

The Son of God!

Psalm 22:1-18, Mark 15:16-47 (ESV)

June 15, 2003

“Truly this man was the Son of God!” When Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last, the Roman centurion in charge of executing him saw how his life ended and said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Finally, someone got it right! He may or may not have known that he got it right. It is not clear whether this is a Christian confession of faith or a sarcastic comment. Either way, for our benefit, he got it right, or almost right. “Truly this man was the Son of God!” We will quibble with the tense next week when we take up the resurrection. For today we will take the title.

The first sentence of the Gospel according to Mark proclaims: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” At the baptism of Jesus, the voice of God announced from heaven that Jesus was his son. At his transfiguration, the voice of God announced from heaven again that Jesus was his son. All along the way, the demons knew that Jesus was the Son of God, and it terrified them. Yet now, at his death, for the first time, a human being, and a Gentile at that, said out loud, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” The dead Jesus was acknowledged, at some level, as the Son of God, as and because he suffered a wrongful death for us, on our account, and to our benefit. So Jesus was the Crucified One, as horrible as that was, *and* the Crucified One was none other than the Son of God.

Here, at the moment of his death, Jesus was named as the Son of God. He always had been the son of God, but on that day someone spoke it out loud. Here, on the darkest day of human history, the love of God shined forth in Christ’s self-sacrifice. Here, at the depths of human sinfulness and iniquity, God extended forgiveness to us all. Here, at the failure of the religion of God’s chosen, covenant people and at the failure of the high rule of law in mighty empire, God offered in himself that which is beyond all personal, religious, or governmental accomplishment. Here, under the crush of all that was twisted, perverted, and gone wrong, the Son of God suffered and died at our hands that we might live and be made new by his hands. Here, Jesus accepted humiliation, degradation, and the loneliness of being forsaken by God in order to bring us glory, honor, and eternal fellowship with God, himself, and each other. As the centurion said, whether he meant it or not, whether he understood it or not, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Consider Mark's depiction of Christ's crucifixion and death. There is no mention of any nails. There is no mention of a spear. There is not even a mention of any blood! This is not to say that Mark is not aware of the gruesome physical suffering of Christ's crucifixion. He remembers that Christ was offered drugs to kill the pain. Mark records that Jesus died with a loud cry, though perhaps this was a victory yell, since most victims of crucifixion died of asphyxiation, exposure, and exhaustion, and could not have cried out at the end. And yet, while Mark is aware of the physical suffering of Christ's crucifixion, according to Mark this does not make up the most important part of Christ's suffering.

What then, according to Mark, is the most important part of Christ's suffering? It is his loneliness. Jesus was accused and condemned by the religious leaders. He was rejected by his own people. He was betrayed and deserted by his disciples. He was convicted by the governmental authorities. He was mocked, stripped, struck, beaten, and spit upon by the soldiers. He was derided by the passers by. He was mocked again by the chief priests and the scribes. He was even taunted by the two robbers crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. And then, worst of all, Jesus, the Son of God, who had lived with the awareness of the constant presence of God, took on the sin of the world and our sin, stood before God as one cursed and condemned on our account, and realized the full weight of God's judgment on us all. He suffered the horrible anguish of being separated from God, so he cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the nature and reality of Christ's suffering for our sake: not only the physical pain, as horrible as it was, but even more the loneliness of being forsaken by God. You and I know our human loneliness. You and I know that it occupies the depths of our despair. Consider, then, that Christ experienced the loneliness of us all, the divine loneliness of the only Son of God being separated from God the Father.

And here is where Christ won the victory for you and for me! How? This one time in human history, the powers of sin, death, hate, and evil were defeated. Jesus took on the worst they could do, but they did not break him. The genius of evil is its ability to replicate itself in its opponent, like a virus; but Jesus never returned evil for evil. The power of hate is to inspire hate in return; but Jesus never cursed those who condemned and executed him. We understand sin as "any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, answer 14); but Christ remained sinless and obedient unto God, even while his obedience meant that he would die. The force of death is felt in its ability to make us fear death; but Christ faced it without fear. So Christ withstood on the cross the onslaught of the massed powers of sin, death, hate, and evil, under the conditions not only of pain but also of loneliness, and he won. And in his victory, we all won.

Sin, death, hate, and evil did the worst they could, but they failed to break Jesus, so they were undone. Christ converted his shameful cross to a glorious throne, from which he rules the universe.

We can see the victory in the events of the day. Those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” They demanded the impossible, but they spoke truth they did not realize. Jesus could have come down from the cross, but then he would not have been the Christ. He could be the Christ only by staying on the cross, lonely and dying. The Christ could have called down upon his executors a thousand warring angels, but then he would not have been the Christ.

In truth, Jesus could not save himself, for in saving himself he would have lost us and not been himself; only by losing himself could Jesus be himself, the Christ, the Son of God, and so save us. The humiliation is almost too much for us to bear reading it. And yet, in his dishonor we find our glory, in his rejection we find our acceptance, in his death we find our new life, in his loneliness we find our communion. In the face of the willing, lonely death of Jesus, the centurion spoke the truth which he may or may not have realized: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Today we have the advantage of Mark adding his witness to that of the centurion. Today we have the advantage of the church adding its witness to that of Mark and the centurion. Today we are invited to join the faithful throughout the centuries in recognizing and believing that Jesus is the Son of God. And today, in this death of the Son of God, we are invited to see God the Father revealed to us and to see how far God is willing to go for us, in his love, to win us back for himself.

All of this gives us good reason to believe in God and in his Christ. The lonely horror of the crucifixion, by showing us how far God is willing to go for us, does more than anything else to make us confident of God’s good will and benevolence toward us.

Moreover, Jesus suffered the loneliness of being forsaken by God so that we will not have to. Jesus died and lives again to be with us and to have us with him. Neither God nor Jesus Christ ever forsakes us. None of us ever have to be as lonely as he was. No matter how alone we are, God and his Christ are always with us. And because they are with us, they provide the basis for us to be together with each other. The meaning, purpose, and goal of human life is to be found in our being together and living together in fellowship with each other and in communion with God and with God’s Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Human beings are created for love, family, community, and congregation. Human life does not work any other

way. We may not be able to find enough good examples of love, family, community, and congregation, this side of heaven, to convince us that this is the meaning, purpose, and goal of human life. But I am sure that we can find enough negative examples of hurt, loneliness, and hellishness to realize that these are the opposites of all that is good and worthwhile in life, and we can come through this back door to realize the importance of our life together with God and with each other. The realization that we never have to be as lonely as Jesus was for us, the reality that God and his Christ never forsake us, are powerful truths that uphold us and carry us through the hardest times of our lives.

Christ also gives us a wonderful example of obedience. Jesus realized that it was more important to obey God than to save his own neck. How wonderful and rare this is! Jesus realized that it was more important to obey God than to go along with the crowd. No one was supporting him. Everyone was against him. Not only were they hurting him, but they were making fun of him. And yet, he realized that he was right, and he had the courage of his convictions. Something else is noteworthy here. “They offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it.” This was a drug to keep him from feeling the pain of the crucifixion. Yet, he refused it, apparently in order to be conscious in his final act of obedience to God and struggle against evil.

Jesus by his death also brings the Old Testament system of relating to God to its end and begins something new. “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom,” which is to say that God tore it. The hidden holy of holies was opened to all. The old system involved sacrifices on altars. Jesus Christ offered the complete and perfect sacrifice. Nothing needs to be added to it, and nothing can be added to it. Therefore, his death completed and ended the sacrificial system, and his cross was the last altar. We live today by the grace of the sacrifice Christ has already made for us. So, our worship is not the attempt to approach or appease God with our sacrifices, but the expression of our gratitude to God for the blessings God has already given us in Jesus Christ. Our tithes and alms are returned in thanksgiving and in response for God’s always prior goodness to us. Our lives are refocused away from self-centeredness and toward the love of God as revealed to us on the cross.

Jesus also gives us an example of dying well. Jesus died a horrible death, but he died well. May God grant us the grace to die well. Dying is the last thing we do in this world. It would be good to be able to die faithfully, in full confidence of the love and forgiveness of God. The crucifixion teaches us that we no longer have to cry out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Christ has done that already. We can live and we can die in the confidence of God’s presence. Others have done it before us. It has been said of John Calvin that he “approached death, at

least according to all the records, with the equanimity of one who was sure that death was no more than the passage from this particular existence to existence more immediately in the presence of God. Hence he carried on the affairs of his final days as though he was simply making preparation to go on a trip to France or to Germany” (John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, p. 235).

So here, at the moment of his death, Jesus was named as the Son of God. Someone said it out loud. Here, on the darkest day of human history, the love of God shined forth. Here, at the depths of human sinfulness and iniquity, God extended forgiveness to us all. Here, at the failure of the religion of God’s chosen people and of the rule of law in the empire, God offered in himself that which is beyond all personal, religious, or governmental accomplishment. Here, under the crush of all that was twisted, perverted, and gone wrong, the Son of God suffered and died at our hands that we might live and be made new by his hands. Here, Jesus accepted humiliation, degradation, and the loneliness of being forsaken by God in order to bring us glory, honor, and eternal fellowship with God, himself, and each other.

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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