



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Mark 15: 21-32

"Christ on the Cross"

Mark

TRANSCRIPT

Our passage is Mark chapter 15 and we will look at verses 21 through 32:

They pressed into service a passer-by from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the Father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.

Now, that's an interesting addition that Mark makes because He's the only one that makes the note that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, and we'll come back to that in our texts in the lesson when we deal with it, but I want to bring it to your attention because Mark is the one that mentions it. And I think it has some significance to the account.

Then they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it. And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them to decide what each man should take. It was the third hour when they crucified Him. The inscription of the charge against Him read, "The King of the Jews."

They crucified two robbers with Him, one on His right and one on His left. And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with transgressors." Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. "Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down

from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him.

May the Lord bless this reading of His word and bless our time of study in it together. Shall we now bow in a word of prayer?

[Prayer] Our gracious heavenly Father, we do thank You for the time that we have now to come together and to study the Scriptures. What a privilege it is, Father, for Your people to gather together and open the Word of God, Your revelation to us, and consider all of the truth that You have unfolded for Your people. And particularly, this passage of the Scriptures which is so important as we contemplate the cross of Christ, bless us with an understanding of these events, give us some insight into the importance of it, and in so doing, Lord instill within our hearts a deep sense of gratitude that we have or should have, for the debt that we owe You, a debt that You paid through the word of Your Son in His precious blood, but a debt of gratitude that we will always bear, and will always seek to repay in this life and throughout eternity. We pray, Father, that You would instill that within our hearts, a sense of gratitude. We thank You for the work of Your Son. We thank You for our position in Your family as a result of that, and for all of the privileges that we have. Being adopted into that family, we have all of the rights and privileges of a son, through no work of our own, but through Your grace.

And among those privileges are not only the privilege to study and to understand the Word of God as we are taught by the Holy Spirit, but also Lord, to pray for one another and to exercise our priestly duties on behalf of each other. And we do that now as a congregation. As we gather here, we lift up our petitions for You. We pray for those who are sick, pray for those who are in need of healing, some in this audience, Father, we pray for them and that the afflictions that they have and that they must bear at this present time, we pray that You might give them relief if that be Your will.

We pray that You'd bring healing. And yet, we pray Lord, also, that You'd give enduring grace, that You might enable them to live with the difficulties if that be Your will, and praise You for it, and see Your hand in it. We pray, Lord, for those in financial need. We pray for those who are seeking jobs and employment. We pray that You'd open doors and that You'd bless and that You'd provide. Thank You for

the provision that You make. Thank You for all of the things that we possess. We are rich beyond our understanding our or imagination. And You are continually with us providing for us at all times, whether we really realize it or not. That is the case, and we praise You for it.

And we pray Your blessing upon us now as we study the Scriptures. We pray You'd bless us with understanding, and we pray that You'd use the hymn that we will sing to prepare our hearts for that. Not only prepare us for this hour together, but the hour this evening as we come together and celebrate the Lord's death through the Lord's supper. We pray You'd bless that meeting as well. Bless our time at this time. May Christ be exalted. May You be glorified, and may each of us be edified. We pray these things in His name, for His sake. Amen.

[Message] From the surroundings up here on the stage and in the auditorium with the wreathes on the windows, it's obvious that we are in the Christmas season. And with that season, our thoughts naturally turn to Bethlehem, and the star, and the manger, and the birth of our Lord. For many people, this is their favorite time of the year, time of lots of festivities, lights, colors, beautiful music, and a favorite time for spiritual reasons.

Historically, a large portion of the church, the Western church, historically, has considered Christmas its most important celebration. It marks the birth of the Savior. And yet, as you ponder the Scriptures, you find that the central event of the Bible is not the Lord's birth, but His death. It was foretold as early as Genesis 3:15. It's found in the pictures, types, and prophecies throughout the Old Testament. In the New Testament, each gospel devotes a large portion of its account to the final days of our Lord's life. I believe it's something like three-fifths of Mark's gospel is given to those last days of our Lord's life, and particularly the days of His life in Jerusalem.

As far back as chapter 8, the Lord began plainly teaching His disciples that He must suffer many things, and be killed and rise again. The cross is central to the gospels, and it is central to the preaching of the apostles as well. Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "I determine to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." So, as significant as His birth was, the cross over shadows the life and ministry of our Lord because it's the cross that is God's solution to the sin problem. Without Calvary, Bethlehem is meaningless. Without the cross,

Christmas is no gospel. It's through the cross of Christ that He became the Savior and became the Savior of the world.

That being so, it's really not enough to say that the cross is central to the Bible, that the cross is central to Christianity. The Cross is central to all of history. There is no historical event that is as important as the crucifixion of our Lord. I recognize that that statement is made from a Christian's point of view. Secular historians would see it differently. Very few in our Lord's day saw the significance of His crucifixion. In a day when crucifixions were commonplace, the death of a carpenter from an obscure region of an obscure place in the Roman empire went virtually unnoticed. He was just one of many who had been nailed to a Roman cross. From the Roman point of view, it was so unimportant that when the Roman historian Tacitus was reviewing the troubles of Judea, he makes the comment, "Under Tiberius, nothing happened." It's amazing, is it not, that the Son of God, the king of kings, could be crucified and it be passed over with the words, "Nothing happened."

Tacitus wrote in a generation, the generation after our Lord, and so he had some perspective on these events. The gospel had taken root in Rome. The church was flourishing there. In fact, churches had sprung up all over the Roman empire. And yet, as he looked over events, he could say nothing happened. And really, that's not surprising. That's, I would say, generally the view of the world. They take more notice of the cross than Tacitus did, but their feeling is that really, in the cross, nothing happened. That will be the feeling or the view of all apart from the grace of God, which opens up men's eyes to its significance.

And yet, what Tacitus said is not history's final verdict on the cross. Today, few remember Tiberius Caesar; fewer still remember the historian Tacitus while much of the world sets its calendar by the Lord's birth. The symbol of the cross is seen over the face of the globe. And for multitudes, it's an emblem of hope, which I think testifies to its importance and its influence.

But in our Lord's day, the cross was anything but a symbol of hope. It represented suffering and shame. Crucifixion was one of the most degrading and cruel punishments ever devised by man. It's been said that the person who was crucified died a thousand deaths. After stripping and whipping the victim, the Romans would march him to the place of execution by the longest possible route. He would carry his own cross while a Roman soldier would walk before him carrying a

placard with his crimes written upon it as a warning to everyone, as something of a deterrent against rebellion in the empire.

When they arrived at the place of execution, the victim's hands were nailed to the crossbeam while lying on the ground. Then the crossbeam was hoisted to its place on the upright beam. The feet would then be nailed to the vertical beam with one spike. The right foot on the left. There, the victim would hang for hours, sometimes days in a gradual excruciating death resulting from the wounds, from torn tendons, and the exhausting struggle for each breath of air, which often ended in suffocation.

It was a cruel death, a death reserved for slaves and the worst of criminals. Roman citizens were exempt from it. It was such a shameful death that Cicero said that Romans should not even speak the word "cross," that it should not be in their thoughts, that it should not be in their eyes or their ears. It was so shameful that they should have nothing to do with even the thought of the cross.

And yet, that is what the Lord Jesus had endured. The pain and the shame of the cross. And He did it willingly. He did it for our sakes. One thing you notice as you go through the gospels and you read these accounts, and particularly when you judge them in light of the prophetic Scripture, you see that God's hand was in all of this, and everything that the Lord did, He did willingly. In fact, all that He did, He did in control of things. So He did it willingly. He did it for our sakes. As the author of Hebrews writes, "Who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross despising the shame." So after He had been scourged and rejected a final time by His people, Mark writes in verse 20, "They led Him out to crucify Him."

John states that the Lord began by carrying His own cross, but He didn't carry it far before He sank under the weight of it. He had been without sleep for a day, and it had been a long day and a grueling night following an evening of intense teaching. He then underwent the intense agony of the garden of Gethsemane. He endured the hostile examination of the high priests and the trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin. And then, the examination before Pilate in the Roman trial. Then, He was mocked by the guards and beaten and scourged. It's hard to imagine the pain that He must've felt as the heavy cross pressed down on His lacerated back. Finally, physically exhausted, His knees buckled under the load and He fell.

So, at random, the Roman soldiers seized a man who Mark says was passing by and pressed him into the service of carrying the Lord's cross for Him. His name is

Simon, and he was from Cyrene, a town in north Africa not far from the Mediterranean Sea, in what is now modern-day Libya. Very little is known of Simon. He was evidently a Jew who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He probably knew nothing about the events of that day, about the trial of our Lord. Perhaps he knew little or nothing about the Lord, being a man from a fairly distant country. He was merely passing by, Mark says. He was headed for another location when he came upon this procession, perhaps as he was walking down the street, his destination would've carried him across the road where this procession proceeded. And so, he was forced to stop, or perhaps he saw it and he, out of curiosity, stopped to see what was happening. When suddenly, he is seized and pressed into service. Without warning, without consent, his life was suddenly thrown in with that of our Lord, and he too was on his way to Golgotha.

Luke's account of this is particularly interesting, I think, because of the juxtaposition of events. It is the way he connects the events in his gospel. He doesn't record the mocking and the beating that our Lord received from the Roman soldiers. He moves instead from the account of Barabbas, whose cross the Lord took up, to Simon, who took up the Lord's cross. And there is something instructed in that, I think, because we can see in it the picture of the Christian life. The Lord first takes up our cross, in that He died in our place, He bore our punishment, the judgment that we should've born, He bore for us, the just for the unjust. But following that, we take up His cross.

You remember back in chapter 8, the Lord said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." Christian life involves bearing a cross. It involves bearing the reproach and the sufferings of Christ that come with being identified with Him. We are identified with Him if we have truly believed in Him because, first of all, He was identified with us. He was identified with sinners. He came as our representative. He came as our substitute. And because of that, and through faith in Him, and what He did, we are identified with Him.

And in being identified with Him, we take up our cross. It's not an option. It's not a possibility. If you really want to be My disciple, you'll take up your cross. If you're a disciple, you're a cross-bearer; because He bore our cross, we bear His cross.

And so, the exchange of crosses in Luke, I think, is instructive. From Barabbas, to the Lord; from the Lord, to Simon.

The Bible leaves us with a big question mark concerning the response of Barabbas to these events, but Mark gives some hints about how Simon might have responded, because he writes that he is the Father of Alexander and Rufus. Now, why does he mention that? Well, evidently, it suggests that Simon's sons were known to those in the church to whom Mark was writing. And it's generally agreed that Mark wrote his gospel to the church of Rome. What is particularly interesting about that is that one of Paul's greetings at the end of his epistles to the Romans in Romans 16 verse 13 is to Rufus. "Greet Rufus, a choice man of the Lord, also his mother and mine." Evidently, he was well-acquainted with these people, not because of his time in Rome, because Paul had not been to Rome when he wrote that letter. He met them somewhere else, and so they weren't from Rome. Perhaps they were from the East. The suggestion is that they were Simon's family.

And so, what may have occurred was Simon was initially forced into service, and that service resulted in a great blessing. He was unexpectedly, providentially brought into contact with the Savior, a person whom he had never met, a person whom he was not even seeking. He was a passer-by. He was not even headed for the Lord. He probably didn't even know anything about Him. And yet, He's thrown into contact with Him, and that contact changed his life as he witnessed the events of the cross, that he was forced to proceed to. He was brought to faith. He returned to his family to tell them about his unexpected encounter with Jesus, and they too came to faith. His legacy lives on in the Scriptures with his wife and his two sons.

Now, admittedly, that's some speculation on my part. I can't be certain about the way it all happened, but it's not unlikely that that is exactly what occurred. What is certain is God providentially laid His hand on Simon that day to give him the great privilege of serving the Savior and witnessing the central event of history. I can be certain of this, that every one of us who carry our cross for Christ walk in His footsteps. We're like Simon. We were not seeking Him when God called us to Christ and His service. Not that we love God, John writes, but that He loved us. He called us out of the darkness that we loved, into His grace and salvation. I say we walk in the footsteps of Simon because I see us in him in that he was not seeking the Lord when the Lord sought him, any more than the apostle Paul was seeking the Lord when

the Lord sought him. Paul was on the Damascus road. He was headed for a destination where he would wear down the church and destroy the church. He was headed in the opposite direction, and that is true of each and every one of us when we were arrested by the Lord and turned around.

I'm not saying that we were seeking to wear down the church and oppose the church and destroy it. Most likely, most of us were totally ignorant of the church and indifferent toward it, or perhaps we were members of the church, but had no love at all for the Lord Jesus Christ. At every stage of our life, we were opposed to Him, whether we were called into His family when we were children, or when we were young adults, or later in life. Regardless of our attitude toward Him, it was an attitude of self-seeking, an attitude of seeking defined our way in our prominence in the world in one way or another. It was not a seeking after the Lord.

And yet, that's where He stops us, and that's where He turns us around, just like He did with Simon. If our calling and His choice of us seem random and indiscriminant like the choice of Simon out of that crowd of people, it's only because we're no more deserving than anyone else. But the reason for it is traced back to God's inscrutable, unconditional love. There's a reason for your choice. It's not found in yourself. It's not found in me. It's not in the things that we've done, or our affection for God because we had none. It's found in God Himself and it's found in His love, His unfathomable love that has called us into a saving relationship with Him. And I think all of that when you consider it in light of this illustration we have with Simon of Cyrene, underscores all the more how amazing grace really is.

Now, Mark writes they "brought Him to the place, Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull." Why this place was named the Skull is not known. The ancient explanation or legend is that it was because of the skull of Adam who was buried by Noah after the flood. And I'm somewhat hesitant in mentioning that because if there's one thing that people remembered after the first service, it was that legend, and that's nothing that we really need to pay much attention to. I don't think we can give much credence to it. Most probably, the reason is due to its appearance. It was a hill that probably looked much like a skull, located, we know from Hebrews 13:12, outside the city. It was a place of death, and so it was a fitting name. We also know it as a Calvary, which is derived from the Latin word for skull.



That's where they led our Lord, to Calvary, to Golgotha, to the Skull, through the narrow streets of Jerusalem and out the gates of the city to execute Him. Before they did that, we're told that they offered Him wine mixed with myrrh, which was a narcotic drink given to deaden the pain, but the Lord refused it, choosing instead to endure the pain to the full with a clear mind. It was not just going to have a clear mind that He might endure the pain, but there were many things that He would say upon the cross. And in so doing, He'd fulfill prophecy. He will direct the events that transpire from cross, and so He sought to have a clear mind.

As one writer puts it, "He refused the wine so as to drink the full draft of suffering with all His senses intact." Matthew refers to it as "wine mixed with gall," rather than myrrh, in order to describe its bitter taste rather than its contents. And in so doing, he connects it prophetically with the sufferings of Psalm 6 and verse 21 which states they "also gave me gall for my food." So, the Psalm of David, which describes the sufferings of our Lord, are seen at least by Matthew particularly, as typical, as illustrative of the sufferings of our Lord. So, he speaks of the wine in terms of its bitterness and the bitterness of our Lord's experience, which were reflected in David's experiences as well.

Then, Mark writes, they crucified Him. What incredible restraint, one writer observes. This execution that Cicero described as the cruelest and most hideous punishment is put on the record without any of the grim details that we might think he would place within the text. Without any attempt on the part of Mark to play on our sympathy or our emotion. Mark simply writes, "They crucified Him." That's it. And yet, that's enough. Mark doesn't allow the details to distract from the simple fact that the central event of the Bible and history, that the Son of God was crucified, that He was made to hang like a common criminal between heaven and earth. He probably hung several feet above the ground, because in verse 36, just before He dies, Mark states that someone filled a sponge with sour wine and gave it to Him on a reed. And so, in order to give Him that drink of sour wine, he had to hold it up to Him. So He was some distance off the ground, and so being lifted up high, He not only had the crowd before Him, visible to His eyes, but He was also made visible to the whole crowd that had gathered to watch this death.

While at the foot of the cross, Mark writes, "the soldiers divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them to decide what each should take."

That means that our Lord hung on the cross naked and in full view of all. The Romans typically crucified their victims naked, whether or not they allowed our Lord to wear a loincloth in order to avoid offending the Jews is not known. But one reason that they took the clothing is because Roman law gave the executioners the right to take the victim's possessions. It was a form of payment to them for their day's work. And since all of our Lord's worldly possessions was His clothing, probably His inner and outer garment, His belt, and sandals, they divvied them among themselves. Quite a comment on our Lord, isn't it? He's the king of kings, Lord of Lords, and yet He comes to this world, and what does He own? Just the clothes on His back. Foxes have their holes, the birds of the sky have their nest, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. We worry about our mortgages and having our homes and our clothing and all, and they're legitimate concerns. The son of God had none of that. He was adequately taken care of.

But I think we're reminded here again of His poverty, of what He gave up. He who was rich became poor, that we might become rich for Him. All He had was these clothes, and now they're dividing them up amongst themselves, while He hangs on the cross naked.

But in doing all of this, these soldiers were again fulfilling prophecy. They were fulfilling the lament of Psalm 22 and verse 18. They divided my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots. What David wrote about 1,000 years earlier was fulfilled at the cross. Well, it shows, again, the plan of God in all of this, that it's being worked out. These are not just events that take place; these are events that were prophesied centuries ahead of time. And every detail is signifying that this is within the plan of God. This is the outworking of the plan of God. It's fulfilled prophecy in that very simple act of casting lots for His garments and dividing them up.

But in it is not only the fulfillment of prophecy, but the fulfillment of a picture of our Lord. It completes a picture of Him that instructs us on the very nature of His death, a picture that not only looks back to David, but looks back to the first man and woman. He hung naked. In Genesis 3, nakedness is a picture of the shame and guilt of sin. Before the fall, Moses writes in Genesis 2 verse 25, the man and his wife were both naked and were not shamed. But after they had sinned, Moses writes, and they knew that they were naked. And you know the story how they tried to hide that

nakedness with fig leaves. Why did they try to hide their nakedness? Why are they suddenly conscious of it in a way that they were not conscious of it before? Well, it's obvious. It's because they were ashamed. Their nakedness was a reflection of their guilt.

Well now, our Lord, the sinless Son of Man, the spotless lamb of God hangs before men publically naked as a demonstration that He has taken on Himself the shame and the guilt of sin as a substitute for sinners. The sin of Adam and Eve was placed upon Him. The sin of each of us, of every one of us that have put our faith in Jesus Christ, our sin, our shame, our guilt has been placed upon Him, that He might bear the punishment of our guilt and suffer the shame in our place. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, Paul writes, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

And so, we have been clothed with His righteousness, because He was clothed with our sin in our place. It's what Luther called the "sweet exchange." Exchanged places with us, that we might exchange places with Him. He took our sin, that we might have His righteousness.

Well, this happened, Mark says, the third hour. Which brings us to something of a problem in our text, because when you compare that with John's gospel, he said that the dividing of the garments took place at the sixth hour. So, there's a discrepancy there. The third hour would be :00 AM. The sixth hour would be 12:00 noon. And so, we wonder what's the solution there? Is there a conflict? I really don't think there is one. Different solutions have been offered, such as John was using the Roman method of calculating time, while Mark was using the Palestinian method. And if that's the case, then the two can be harmonized. And some, in fact many, take that position.

Leon Morris, however, is probably correct when he suggests that both John and Mark were not giving a precise time. As he points out, people in antiquity didn't have clocks. They didn't have watches. And the reckoning of time was always very approximate. It couldn't be anything but that. The third hour may simply denote the middle of the morning, a kind of approximation while the sixth hour would signify that it was getting on towards noon. And so, late morning would be what both of them were talking about. I think that's probably the sense of it here. Late morning, they crucified Him.

As I pointed out earlier, it was the policy in Roman executions to write the offense of the person to be executed on a placard or on a board and carry it to the site of the execution, and then post it on the cross above the head. And that is what was done here. Mark states that Pilate wrote the charge, "The King of the Jews." We know from John's account that the wording of that charge angered the Jews and they asked Pilate to reword it and put, "He said, 'I am King of the Jews,'" because that's exactly what they charged Him of being. He said He was a king, and He was a rival to Caesar, so Pilate puts the charge, but he puts it in a way that offended them. So they wanted it changed. But Pilate refused. He said, "What I have written, I have written."

Pilate's refusal to change the inscription was not due to respect that he had for the Lord, though I think he did have respect for him. I think you see that toward the end of the trial. He's really quite impressed with our Lord's composure and his conduct, and the very words that he said to Pilate, and the words that he wouldn't say to Pilate. But that's not the reason that he does this. He doesn't express any belief in our Lord, didn't think that He was a king. What he does here probably is to be understood in terms of spite. Spite that he had for the Jews to inform them that he didn't believe the charges that they had brought against Him. He knew they were false charges. He knew their motives. He knew that they were jealous of them, as we were told. And also, to taunt them by saying in effect, "This is a Jewish king, the only king the Jews can have, a king who is crucified like a criminal."

So, He's mocking them, really. And yet, the inscription told the truth, and it told the truth to the world, because John tells us that the inscription was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, the languages of the known world at that time, the Roman empire. And so, all who knew those languages, the world, in effect, read the statement that He is the king of the Jews. So, regardless of Pilate's motive, the truth was stated by him. He is the Messiah. He is the heir of David's throne. It was by means of His humiliation, by means of His death on the cross that He won that kingdom of which He is king, grounding it in righteousness and justice. And in so doing, conquering at the cross, Satan and sin, destroying the works of the devil.

So He hangs on the cross with that placard that announced He is the king, the king of the Jews. And yet, there was nothing kingly in His appearance. Nailed to a cross, an emblem of shame, reserved only for slaves and the worst of criminals. He

was crucified between two thieves. In the authorized version, verse 28 reads, "And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And He was numbered with transgressors.'" That text is not included in the New American Standard Bible, or the New International Version because the text will support for it is very weak. It probably was not in the original text.

Nevertheless, it does state a truth. An important truth. In fact, one that the Lord does state in Luke 22 verse 37 where He informs His disciples that this which is written must be fulfilled in me, and He was classed among criminals. And so, that's probably the reason that a scribe later put it in at this place, which is a fitting place for it because this is where it's fulfilled. It's a reference to Isaiah 53 verse 12, and the fact that the Lord in Luke 22 states that it's to be fulfilled in Him shows that He understood Isaiah 53 to be a reference to Him, which I think is significant, because our interpretation of Isaiah 53 is messianic as a prophecy about the Messiah being a suffering servant was His interpretation. It's not something that some Christian later on imposed upon the text. That is the Lord's interpretation. That's the inspired interpretation of Isaiah 53. It is about Him, and that particular verse indicates the extent of the shame of His sufferings, and the extent of the injustice of His sufferings. It was not mere sinners with whom He was numbered, but criminals. He who least deserved it was classed with the worst of sinners. And we read later in our text in verse 32 that those two criminals mocked Him, looked down upon Him, so that He was even despised by them.

Not only is He numbered by the nation with criminals, the criminals number them as being worse than Him. That's a terrible shame that He had to suffer. And yet again, we see in this the providence of God, because this not only fulfilled prophecy, the prophecy of Isaiah 53. But in doing that, it states the purpose of His mission. He came for that reason. He came to be identified with sinners, the worst of sinners in judgment so that He could, as He said, seek and save that which was lost. Not just the good people that were lost, but the worst of the lost, He came to save them. Throughout His ministry, that's where we find Him. We find Him with the sinners. In fact, that, you'll remember, was one of the charges that the self-righteous Pharisees brought against the Lord. He's the friend of publicans and sinners because He ate with them, He spent time with them, He went to them. And so, it's only fitting, is it not, that He be numbered with them in His death, those for whom He came to save.

Well, those in the crowd who missed the spiritual significance of His crucifixion between two thieves certainly didn't miss the shame of it. Mark writes in verse 2 that as they passed by, they hurled abuse at Him. The crucifixion was a very public event. Evidently, it occurred just off a main road leading into the city where people were coming and going. So they were passing by Him, just maybe a few feet off the road. Evidently, archaeology suggests that the hill, Calvary, was very close to the outer wall of Jerusalem, so people were lined up on the wall, no doubt looking down. Those who passed by coming and going from the city would see Him. And as they did, Mark writes, they would shake or wag their heads at Him. It recalls the words of Psalm 22 verse 7, "They wagged the head," which was a sign of scorn, a sign of ridicule.

So they would ridicule Him in that way, and then some would hurl the accusation at Him, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" These were evidently people who had witnessed the trial before the Sanhedrin. Because as you remember, that was one of the accusations that they brought against Him in accusing Him of blasphemy, that He said He was going to destroy the temple, a reference to John chapter 2 where He did say, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." That was the sign, and the evidence of His authority to cleanse the temple as He did. But as John points out, He was speaking of His resurrection, the temple of His body, not the temple of Herod. And yet, they twisted it to mean that.

So, evidently, these people had either attended the trial or word had got out that that was the great accusation that they had brought against Him. But here, they are not using that so much as an accusation of His being a blasphemer as they had at the trial, as they were mocking Him as an imposter. If He really had the power to destroy the temple, then He could leave the cross and save Himself, which must've been a particularly difficult insult for Him to bear, because He was very conscious that He did in fact have the power to do just that, to destroy the temple, if that had been His will. But certainly, to come down off the cross.

And yet, He was not exercising that power. He was deliberately restraining it by His own will. So, it was an abuse that He had to suffer, but also a temptation that He had to face, as Satan used that challenge to His power to again, tempt the Lord to turn away from the will of the Father and avoid further suffering by escaping death.

Satan knew all the way from the earliest moment in history, from Genesis 3 and verse 15 where that prophecy had been given of His destruction, that it was by means of this one who had come, by means of the cross, that He would be destroyed. And so, he is still seeking to avert that, to frustrate God's plan of salvation and remove the cross from history. It's a temptation that was being thrown at our Lord.

So, He endured that, but there was more to endure. Because in addition to the by-passers was another group, the spiritual leaders of the people, the chief priests, along with the scribes. They were standing there at the foot of the cross, very close to the Lord, right on the front row. And they take up the taunt, they take up the ridicule of the others who said, "Save Yourself." They say, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself." They don't say that directly to Him. You see that as you go through the gospel accounts. You remember how sometimes the Pharisees will call the disciples aside and challenge the Lord. They didn't like to go directly to the Lord and bring their accusation. They didn't like to face Him eye to eye. And here, they're not doing that either. They're raising their objection, or they're making their statement of ridicule. But Mark says they did it among themselves. Among themselves, but in a way that He could hear them, because they're very close. They said it, as one writer puts it, in a stage whisper.

It was a self-condemning statement that they made, because they recognized that He'd done miracles. He'd saved others, they said. There was no denying that. Everyone knew that He'd done miracles. Everyone knew that He had raised Lazarus from the dead, that He'd healed the lame, that He'd given sight to the blind. Many of those miracles had occurred right there in Jerusalem. He'd done a multitude of miracles that they don't make any attempt to deny, and they didn't make an attempt to deny it during His ministry. They accepted that. They believed in the miracles, but they didn't believe in Him. For all that they had witnessed in His amazing ministry of three years, and for all that they had read in the Scriptures that they had studied, they were as blind to the significance of the cross that was standing right in front of them as Tacitus would be a thousand miles away in Rome.

They were looking right at the cross, and in effect, they were saying "nothing happened." And yet, they knew that something had happened. They knew that this man had performed miracles. That was undeniable. And yet, they add to their condemnation because that's a condemning statement by them to admit that, and yet

still resist. And they add to their condemnation when looking up at the inscription over His head, over the crown of thorns that He wore; they add with contempt, "Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!"

That is really a brazen act of defiance on their part to suggest that they were willing to believe if He would just give them enough reason to believe. One more miracle. That's all they were asking for. Just come off the cross, show us that you can do that as though raising a man from the dead, raising Lazarus from the dead was not reason enough to believe. It was their self-righteous way of taunting Him and suggesting that their failure to believe was His fault. He hadn't done enough. He hadn't really proven Himself. Perhaps this demand for another miracle echoed in Paul's mind when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 1, "For indeed, Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom. Signs, miracles, were used of God to affirm the truth of His message, and His messengers throughout the Old Testament. You see it with Moses. A great example of that. God gave him the staff that would turn into a serpent. The hand, remember, that he placed within his garment and pulled out will become leprous, all to demonstrate that he was God's messenger, and that He represented God.

You see that throughout Israel's history with the prophets. You see it with the apostles. They confirmed that they were messengers of the Lord with the Lord's message through the miracles they did. And that's one of the main reasons that the Lord did miracles. The chief reason, John brings that out, they were signs. They affirmed that He was the Son of God, the Savior of the world. But while external miracles of themselves give objective evidence to the truth of God, of themselves they could not convince an unbelieving heart to believe. Now, they did in some cases. God used them in the hearts of many people to bring them to faith. But a miracle, an external miracle in and of itself will not call someone to believe. That calls for a miracle of another kind, not an external miracle but an internal miracle, the miracle of regeneration, the miracle of the new birth in which God opens up the eyes and the mind of an unbeliever to the truth of God and creates a willing heart. And if there's anyone in the audience who resists the truth of the gospel, who says: I recognize that the cross has significance but I don't see the significance that you're speaking of. If you're not impressed with what the cross has accomplished and the importance of it,



then what you need to do is pray, "God I can only know that by Your grace. Give me the grace to understand that and open my eyes to it."

Well, these men standing around the cross, these religious leaders were certainly not willing to do that. This was their excuse, their way of rejecting Him even farther and hardening their hearts even more. And yet, in their blasphemy, there is a marvelous truth that's expressed. Because they were right in what they said. "He saved others; He cannot save Himself." Oh, He could come down off the cross, He could've ended the pain, He could've ended the humiliation of it all, but He would've done that at the expense of saving His people from their sins.

The cross and only the cross is God's solution to the sin problem, and without it there would be no ransom paid for the many. No redemption, the great host of people whom the Father had given to the Son would not be bought, would not be brought into the family of God. And so, to accomplish that, to accomplish His mission, He resisted the temptations, He endured the ridicule, and He stayed on the cross.

As the author of Hebrews says, "For the joy set before Him." What is that joy that was set before Him? It is the joy of redeeming His people. It is the joy of saving them from the very judgment that He was undergoing. And for that joy, He endured the cross, despising the shame. And that's why He is the Savior. And that is why at this time of year, and this season of the year, we can sing "Joy to the World." Joy to the world, because the Savior has come, and He has finished the work of redemption, and there's nothing that we can add to it. All we can do is receive it. All we can do is thank Him for what He's done and trust in Him.

Well, men today want to celebrate His birth and His life. And of course, those are important, but His birth was only the necessary step to the goal of His mission, which was the cross. And it's the cross that gives meaning to all of the rest. Yet, its meaning has value only for those who believe, only for those who trust in Him as their Savior.

Can you say that you've done that as we begin to celebrate this Christmas season? Can you say that you know that the child that was born in Bethlehem and that was laid in the manger was the incarnate God of the universe? God become man? The second person of the Trinity? That He grew up without sin and He went to Calvary in order to be the sin bearer for all who believe? Can you say that? And can

you say that you are trusting in Him, and in what He did for your forgiveness and for salvation? If not, then I urge you: believe in Christ, trust only in Him, say, "Lord Jesus, I am a sinner in need of forgiveness. You died for sinners, and I want that death to count for me. I want to receive You as my Savior." And if you say that, then He will receive you. He will enter into your life, and He will give you forgiveness, and He will change your life, change it forever, make you a son of God.

God help you to do that. May God help you to see your need, and to trust in Him. And may God help all of us to gain a sense of what our Lord sacrificed in our behalf, what He endured for us, that we might escape the judgment He underwent, and enjoy His life and His life forever. Shall we stand now for the benediction?

[Prayer] Gracious heavenly Father, we do thank You for the gift of life that we have in Your son. And as we enter into this season of the year when we celebrate our Lord's birth, may we see the importance of it. It is important that He came into this world. It's a great blessing because He is a manual, God with us, and with Him, we see You. He has explained You to us. No man has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son explained Him to us, and we praise You for explaining Yourself to us through Him. Because in Him, we see Your purity, Your perfection, Your goodness, Your mercy, Your love, Your kindness. All of that. But we see Your glory, most of all, in what He accomplished in being born, and that was His death on the cross. We thank You for that. We thank You that You sent Him into the world not simply to live as an example, though He is certainly the example for men, to be the suffering servant, to be the substitute in our place. Thank You, Father, for that. Help us to grasp to some degree, the greatness of that gift, and live with grateful hearts in light of it. We pray these things in our Savior's name. Amen.