

Dying to Sin

Mark 8:31-38

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of

his Father with the holy angels.”
9:1 And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

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Each of the four gospel writers want us to remember the events of this day. For them, there is gospel even on Good Friday. So we reflect on Mark’s proclamation.

Jesus had been praying with his friends. He was distressed and

agitated. “Grieved unto death” he said to them.

So troubled was he that Jesus sweat drops of blood.¹ Physicians report that this condition, hemati-drosis or hemo-hi-drosis, is very rare, but may occur in highly emotional states.²

There while in prayer, in that place where they had frequently prayed, the religious authorities arrived in a crowd. Their swords and clubs were all that was need to show that they meant business.

¹ Luke 22:44

² See “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ” JAMA March 21, 1988, p 1455-1463

“Who are you looking for? Jesus asked. “Jesus of Nazareth,” they answered. Jesus told them “I am he.”

Imagine the confusion among Jesus’ followers:

- They’ve come for Jesus.
- They’re taking him away.
- Can’t we do something?
- Oh, my! Peter struck the slave with his sword.
- He’s cut off the man’s ear.

Jesus was then taken before the Council and questioned by the High Priest. Many testified falsely against Jesus. Eventually,

he was blindfolded, spat upon and beaten by the guards.

On this day, the Council of religious leaders decided to send Jesus to the Roman governor. While Pilate found no fault in Jesus, the authorities persisted in their opposition to Jesus. Twice Pilate tried to appease the angry leaders: first by having Jesus flogged, and then by offering to release a prisoner as was custom during the Passover. The crowd cried out for Barabbas’ release and for Jesus to be crucified.

This was an ordeal for Jesus. He felt the agony of rejection by

Judas, the denial of Peter, and the mocking of the soldiers. Physically, he likely had little sleep and perhaps no food or water. The loss of blood from the flogging likely led to Jesus being in a state of physical shock.

On the morning of this day, Jesus was bloodied from flogging. Still, he was ordered to carry the cross piece of his cross to Golgotha. About 9 a.m., Jesus was nailed to the cross with long, tapered spikes. The damage to the sensory branches of the median nerve likely caused a

pain known as *causaglia* which is reported to be a severe pain.³

You and I have seen angry outbursts from people in the hospital when nurses cannot arrive in a reasonable time. I imagine that a person enduring such treatment as hanging from a cross would have moments of rage against the soldiers and everyone responsible for their hanging. But, with Jesus, it was different. He said little. Rather than curse the Chief Priests, Judas, or Pilate. Rather, Jesus prayed for their forgiveness.

³ See Frederick T. Zugibe in *Bible Review*, April 1989, pages 35-43

Mark tells us that seeing the events of this morning, two people were moved to faith. One was Simon (a Jew from Cy-reene) and the other was a Roman soldier, the centurion, likely a pagan. It was the centurion who gave the witness of faith when he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

The One (Jesus) who had drawn so many to faith during his life, led these two to faith, and perhaps others, on the day of his death.

Jesus' crucifixion remains a remote account of historical

events until you connect it with something that you've experienced. For me that connection is my mother's cancer.

Following two mastectomies, my mother's cancer metastasized to her brain. Surgery was not an option. In January 1981 she underwent radiation and chemotherapy. I was in seminary at the time. When I arrived for a visit a month later, I would not have recognize my own mother had she not been in her room. During this final leg of her journey, six months in all, she endured painful headaches, loss

of mobility, continence, and speech. She died in June that year. She was 47.

Remembering the suffering we have known helps us to understand how much Jesus endured. Then comes a stunning awareness through the Apostle Paul: “While we were yet sinners...Christ died for us.”⁴

Jesus endured the trauma of mockery, shame, abandonment, brutal pain and death – *for you...for me!*

If ever there were a day that we would ask if we're living up to his gift...today would be that day!

How do we respond to such an un-requested and unmerited gift?

Isaac Watts, the pastor-poet from London, put his answer in verse:

*Were the whole realm of
nature mine, that were a
present far too small. Love so
amazing, so divine, demands
my soul, my life, my all.*

How are we doing?

⁴ Romans 5:8

Pastors report that members are deeply committed to God. George Barna, who researches Christian issues, has reported the surprising result that congregants deny it.⁵

While pastors tend to believe that all is spiritually well with their members, adults report that they are lukewarm about God.

Overall, only 1 in 7 adults place their faith-in-God as their top priority.

In the typical protestant church the number is not quite 1 in 4. Evangelical churches do slightly better at 2 in 4.

Remembering that Jesus died a purposeful death, the important question is “what does our crucified Savior expect of us?”

Jesus said, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

For this Friday to be to our good, we must move beyond our praise

⁵ See <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=215>

and gratitude. We cannot just appreciate that Jesus took his cross, we are called to take up our cross. We must follow Jesus even to the point of *dying to sin*.

The author of Christian devotional classic “My Utmost for His Highest” was the Scottish minister Oswald Chambers. The book is a compilation of his messages to students and soldiers.

The irony is that this author did not, at first, find satisfaction in Christianity. He considered the Bible to be “dull” and uninspiring. Finally, after four

years of spiritual dryness, Chambers realized that he couldn't - from himself - be holy. Once he realized that the strength and peace he was looking for was Christ himself, *Christ's life in exchange for his sin*, he experienced great renewal so much so that he described it as a “radiant, unspeakable emancipation.”⁶

His meditation for April 10th gives guidance for the cross we are called to bear. It is titled “Complete and Effective Decision About Sin”.

⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_Chambers

Chambers begins with a question: “Have you made the following decision about sin – that it must be completely killed in you?”

Have you resolved that sin should find no welcome in your life and that you want it killed within you?

The average person, it seems, seeks to live a good life and to be generally faithful to Jesus. But, many average persons have made a secret, perhaps unconscious, agreement with their sin:

- some sins will be strictly renounced,
- others will be tolerated occasionally, and
- some sins will be not be resisted at all.

Friends, most of us have a divided heart where sin is concerned.

Scripture’s counsel to us is clear: we must consider ourselves “dead to sin”.⁷

Some of you likely remember Jesus’ teaching that we cannot serve two masters. We will either

⁷ Romans 6:11

love the one and hate the other or hate the one and love the other. In his call to follow, we will either accept our sin or we will commit ourselves to put sin to death within us.

Each must decide for himself, for herself. To take up your cross and consider yourself dead to sin, you need not be filled with a perfect, righteous zeal. You need only the realization that you cannot serve two masters and a desire to evict sin from your life.

Jesus was clear: “³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for

my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

I invite you now, on Good Friday 2007, to consider yourself dead to sin and to resolve that, with God’s help, you will not welcome any sin in your life.

While Jesus walked that lonesome valley all by himself, we will carry our cross looking not to the challenges of the road or the coming hill or to any unknowns that may lie ahead. We will fix our eyes on our savior who died and is alive again. He leads the way; our single task is to stay close to him.