WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Mark 15:1-47

Key Verse: 34

“And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthanie?’ —which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Thank God for Jesus’ payer at Gethsemane, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me, yet not what I will but what you will.” In this prayer, Jesus was determined to take the cup of God’s wrath upon himself for each of the souls God saves. We are forever grateful for this marvelous grace of Jesus and pray that we may really learn the prayer of our Lord Jesus at Gethsemane. After the prayer battle, Jesus was ready to be arrested and tried before the Sanhedrin. In today’s passage, we see his trial before Plate, his crucifixion and death, and his burial. Let’s observe how the author Mark described concerning these events so that we may be able to see our Lord Jesus majestic and glorious death on the cross.

At the night court of the Sanhedrin, Jesus was charged with the death penalty. The highest Jewish court was full of falsity, showing the worst of injustice. Jesus, however, unambiguously identified himself as the Son of God, sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. Yet, they completely ignored the words of Jesus. Then very early in the morning, they opened the court again and made their illegal verdict validated. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

At the trial before Pilate, Jesus spoke just one thing, “Yes, it is as you say” at the question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Regarding his identit,y Jesus was always crystal clear before anyone. The king of the Jews is God’s promised king, the king of the whole world. When Jesus made no reply for any accusation, Pilate was amazed (θαυμάζειν, marvel, wonder). Pilate knew it was out of envy that the chief priest had handed Jesus over to him. He tried to release Jesus when the crowed asked him to release a prisoner according to the custom at the Feast. But it did not work out. The crowd, manipulated by the chief priest, shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Then wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas, an insurrectionist, to them. He could not exercise his power as the governor at the very right time. He could not act according to his conviction because he wanted to satisfy the crowd, suppressing the fear of God that had risen in his heart. Romans 14:22 says, “Bless is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.” It is a constant battle going on in any one’s heart whether to please God or to please myself or other people.

Pilate had a wonderful opportunity to do what is right and good to Jesus, the Son of God. But he made Jesus suffer immensely. He had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified. At that time flogging or scourging was a form of terrible torture. It was whipping by a rod connected to a leather thong with a sharp end of lead or bone. At this scourging, the flesh was torn and lacerated all the way down to the bone itself with blood sprang up. Some criminals even fainted and died.

Then Mark describes Roman soldiers’ mocking the flogged/tortued Jesus. The whole company of soldiers, a cohort (σπεῖραν, speiran), a tenth of a legion, gathered at the Praetorium, headquarters or the residence of the Roman governor. It was called praetorium because the elite troops were the praetorian guards. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jew!” Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him (ἔτυπτον; stem – tuptó, strike; kept striking). Spitting in someone’s face is the ultimate act of disdain. As they kept striking him on his head with a staff, blood came from his brow and flowed on his head, mingled with the spit on top of the blood that was already on his body by the flogging. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. What a comedy! What a parody! They would not display such a mockery to Caesar or any other powerful human king, but a helpless, defeated, and captured king. To them, Jesus was so helpless and powerless. In the previous passage at the trial before the Sanhedrin, they spit at him, blindfolded him, struck him with their fists and said, “Prophesy!” And the guards beat him. For Jesus looked so powerless and helpless to them. All these sorts of people, great or small, high or low, treated Jesus as they wanted, revealing their sinful nature, which is fundamentally against God. In this way, they abused Jesus, the Son of God. Paul said in Romans 3:14-17, “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.” When there is no fear of God, sinful human beings can do anything and everything as the expression of standing against God. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Yet, in that mockery there is truth. We are to know that he was mocked because of our sins. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Then verse 21 says, “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 wrote this gospel in Rome, particularly to Romans. In Paul’s epistle to the Romans, he says in 16:13, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.” We see that Simon’s son and his wife were well-known and very influential in the church of Rome. Paul seemed to have no need of a motherly love in his strong character and faith in Jesus, but he confessed that he had received motherly love from Simion’s wife. This indicates something of Simon’s life that must have influenced his children and his wife in the Lord. We can infer that carrying the cross of Jesus even forcibly and experiencing Jesus on that day changed his life. This was the divine grace that came upon him, who must have been a God-fearing Jew coming to Jerusalem as a pilgrim to worship God mentioned in Acts 2:5-10, “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven…Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene:”

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh. Probably it was to prepare for the horrible pain of the crucifixion, but he did not take it, not wanting to lessen the pain.

Verse 24 says, “And they crucified him.” What a simple description regarding the crucifixion! All gospel writers described it in that simple way: “When they crucified him” in Matthew 27:35, “there they crucified him” in Luke 23:33, and “here they crucified him” in John 19:18. There is no adjective or other description concerning how Jesus responded to it. The simple depiction stresses the fact of Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus was crucified with two robbers as Isiaah 53:12 says, “…he was numbered with the transgressors.” So this crucifixion of Jesus was one of the three, as a common event at that time. Yet, fact was fact.

However, we are to remember that the crucifixion was the most terrible and painful way to kill a fellow man that the world had ever devised. The cross would be placed flat on the ground and the victim would be put on it. Then the arms of the victim were stretched out and the thick and long nails (1.25cm in diameter square and 15cm long iron spikes) were driven through the wrists, and the knees were a little bent and the nail went through the folded feet. The blood gushed out from the wounds. Then the cross was lifted and placed in a socket in the ground. The victim would soon have breathing difficulty and try to breathe by pushing his body up on the wounded feet to inhale and pulling his hands from the wounded hands to exhale. Through the repetition of pushing and pulling, the victim would maintain breathing until he would die slowly by asphyxiation/suffocation in a few days. Meanwhile the bugs and insects would come into his eyes and ears. Such a terrible punishment of crucifixion was invented by man. However, the Scriptures already prophesied such a punishment before the Medes’ invention. Around 1000 years before, David prophesied in Psalm 22:16, “…they have pierced my hands and my feet,” and Isaiah around 700 years before said in Isaiah 53:5, “He was pierced for our transgressions…” and around 450 years before Zechariah said in Zechariah 12:10, “They will look on me, the one they have pierced.” There are amazing prophecies concerning Jesus’ crucifixion. Again, Mark emphasizes the fact that it was the third hour when they crucified him. So we clearly see the facts of who, where, when, what, and how, concerning Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross as the most significant event in human history. And “why” should be rendered to each reader. The written notice of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” Unwittingly, they disclosed who the victim was. The king of the Jews, the true king, the king of the world, was crucified and hanging there with sinners. What a visual message!

However, under the cross the solders were just playing games by dividing the clothes and casting lots to see who would get what. They were indifferent and thoughtless. They were not serious in life, trying to get a little benefit given by the Roman authority and have a little fun and pleasure of the world. There are other groups of people. In verse 29 “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!” What cynicism! What scorn! The idea of the world is that the Messiah should be powerful with a sensational act. It had to be displayed visibly. The people of the world in each generation are cynical and scornful in regard to Christ and his crucifixion and death.

In verse 31, “In the same way the chief priests and the teaches of the law mocked him among themselves. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” The chief priests and the teachers of the law seemed to be more knowledgeable with their learning and position. Yet, they were more cynical and disdainful. They did not know that the promised Christ and King could not save himself in obedience to God, though he had power to do so. They said, “we may see and believe.” In fact, even hearing the resurrection of Jesus from the eyewitnesses of the guarding Roman soldiers they did not believe. Rather the constant teaching of the Bible is “repent and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults at him. The crucified were in the same suffering with Jesus on the cross at the very last moment of their lives. But they were also heaping insults at him. They had no reverence of life at all. People can be cynical and scornful to the end of their lives, rejecting the Christ.

We have seen all scorn, all sarcasm and all mockery of all sorts of people, Romans soldiers, passersby, religious leaders and even crucified and dying robbers. This is the response of the world. So Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Then what happens here? In verses 33 and 34, “At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice hour, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” Mark clearly wrote that it was the third hour when Jesus was crucified, 9am. Then from 9 am to 12noon Jesus did not say even a word according to Mark’s description. He could bear the unspeakable pain of crucifixion silently. But when the darkness came covering the whole land until the ninth hour, 3pm, he could not bear such a time and cried aloud, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He could not bear the suffering and pain of being forsaken by God. We know that God is present in the light. He is also present in the darkness, in the darkness of judgment (Amos 5:20). Darkness, then, is the ultimate form of God’s presence in judgment. This darkness is not the power of Satan, but the very power of God’s punishment upon the Son, because of man’s sin and its consequence of being plunged into the eternal hell. Of course Jesus’ whole life was a life of serving and suffering. Yet, this suffering is different, even from the suffering of the crucifixion for the first three hours. During the last three hours of his life God’s dreadful punishment was poured out on him, which was to be outpoured on sinners eternally. How can we grasp the three hours of Jesus’ suffering in God’s hellish wrath? It is equivalent to the eternity of the suffering in the fiery lake of burning sulfur of all those whom God saves. It is because Jesus had to pay the full price through the fullness of such suffering of all condemned and redeemed sinners. We know that three hours cannot be compared to the eternal hour. No way. But the infinite God did so by pouring out his wrath on the infinite Son for three hours. In this act of God, the Son received an infinite and eternal amount of wrath because He is an infinite and eternal person. What wisdom of God! What mercy of God! What power of God! What love of God! That judgment of God the Father, that separation and abandonment, though temporary, was so unbearable that he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In this cry of Jesus, those who put their trust and hope in this Jesus are assured of eternal acceptance and welcoming into the presence of God the Father and his kingdom. It is a constant teaching of the Bible that those who repent and believe in Christ Jesus have eternal redemption and eternal salvation. For the sacrifice of the very life of the infinite eternal God the Son bringing the forgiveness of sin would be enough for our infinite and eternal salvation. Praise God! Praise Jesus, our Lord and Saviour! May we keep and enjoy this unimaginable blessing of eternal salvation, being forever grateful for his grace.

In light of this grace we may also be able to calculate our finite time in this world and eternity in God. If our life of a little suffering in Christ contributes to the people of world receiving eternal salvation, what a life it will be? My temporary suffering in this world following the cross of Christ and the eternal salvation in glory of God’s flock of sheep, that comparison can’t be possible. God really wants us to have eternal perspective of life. Paul said in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

In verse 35, “When some of those standing near heard this, they said, ‘Listen, he’s calling Elijah.’” We know that Jesus’ voice was loud and clear. They could distinguish between the sound of “Eloi” and that of “Elijah.” But they played a word game out of joke of Jesus. One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ‘Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,’ he said.” Elijah went to heaven without experiencing death. So they thought he would come down and possibly take down Jesus’ body on the cross. Still they were in such a thought in their sarcasm. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

Then amazing things happened. Mark wrote only two things to give a simple yet powerful message of Jesus’ death on the cross. The curtain of the temple (9cm thick and 9m long) was torn in two from top to bottom. It was a heavy thick curtain, symbolizing the unbreakable barrier between God and man for countless days and months and years. As we studied in Leviticus, the blood of animals was sprinkled on the curtain seven times for the outward atonement of sin. Now at the death of Jesus the curtain was torn into, providing the new and living way to God. It is by his blood through his body torn and totally broken in the cross. What demonstration of God’s power!

And another event is this. Verse 39 says, “When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!” The centurion was an expert in killing criminals and in examining how they died. He must have gone through so many criminals’ crucifixion. To his eye,s Jesus was not just a man, but the Son of God, clearly hearing his cry and carefully observing how he died. Most importantly, God opened his eyes to see Jesus on the cross and the Son of God in his death. Humanly speaking, in this confession, his future would be unpromising and gloomy, possibly losing his job right away and being an object of ridicule. Yet, he could not resist his inner conviction.

Some women were there watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. Also many other women were there. While no man appeared, the women were there.

The victims of the crucifixion would be dumped on the street or in a pit with no proper burial, not being worthy of any kind of burial. But God prepared for Jesus’ burial miraculously. A man appeared all of sudden, Joseph of Arimathea, whose name appears only here in the Bible at the time of Jesus’ burial. He was a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God. He was a true believer and follower of Jesus, though secretly. He obtained courage seeing Jesus’ death on the cross and went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. He was bold enough to be defiled according to the Jewish ceremonial law, and went to a Gentile’s residence. He could risk anything at this time for the sake of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus was already dead and confirmed it from the centurion whose testimony must have been trustworthy, and gave the body to Joseph. Jesus was buried not by an obscure man, but by Joseph a prominent man. Jesus was buried on Friday before the Sabbath so that he might be in the tomb for three days as he promised. What providence!

In this passage, we see all sorts of sinners, wavering Pilate, joking guardian soldiers, indifferent and thoughtless soldiers, mocking passersby, and cynical sarcastic religious leaders. Yet there are those who had the fear of God under the cross. Thank and praise God for our Lord Christ Jesus who was flogged, mocked and crucified and cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He bore God’s whole punishment and the consequent separation and abandonment so that we might be eternally accepted into his presence and kingdom. May we keep this marvelous grace of our Lord Jesus in the immeasurable blessing of God and be true followers of Christ Jesus, cherishing the cross with the eternal perspective of life.