.

So why is he being punished?

He is being punished because my sin has been placed on him.

[Hold CDs]

Two CD ROMs, one is mine and the other belongs to Jesus.

And I'm rather glad that you can't read my CD because it contains all the bad stuff that I've said, done and thought.

Jesus' CD on the other hand contains nothing but good stuff.

Jesus never sinned, he never had a bad thought, never said or did anything bad.

He never rebelled against God, he was perfect.

He always perfectly obeyed the will of God; he always pleased his father.

But by comparison, there is much on my CD of which I am rightly ashamed.

All the times when I have ignored God, treated him as if he is not really important at all.

And the times I have used him, as if he is just a servant, and blamed him when things have not gone my way.

And it's all on my CD ROM.

[CDs down]

This treatment of God, as we've said before in the course, is what the Bible calls sin.

And in his world God quite rightly punishes sin.

He does it by ultimately confirming our choice.
God is a just judge and in the end he will give us what we ask for.

If we say to him "Leave me alone".

Then there will come a day when, with great sadness and a heavy heart, God will say,
"OK, I will leave you alone. I'll confirm the decision you've made about me and will leave you alone."

That is what the Bible calls hell.

Hell is to be without God, and without his gifts, one of which is the love and friendship of others.

It is to be utterly alone with no hope and no comfort, reflecting for eternity on a life which was 70 years or so of an opportunity missed.

So this is what sin does:

My sin cuts me off from God;
and I face abandonment.

But let me illustrate what happens on the cross.

[Hold Both CDs]

While Jesus was on the cross all the bad stuff,
all my sin that is on my CD was downloaded onto his CD.

So Jesus took the punishment that I deserved.
He took the anger of God, at my rebellion on himself.

He was forsaken so I need never be.

And something else also happens.

As all my bad stuff is taken from my CD,
all of Jesus' good stuff is copied from his CD and is downloaded onto
mine.

We have an exchange, my bad stuff for his good stuff,
my sin for his righteousness.

So on the cross,
Jesus is treated as if he were me and I am treated as if I were Jesus.

[CDs Away]

[OHP 5]

So to recap:

God was angry;
Jesus was abandoned for me.

And this leads us to the third point:

We can be accepted

[Film - Flash Backs - Highlander - Sword fight]

At the beginning of the film Highlander there is a sword fight in the car park and after the Highlander has chopped Fazeel's head off we have a couple of flash backs from New York to the Scottish Highlands.

These flashbacks help us to understand what the sword fight was all about.

[BLANK OHP]

And Mark is doing something similar here in verses 37 to 39 of Ch15.

Verse 37 takes place at the cross - "*with a loud cry Jesus breathed his last*" and in verse 39 we are back at the cross with the Roman centurion.

But verse 38 doesn't take place at the cross at all.

We flash from one side of the city to the other in order to explain what is happening at the cross.

In verse 38 we are in the huge temple in Jerusalem and we see the most amazing thing.

The 30-foot-high curtain in the temple being torn in two.

This is what Josephus the Jewish historian says about this curtain.

The curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was 4 inches thick.

It was so sturdy that it could not be torn apart by horses tied to it, pulling in opposite directions.

And yet we read that this 30 foot high - 4 inch thick curtain is torn in two from the top to the bottom.

So what is so exciting about this curtain being torn in two, apart from the shear power required?

To answer that question, we need to realise what the curtain stood for.

The curtain was actually a barrier to the Most Holy Place, the heart of the temple where God had His Holy presence.

This massive barrier between God and his people was there because they had rebelled against him.

Only the High Priest was allowed into the Most Holy Place:

not any person;
not even any priest;
but only the High priest, and
even then only once a year.

The whole system showed that it was not an easy thing to come into the presence of God.

The curtain was like a big "No entry" sign.

It said loudly and clearly that it is impossible for rebellious people like you and I to come into God's presence.

Then, suddenly, as Jesus dies on the cross, this curtain is ripped in two.

This is a supernatural event, being done by God.

Because not only is it so thick,
but it is being torn from the top 30 feet up down to the bottom.

God is saying in effect:

"The way is now open for people to approach me.

There is no longer any barrier."

Why?

Because Jesus has been abandoned.

Because Jesus has taken God's anger and punishment instead of us.

So that we are now free to be accepted by God.

Just like the Berlin Wall coming down signifying the end of the Cold War between East and West.

So when this curtain was torn from top to bottom,
the Cold War between God and us was ended.

The barriers are down.

Now there is nothing to prevent us from having a relationship with God.

So Jesus **must** die so that my sin can be placed on Him.

He is abandoned by his Father and punished so that I can be forgiven.

But we still have to decide how we respond to the cross.

It's very challenging to see how most of the details in the verses we read focus not so much on Jesus but on the reactions of those who witnessed the crucifixion.

It is as though the underlying question in Mark's narrative is:

"OK, so this is how others responded around the cross, but what about you?

What will you make of the cross?"

I've picked out 3 reactions to the Cross.

[OHP 6]

- The busy soldiers
- The religious authorities
- The Roman centurion

We first meet the soldiers in verses 16-20 (Chapter 15).

[BLANK OHP]

And we find them mocking Jesus and his claim to be king of the Jews, as well as spitting on him and beating him.

In verse 24 we discover them dividing up Jesus' clothes and casting lots to see what each would get.

For this execution squad the main legacy of the cross is Jesus' clothes.

They are absorbed in doing their job.
They see nothing special about this man.

And as they just did their job,
they missed the most important death in history.

The Son of God being crucified above them.

No doubt they did their job well,
but in doing their duty they missed the true legacy of the cross.

And many go through life today doing their duty,
working hard,
saving for the mortgage,
and yet missing the most significant death that has ever taken place.

In their day to day activities they are too busy to notice the significance of the cross.

Then there's the religious people.

We see them mocking Jesus in verses 31 and 32.

These religious leaders are convinced that they know the way to God, and Jesus Christ is not part of that way.

They had the curtain repaired.

The barrier between man and God would be re-erected by these very religious people.

They had their own means of gaining access to God, and it was not through the cross.

They didn't want to be right with God on God's terms.

They wanted to be right with God on their own terms.

Just like people today who think that all you have to do is to be good.

There is, however, another response to the cross.

And it is that of the Roman Centurion.

It is this response, in verse 39, which is the climax of Mark's Gospel.

"And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'"

Here is a hard-bitten Roman soldier who had doubtless fought in many campaigns and seen many men crucified.

But he had never seen a man die like this.

And as he sees Jesus on the cross, he acknowledges him to be the Son of God.

Someone who was part of the execution squad, who had been responsible for nailing Jesus to the cross, sees and understands.

His words *"Surely this man was the Son of God"* echoes the voice of God when he said of Jesus in chapter 1, *"You are my Son."*

Will we like the centurion realise that Jesus and his death are significant?

Or will we fail to see what his death has achieved for us?

So in summary.

We all reject the ruler - God - by trying to run life our own way without him.

But we fail to rule ourselves, our society or the world.

God is not going to let us rebel forever.

God's punishment for our rebellion is death and judgement.

But because of his love for us,

God sent his son into the world to die – the man Jesus.

Jesus always lived under God's rule.

Yet by dying in our place he took our punishment and brought forgiveness.

So let me finish by asking you this question:

What have you done with your sin?

[COUNT 2]

Have you taken it to the cross and received forgiveness?

Or are you taking it to the grave and to the judgement?

[COUNT 3]

Your choice.

Thank you for listening.