



As many of you know, my dad passed away last July. I was blessed to be able to get home from Africa a day early so I could spend his last few hours at his bedside. What a privilege to be with him when he passed into the arms of Jesus. On the way to his house in Sacramento, Lynn and I had a very unique experience. Lynn picked me up at SFO and we drove straight there, not knowing if we'd make it in time to say goodbye. As we approached his house in the car, strange as it seemed in the middle of July, there was a bright rainbow hovering over his home with a majestic red sunset as the clouds broke from a brief summer rain. It was like God was saying, "Don't be afraid! This is what I have in store for your Dad!" I've been in many hospitals with dying people over the years, but for us this was more than just another death.

At times, it seems like we're surrounded by death. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. People die every minute of every day. Someone once said the statistics on death are quite impressive. But, when someone you love dies, you want people to know it's more than just another death. This was my husband who loved me like no one else could. This was my son who gave me so much joy. This was my father who was always there for me. This was more than just another death.

At the end of the Gospel of Mark there's an event which the whole Gospel points to—the death of Jesus. His death comes as no surprise. Several times Jesus predicted his death in detail. Back in Mark 10 he said, *"When we get to Jerusalem the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of the religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. They will mock him, spit on him, beat him with their whips, and kill him..."* As time went on all these things happened: he was betrayed by Judas, condemned by the Jewish leaders, handed over to Pilate and the Romans who mocked him, spit on him and scourged him. Now, in Mark 15, Jesus begins his march to the cross where they'll kill him.

As Mark paints this scene, there's one thing he wants us to know: this is more than just another death. Mark reveals this truth in his own way. He doesn't do it by giving us the gruesome details of first century Roman crucifixion. There's some value in that, but that's not Mark's focus. Nor does Mark do it by some kind of abstract theological reflection on the meaning of the cross. You won't find words here like justification, redemption and propitiation. Those are important words others will use to speak of the meaning of his death, but that's not Mark's focus. His focus is

on the people there when he died; the things happening around him as he walked to Golgotha, was nailed to the cross, and took his last breath. Through them Mark shows this was more than just a death.

### **More Than Just Another Death for Simon**

It was more than that for Simon. As they led Jesus out of the city, he was placed in the center of four Roman soldiers. The patibulum, the cross beam of the cross, weighing as much as 100 lbs, was dropped on Jesus' torn shoulders. As he stumbled along the path an officer led the way with a wooden sign bearing the inscription of his crime: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. It was a long walk; the Romans always led the condemned through the city by the longest route to induce fear in the people and as a deterrent to crime.

Jesus started out carrying the cross beam, but he was so weakened by the beatings they grabbed a visitor to the city named Simon.

**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 (Mark 15:21).**

Simon was from Cyrene in North Africa. He was probably a Jew who'd come to Jerusalem for Passover. I can see him coming closer for a better view, like a kid squeezing to the front of the crowd in a parade. But then an awful thing happened. One of the condemned crumbled under the weight of the cross beam right at Simon's feet. Roman law gave soldiers the right of conscription, that is they could draft anyone into service on the spot. They grabbed Simon and put him to work carrying the cross beam. How humiliating; how embarrassing. Simon's vacation was ruined.

But there's a hint of something more here. Mark speaks of Simon's two sons, Alexander and Rufus, as if they were well-known to believers in Rome for whom he wrote this Gospel. It may be no coincidence when Paul later wrote the Roman church he said, *"Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother who has been a mother to me, too"* (Rom. 16:13). Could it be for Simon this became more than just another death? Could it be after he bore that cross, he watched Jesus die and knew he was different? Could it be he stayed around to hear the rumors of his resurrection? Could it be he went home and shared with his wife and sons about Jesus, who for a moment ruined his vacation, but for an eternity gave him life?

## More Than Just Another Death for the Soldiers

I wonder if it was also more than just another death for the Roman soldiers who led him to the place of execution.

**They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.**

**It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS (verses 22–26).**

These soldiers watched as Jesus refused to be drugged. It was customary for women of Jerusalem to offer wine mixed with myrrh to deaden the pain of crucifixion. But Jesus refused to be medicated. He needed a clear head and he was determined to drink the cup his Father had given him to the last drop.

As Simon laid the cross beam on the ground, these soldiers knew the routine. They threw Jesus down, spread his arms, and drove a spike through each wrist. They raised the cross beam, and with Jesus' legs dangling, they fastened it to the standing post. They nailed his feet to the post with a single spike. Jesus began his repeated genuflections, struggling upward for breath, and then collapsing downward in exhaustion. This would go on for six hours.

It was just another day's work for the soldiers. They'd just punched in; it was only 9:00 AM. How many more of these would they do today? There was one perk. It was customary for them to claim the minor possessions of the victim. And so, they sat beneath the cross and rolled dice to see how they'd divide up his garments. I wonder if they knew where those garments had been? Did they know of the woman who touched the hem of this garment and was healed from 12 years of disease? I doubt it.

I don't think they knew this was more than just another death, but without knowing it they were acting out a script written several hundred years earlier. The writer of Psalm 22 wrote about the future King of Israel who prayed, *“Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment”* (Ps. 22:16-17). The soldiers knew nothing of that Scripture, but Mark knew and we know. The irony is when they nailed the inscription above his head, The King of the Jews, they were right.

## More Than Just Another Death for the Mockers

But there was more than a few calloused soldiers at the cross. There were also some cold-hearted mockers.

**They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. 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, come down from the cross and save yourself!” 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! Let this Messiah, 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 (verses 27–32).**

Three groups are mentioned. There were the two rebels crucified with him, one at his right and one on his left. They, too, unwittingly fulfilled Scripture. The prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah would be numbered among transgressors like these two thieves (Is. 53:12). Though it says in v. 32 they *“heaped insults on him”* we know from Luke's gospel one would later repent (Luke 23:39-43).

They were joined by a second group of mockers “passed by.” They looked up on the cross and saw a defeated man. They shook their heads in contempt. They hurled abuse. They blasphemed the One charged with blasphemy. They recalled the charges made against him about destroying the Temple and rebuilding it in three days. They were joined by the more sophisticated religious leaders who sneered, “He saved others, but he can't save himself! If he's the Messiah, why not prove it and come down?”

I don't think any of them knew this was more than just another death. But again, there's irony here because without knowing it they spoke truth. Jesus' death **does** destroy the Temple made with hands and build a new one made without hands. This new Temple isn't tied to a place like Jerusalem. It's a worldwide community of worshipers who believe his sacrifice abolished the need for Temple sacrifices. The religious leaders spoke truth, too. He **did** save others. He saved a leper from leprosy, a blind man darkness, disciples from a raging storm, and a 12-year-old girl from the clutches of death. He did save others, but he couldn't save himself. Why? Because that would mean disobeying his Father. He couldn't save himself because, if he did, he couldn't save others from something worse than storms and illness. This was more than just another death. He **was**, as they said, “the Messiah, the King of Israel,” who'd prove it not by coming down from the cross, but by staying on it.

## More Than Just Another Death for the Bystanders

Then Mark says darkness shrouded the whole land from noon until 3:00 pm, typically the brightest part of the day.

**At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon (v. 33).**

Mark doesn't explain the darkness, but Jews knew this was a sign of judgment. God had judged the Egyptians with the plague of darkness just before the first Passover lamb was killed. The darkness testified this was more than just another death. It stayed for three hours. Finally Jesus broke the silence.

**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?”).

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

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 (verses 34–36).

This is the only thing Mark tells us Jesus said on the cross. Other gospels tell us more, but for Mark this said it all. Jesus is quoting the first verse of Psalm 22, which was about the King of Israel who is suffering. This Psalm in its entirety is both an honest cry of abandonment and a strong affirmation of faith. Here, Jesus is crying out to **his** God who at that moment **had** to forsake him as the One who bore the sins of the world. Scripture says, “*Cursed is any man who hangs on a tree*” (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). God’s curse was on Jesus at this moment; he knows it and laments it.

Those who heard him misunderstood. Here we encounter another group at the cross. They were bystanders; bits and pieces of the crowd who’d been present at his trial. It seems they misunderstood Jesus’ prayer to be a cry for help to Elijah the prophet. Elijah was believed to swoop down and come to the aid of those in crisis. He was “the patron saint of lost causes.” They could see Jesus was close to the end, and so someone ran to fill a sponge with the cheap wine normally used to refresh the soldiers. They stuck it on a stick and gave him a drink, hoping to revive him long enough for Elijah to come.

They hoped this would be more than just another death, but they hoped for the wrong thing. “Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down.” They were thrill seekers. They were like those who gather below a man who stands on a ledge over a city street and is about to jump. They waited to see what would happen. The human heart has a kind of twisted fascination at thrills of this kind. The bystanders didn’t understand Elijah had come. He came in the person of John the Baptist. They killed him just as they were killing Jesus. There were no thrills at his death. No one swooped down to help John, and no one would swoop down for Jesus.

### **More Than Just Another Death for the Centurion**

Death comes in verses 37–39.

**With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.**

**The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 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!”**

Finally, someone sees this was more than just another death. But look who it is! A Roman Centurion, a hardened leader of a hundred men, a Gentile, sees Jesus die and confesses this was the Son of God. He probably didn’t understand what he was saying, but still it’s an amazing statement. As a Roman, he was loyal to

Caesar, who was considered the son of god. That’s what they called **him**! But now he boldly steps out of his paganism and says **this** is God’s Son. What convinced him? He’d seen countless crucifixions, but there was something about the way Jesus died.

Mark mentions two unusual things. The first thing the man saw, but the second thing he didn’t see. What he saw was Jesus die with a loud cry. Victims of crucifixion never died with a loud cry. They died after languishing for days; they fell unconscious and died feebly and quietly. The fact Jesus died with a loud cry says he was fully conscious to his very last breath and he chose to give his life up; it wasn’t taken from him. The Centurion saw that and it convinced him this man was special.

What he didn’t see was how the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Mark places it here right after Jesus’ death and before the Centurion’s affirmation of faith because of what it symbolized. The veil of the Temple separated the Holy Place in the Temple from the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was where God dwelt and it could be entered only once a year by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. When Jesus died, the way was opened to God; the “no trespassing” sign that scared off those who approached him was ripped down and he said, “Come on in.” Listen to how the writer of Hebrews put it: “*Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings...*” (Heb. 10:19-22).

This was more than just another death. This was the only thing that could open the way for sinful people like you and me to draw near to God in full assurance of faith. Why? Because it’s through his death our sins are forgiven and we’re made righteous enough to enter his presence. The Bible says, “*He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him*” (2 Cor. 5:21). Peter put it this way: “*He bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by his wounds your were healed*” (2 Pet. 2:25). The only reason we can qualify to enter into his presence is because he was judged for our sins on the cross.

Do you ever have a day that goes something like this: You get up in the morning and rip your shirt on a nail sticking out of the wall you knew you should have fixed three weeks ago. You go out to the car and it won’t start. You get to work late and your boss says, “Have you finished that report yet?” and you haven’t. The whole day unfolds in one endless set of problems and failures. You go home and your kids are behaving badly and you say something that hurts your spouse.

Finally, it’s time for bed and your prayer runs something like this: “Dear God, this has been a rotten day. I’m not proud of myself,

but I really don't have anything to say. I'm sorry I haven't done better. Bless everybody in the world. Your will be done. In Jesus' name, Amen." Deep down you feel ashamed and guilty, a disappointment to God.

But then the next day you wake up, and the sun is shining, the windows are open, the fresh air wafts through the screen, birds are singing. You have a wonderful quiet time. You eat a hearty breakfast and then go out to your car, and it starts right up and takes off. You get to work early. Your boss says, "Great to see you today! Did I tell you about your raise?" Then you arrive home and a family dinner is filled with laughter. You have great talk with your spouse while you clean up the kitchen.

Finally, at the end of that day you get down to pray, and your prayer goes like this: "Eternal and matchless God, I bless you that in your infinite mercies and great grace you have poured favor upon me." And then you pray for missionaries and their children and your in-laws. As you begin to doze off you feel justified.

On which of these two days are you thinking more like an unbeliever? You see, both approaches are wrong because in both cases we're basing our sense of acceptance before God on our performance. We're only justified through the cross. That's the only ground of our acceptance before God. That's why the death of Jesus was more than just another death. On good days and bad days, when we perform well and when we don't, it's only the cross that qualifies us to walk through the torn curtain into the Holy of Holies as one acceptable to God. Justification means we're righteous and acceptable in his sight, not because of our own religious performance but because of what Jesus did on the cross. Justification means through faith alone he's as pleased with us as he is with his Son. We can't add anything to that.

We can never be more pleasing to him than we are simply by trusting in Christ.

Let me put it this way: justification should always be the basis for our sanctification. In other words, our acceptance before God is the foundation for our obedience to God. Our sanctification is our actual moral behavior; it's becoming more like Jesus. But for many of us, instead of our justification being the basis for our sanctification, our sanctification becomes the basis for our justification. In other words, our obedience becomes the foundation for our acceptance before God. Our default mode is works-righteousness. In our day to day life, we think we have to perform well to be acceptable to God. It might be doing well in our religious disciplines, or our obedience to his Word, or the intensity of our feelings towards him. We know we were forgiven when we put our faith in Christ, but somehow we keep thinking we have to earn his favor. We strive to live an obedient life not because we know how pleased he is with us, but out of fear. And if we're being successful at that, we fall into the smug self-satisfaction of the Pharisees. If we're not, we feel insecure, anxious and self loathing.

This is why we constantly must return to the cross. We never grow beyond our need for the cross. We never graduate from this. It's like there's a strange rainbow hovering above it. The death of Jesus was more than just another death because it's only through the cross we can enter into the Holy of Holies through the torn curtain, and know we're completely acceptable, justified in his sight.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*