

**Three Little Lessons for Us at Christ's Cross**  
**Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI**  
**Sermon on Mark 15:21-32**  
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**Introduction: Three Lessons for Us at Christ's Cross**

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Dear fellow Christians—gathered at the cross of Christ:

You'll recall that this year on Lenten weekends we've been considering the Passion History of our Savior. Today that history brings us to the foot of Christ's cross. Countless times the Bible draws us to view Jesus' crucifixion like this. After all, it's Christ's crucifixion that means our salvation.

Now, some of the time, the Scriptures give us Jesus' own thoughts upon the cross—as in Psalm twenty-two. Some of the time the Bible gives us Christ's words from the cross. And often, the Scriptures interpret for us what was happening upon the cross—as in Isaiah fifty-three, or in many of the letters of the New Testament.

Today, though, it's really mostly the scene of the crucifixion that the Bible reports to us—Jesus getting fastened to the cross, what immediately led up to that, and what immediately followed. We'll be considering Mark chapter fifteen, verses twenty-one through thirty-two. What I'd like to do, first, is to read and explain that part of the Bible. And then, I'd like to draw three lessons for us from it.

**Exposition: Narration of Events at Christ's Cross**

So, it's maybe – they say – Friday, April seventh, of the year thirty AD. It's probably a scant one-third of a mile – four of our city blocks – to the west of the temple. And it's in Jerusalem—with house upon house upon house, with narrow, crooked streets, and with crowds which would number many hundreds of thousands on this Passover festival day.

Jesus probably hasn't slept in a full day. He's been repeatedly beaten and flogged. Guys sometimes died from that! And now he's carrying a heavy chunk of wood out to serve as the crossbeam for his crucifixion. Very apparently, he just can't make it those couple of blocks. He's just too beaten up; he's just too weary.

And so, we read, probably once Jesus leaves the wall of the city: **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.**

So: who, exactly, is this Simon? Well, we can't identify him with any other Simon in the New Testament. But there are some things we know about him from what we read here, plus we can make some other educated guesses.

First of all, obviously, his name is *Simon*. That's a Jewish name. So, Simon is a Jewish person—probably by birth, but at least according to religion. He's from *Cyrene*. That's modern day Libya, on the North African coast, a thousand miles west of Jerusalem. Cyrene was actually a Greek settlement, with a large Jewish population. And Simon is heading into Jerusalem during the Passover Festival. So obviously, he's coming to worship.

Interestingly, Simon is called *the father of Alexander and Rufus*. These sons of Simon must have been well known to Saint Mark's original Roman readers. In fact,

Saint Paul greets a man named *Rufus* in his inspired Letter to the Romans. So actually, it's kind of obvious what probably happened here. Simon is heading into Jerusalem to worship the true God. And when the Roman soldiers press him into service – they were known to enjoy throwing their weight around like that – well, Simon got to meet and to trust his true Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, resuming: **They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha** – in Aramaic, *Calvary* in Latin – (**which means The Place of the Skull**). Either this was a skull-shaped place, or it was memorable for the skulls of those who had been crucified and whose flesh had been picked clean by vultures.

**Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.** This was a sedative. It was meant to deaden the pain. Giving wine and myrrh, they tell me, was a humanitarian gesture on the part of the women of Jerusalem. But Jesus didn't take it. Jesus wanted to suffer every drop of our punishment. He wanted to drink to the very bottom the cup of God's grueling anger over our transgressions.

**And they crucified him.** They stretched Jesus out on the cross. They took large spikes and sledgehammered him to the cross. Can you imagine the startling pain? and the spurting blood?—which was the price for your forgiveness. Yeah, they probably also used ropes to support Christ's body. You see, most crucified men didn't die from their wounds. They died from asphyxiation—after some days of crucifixion, they could no longer boost themselves up for a breath.

And: **Dividing up his clothes** – maybe a heavier sort of a robe, a sash of some sort, and possibly sandals and something over his head – **they** – the four Roman soldiers – **cast lots** – now, that would have been for the undergarment, woven in one piece – **to see what each would get.** So, they made a game out of Jesus' predicament. And so, they fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm twenty-two. It means that Jesus was left with probably just a scrap of cloth around his waist, in what were probably temperatures in the forties or fifties. Accompanied by his blood loss, Jesus must have felt exceedingly cold.

**It was the third hour** – nine in the morning – **when they crucified him.** And: **The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.**

That *written notice*—that wasn't something special for Jesus' cross alone. They put something like that on all the crosses. The whole idea behind crucifying someone was that it was a show and a deterrent. People would see the crucifixion, they'd read the reason it was taking place, and they'd be warned not to commit the same crime the perpetrator did.

So, what was Jesus' crime? Well, in full form, in Latin (which was one of the three languages in which this was written): *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudiorum*, abbreviated *INRI*: Jesus from Nazareth crucified for the crime of being *King of the Jews*. And as the Shepherd King of the Jews, in fact as the Shepherd King of all people, Jesus offered himself in sacrifice to rescue his people. That's the "crime" for which Christ was crucified.

**They crucified two robbers** – two highway bandits, and undoubtedly they had committed some murders, in Luke they're called *evildoers* or good-for-nothings – **they crucified two bandits with him, one on his right and one on his left.** It maintained Jesus as the center of attention. It had the effect of making Jesus the feature criminal of the day. It also fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah fifty-three: *He was numbered among the transgressors.*

Finally: **Those who passed by hurled insults at him** – probably informed and egged-on by the Jewish leaders – **shaking their heads** – in scorn – **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!"** They were misrepresenting Jesus' words when he first cleared

the temple years earlier. You heard them in this morning's Gospel Reading. Jesus had been predicting his resurrection—and claiming it gave him divine authority to clear and to restore the temple. But all these people were interested in was making fun of him.

**In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves.** These were the Jewish leaders. It was, they thought, their big day. They could never have dreamed they'd so quickly get rid of their enemy. But the one who had captured the people's hearts – and won their respect away from that of these Jewish leaders – he would certainly soon be dead and gone and out of their way.

**"He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!"** How true that was! In fact, Jesus was in the process of rescuing all people, but in order to do so, he had to give himself over to damnation. **Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.** And of course, they wouldn't have trusted in him, no matter what. Three days later, when he rose from the dead – incontrovertibly, right under their noses – they rejected him and made up a lie to cover up his victory.

Finally: **Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.** It's pretty bad when even criminals, even victims of the same fate as you, when they also insult you. But that's what was happening to Jesus. And interestingly, although one of these would later famously be converted, even that one started out in rank unbelief.

...And that's it. That's the account of Christ's crucifixion. It's painful and exhausting even to read. Let's see if we can't derive Three Little Lessons for Us at Christ's Cross. And we'll find that they correspond to three main characters or sets of characters we find there....

### **Appropriation One: We Insulted Him**

First of all: let's consider the Jewish leaders, the Jewish passers-by, the Roman soldiers, and for that matter, the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, who sent them there. What lesson do we learn from all of these—the enemies of Jesus?

Well, in their words and actions, our old sinful nature is on display. We're the ones who negligently hand Jesus over to crucifixion in place of our responsibility—like Pontius Pilate. We're the ones who are too busy dividing up the spoils of our labors in this world to notice the salvation happening right in front of our very eyes—like the oblivious Roman soldiers. We're the ones who are easily egged on into sin by others—as the Jewish passers-by were. And we're the ones whose jealous self-interest puts God himself through pain—as did the Jewish leaders.

Our sin is fully on display here. We're by nature the ones insulting Jesus.

### **Appropriation Two: He Saved Us**

Secondly, of course: let's consider Christ. What lesson do we learn from him?

Well: ...Jesus loved you so much that he refused so much as a sedative while suffering for the sins of yours I've just mentioned. He wanted to drink every drop of your punishment and leave you with no prerequisites to fulfill for your salvation. ...Jesus cared about you to such a degree that he – God! – was spiked to a cross, his blood – God's blood! – splattered for you, and he – God! – was put on display, inviting insult: to pay for your crimes. ...Jesus cherished your soul so completely that he accepted your guilt and your death penalty for you, even though he was completely holy and innocent.

Our Savior is fully on display here. He suffered and died for you.

### **Application Three: We Follow Him**

And finally, it's worth it to consider Simon from Cyrene. What do we learn from him?

Well, what Simon does here is representative of what we want to do for the Lord. Simon picks up Christ's cross and carries it for him. That's sort of what we want to do. Jesus himself said: *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.* It means that whatever it takes for us to live for Christ and so to proclaim Christ—we're going to do it, no matter what pain it brings us.

So: ...If you are one of those: considered strange for having some standards, considered an oddball for daring to confess Christ, considered a target for ridicule because you won't sinfully fight back—take up your cross and follow Jesus. The cross is worth it! ...If you are one of those: whose coworkers or family members, whose very children or spouse, consider it strange, even a hassle for them, that you take Christ Jesus so seriously—well, take up your cross and follow Jesus. The cross is worth it! ...And finally: ...If your allegiance to Jesus is holding you back on the job or in the classroom or in your personal goals—take up your cross and follow Jesus. The cross is worth it!

Our intentions are on full display here. According to our new nature, we want to follow Jesus.

### **Conclusion: God's Plan Transcends Our Understanding**

And as we do so, we'll find that the difficulties we face are like God chiseling away at our character—making us more and more apt representatives of him. Our love for others and our steadfastness toward the Lord will reflect our own Savior's footsteps.

And we'll look back on it and say, "Even with all the pain, I'd have had it no other way. God used me to display Jesus to the world— ...Jesus, who suffered every drop of punishment I deserved, ...Jesus, who was spiked to the cross to suffer my damnation, ...Jesus, who accepted all the shame and scorn I deserved.

Once again, this plan from God – thank God! – transcends all our understanding. Amen.

*The peace of God which transcends understanding will guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*