

## Jesus in the Electric Chair?

Mark 1:1 & 8:27-33, 15:37-39

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I want to begin by thanking a fellow named Tim Mackie for opening my eyes to some key stuff I get to share with you today. Thanks, Tim...

I don't know if you are familiar with "Old Sparky." "Old Sparky" was the name of the first electric chair used in America to execute people. If you've seen the movie "The Green Mile" then you have some idea what it was like, how a person was strapped into it and huge amounts of electricity coursed through their body until they were dead. Some years ago I got a grim, black and white drawing of "Old Sparky" and made small, laminated copies of it, about two inches wide and three inches high. I put these on strings and invited some high school students to wear them for a day. When people would notice them and ask what it was, the students would say "Well, it's an electric chair, for killing people." When further asked why they were wearing it they would say "Oh, it's a symbol of my religion." That answer, as you can imagine, led to some further questions, and the students had an interesting day.

Suppose we had a 20 foot high electric chair here in the front of church today? That would be interesting, to say the least. Perhaps much more than interesting. I was going to hang a banner with an electric chair on it, but a friend was distraught, shocked, and angry when he heard of it. Perhaps your reaction is similar. So I didn't do it, the banner plan died, or was executed. All I have is a blank banner.

The necklace electric chairs were, and a banner today would be, as you might imagine, substitutes for crosses. Crosses are pretty ubiquitous, found all over on buildings and in media and as jewelry. Not so electric chairs. The irony is that an electric chair is far more gentle than a cross. It was, in fact, historically, chosen as least awful out of 38 ways of execution studied by a commission in 1887. The electric chair, whatever it's shortcomings, was originally developed as a more humane alternative to execution by hanging. But humane is exactly what the cross was *not*. It was designed to torture one slowly to death. I could list a dozen ways in which the cross was more horrific than the electric chair is. Yet crosses are all over the place, because they don't cause anyone to pause or recoil in shock about an instrument of torture and death supposedly being a symbol of warmth and love and joy. So thoroughly has Jesus transformed the cross, in addition to its modern disuse, that you and I can barely access it's raw emotional power as an instrument of horror.

But when the gospel stories of Jesus were first written Paul called the cross and Jesus's death on it "a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Gentiles," that is, to non-Jews. The idea that the Jewish Messiah, indeed the very Son of God, would die such a shameful and horrific death, was an "it does not compute" kind of idea. We today have grown up with it and heard it celebrated countless times, such that we really can't grasp how crazy it seemed at first.

When people get old, as I will someday, they start talking about “when I was young” and current young people want to run for the hills. Those old people remember times before cell phones and computers, when people “computed” things with a pencil and paper and paid \$10 for a three minute phone call to California — on a phone attached to the wall — and the draft could force you to go to Vietnam and perhaps die — and a movie cost 35 cents and you could only see it in a movie theater, we walked three miles to school, uphill — both ways, — etc. For a young person it is a weird world to think of — a little like the world of Conestoga wagons and crossing the great plains on the way west — just something in a book. And that’s where we all are with the cross and crucifixion. At best we may have see the grim crucifixion in the movie “The Passion” or read about the details of crucifixion horror, but we are nowhere near the ordinary first century person who may well have personally seen people writhing in pain for hours or days while watching crowds mocked their slow death by torture.

This morning we want to look at the Gospel of Mark and see how Mark helps his first century readers come to grips with what was a shocking, sometimes indigestible or unbelievable truth for them to confront: that the crucifixion of Jesus, rather than a *problem* for him being God, was actually a sign of his divinity, a *proof* he was truly God. Perhaps imagining Jesus in an electric chair can help us to grasp, even to feel a little bit of the cross’s emotional force and scandal 2000 years ago. And after we see how Mark spoke then, we want to ask what that means for us, in our world, 2000 years later.

Let’s see what Mark does with this. In Mark 1:1, the very first verse, we see this simple sentence: “The good news, the “gospel” about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” It’s like one of those flash-bang grenades SWAT teams toss into a room before breaching it: KA-BOOM! Two explosive claims in one short, dramatic opening sentence. (The Messiah was the specially promised one sent from God whom the Jews had been awaiting for *centuries*. And the Son of God topped even that — not to mention being a challenge to the Roman Ceasar who was call the Son of God at that time.) Notice two things: First, this is the first and last and only time Mark will directly tell us what he thinks. The whole rest of the gospel he *shows* us what he would like us to know. (Like writing teachers advise their students to do so often: show, don’t tell.) Second, Mark gives us the two fulcrums on which his whole gospel story will depend: The two staggering claims of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, and Jesus as the Son of God.

Right away Mark plunges into 8 chapters of stories about all the different reactions and ideas of people about this unsettling Jesus — Jesus the wonder worker — Mark lists 18 miracles & alludes to many more — Jesus the brain blowing teacher — folks are “astounded: because He “taught with authority, not as the scribes.” People 2000 years ago varied, not unlike the spectrum of responses one might get today: Jesus is a great teacher, or just a legend, or God, or an avatar, an imposter or a fool, or a crutch, or a manifestation of the God or Christ consciousness in us all, or “I don’t know.” Well, Mark walks us through the following stories — OT Isaiah - “the Lord” in some sense. Baptismal voice from heaven - my beloved son — AHH, Son of God. Demon - holy one of God. Teachers of the law - a blasphemer, an insulter of God worthy of death. Pharisees - a hanger outer with the riff raff and even scum of society (as they saw it).

Some looking to accuse - a Sabbath violator, again worthy of death for that in Jewish law. Impure spirits - Son of God — AHA — Son of God — (note that this Son of God stuff comes from from heaven and hell, but no humans!). Jesus's family - crazy, "He's out of his mind." (Finally, a way in which I remind people of Jesus!) Teachers of the law from Jerusalem - possessed by Beelzebub (which means the Lord of the Flies). Disciples (after storm stilling) - Who *is* this guy? Demons called "Legion" - a whole gang of them - Son of the Most High God. Hometown crowd - Miracles, schmeeracles, this is just Mary's son! (a prophet without honor) Chapter 8 Jesus asks his disciples: Who do men say I am? The answer: Various folk - Elijah, John the Baptist, a prophet. Jesus says to Peter "Who do YOU say I am? Peter steps up and hits a homer - "The Messiah" — All right, Peter! [ Remember Mark 1:1 ! – the "Messiah." ] So Jesus explains, "Right you are, GOD showed you this, Peter — And now, understand, as Messiah I'm going to be rejected, suffer and die, and rise. "WHOA," says Peter - No no, not *that* kind of Messiah. I'm talking about the Roman smack down, clouds of glory kind of Messiah, the kind we Jews have been longing for for CENTURIES." One can read a first century BC quote where it speaks of a Messiah-king who will, quote, "destroy unrighteous rulers" and "purge Jerusalem from gentiles." (Pss Sol 17.22) *That's* what Peter was excited about. But Jesus says - "*Get behind me, Satan.*" Because he knows that as Messiah he must die.

Now the story turns from Galilee, where all this has happened, up in the north of Israel, to Jerusalem, where Jesus must die, and where his disciples and the world had to come to grips with a Messiah who comes *not to conquer but be crucified*. On the journey there Jesus keeps telling his disciples he must *die*. What in the flying burrito brothers kind of craziness was this? It was the wisdom of God but to most people, foolishness.

Well, that shows us how Mark develops his theme of Jesus as the *suffering* Messiah, a theme that naturally climaxes at the cross, but he also develops the idea of Jesus as the Son of God in a beautiful way. And we will see that they come together at the cross in a beautiful way at the end of Mark's story. Remember, these gospel writers are creative literary writers, sometimes just like the literature you may have analyzed (or suffered through) in English class. We can be grateful that just reading the Bible it can speak straight to our heart by the Spirit of God, but it can also yield rich fruit when we study it carefully. The Bible is like the ocean, wet and wonderful right at the top, but also with mighty depths. Both are wonderful, both are to rejoice in. So notice this: Mark first tells us the gospel is about Jesus, the Son of God. Then throughout the whole Gospel — until the very end, — no human character calls Jesus the Son of God. No, not Peter either. He calls him the Messiah, but not the Son of God. Demons, yes, they do call him "Son of God." Surprisingly, they have a clear inside track about who Jesus is — and it (almost, but unfortunately not quite) scares the hell out of them, if I may use that phrase appropriately here. No humans. As we used to say in my Bible classes, "Coincidence? I think not." Now notice this: The Gospel of Mark is structured into three parts — Jesus in Galilee, Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus *in* Jerusalem. In each of those three parts there is a key statement of Jesus as the Son of God.

1. In the first part of Mark's story, in Galilee, right off the bat in Jesus's baptism, a voice from heaven calls him "my beloved son," i.e., the Son of God. That's who's speaking from heaven, right? God.

2. In the second part of Mark's story, on the way to Jerusalem, at one point, Jesus takes three of his disciples up on a mountain and there he is transfigured into a shining superwhite figure, and has a conversation with Moses and Elijah — who have, by the way, been dead over 700 years. Nice trick if you can manage it. (By the way, do the gospels have great, wild stories or what?) Anyway, a voice comes from heaven — does this sound familiar? — and says "This is my son, whom I love." Right. The Son of God, again. (By the way, what do Jesus, Elijah & Moses talk about? Jesus's coming death in Jerusalem!)

3. But it really gets interesting in Jerusalem. Jesus is framed by a crooked Jewish court and condemned by a crooked Roman governor. He is beaten, spit on, whipped, mocked. Crowned with thorns and a purple robe on him to joke about him being a king. Then they strip him bare for more humiliation and nail him to a cross to die slowly, while over his head is a mocking sign calling him "King of the Jews." and a crowd catcalls and says to prove who he is by coming down off the cross. How ironic! *Here* is the Messiah, proving his true character and mission, *not* by coming down from the cross, but by *staying* on the cross. As an old saying puts it, "It was not the nails that held him to the cross, it was his love." *This* is the Messiah who was utterly counter intuitive, *against* the expectations and dreams of so many back in the first century.

The sky darkens for three hours as the earth itself goes into shock, and then there is an earthquake, and Jesus dies. But wait, there's more. Remember how in each of the first two sections of the gospel there was a testimony from heaven that Jesus is the Son of God, but *no humans* getting it? Our last Scripture today tells us what happens at the cross, one of the climaxes in the gospel. When he sees how Jesus dies, *the Roman centurion* says "Surely this was the Son of God." Wow. Finally a human gets it! Is it a Jewish scholar? One of the disciples? The ruling Jewish council? No, it is a Roman soldier who just executed Jesus. Mark announces at the very start that Jesus is the Son of God, but then in all Mark's gospel, the only ordinary human person who sees & calls Jesus the Son of God, who echoes the voice from heaven is right near the end of the gospel and it's a Roman soldier, a non-Jew, who sees it not *in spite* of Jesus's crucifixion, but because of it: the text says the centurion spoke as he did "when he saw how Jesus died." And thus Mark, in his creative literary way, invites his original readers to see it that way also. He invites them – and us – to see the stupendous irony that the mocking soldiers with purple robe and crown of thorns and King of the Jews sign, actually got it *right*. Jesus's suffering turns out to be not a stumbling block to his identity as Messiah and Son of God, but the very *proof* of it. Mark's two beginning and astounding claims are developed in two different ways but come together in climax at the cross. You can put your index fingers out to each side and bring them together in front of you as a cross to visualize what Mark does.

Friends, this morning we gather to worship and “cling” to that Jesus. But it is well if we try to remember what a shocking thing it was. And in doing so I invite you to reflect on four things:

First, remember the transforming power of Jesus. He could take an instrument of torture and make it the most widespread symbol of love on earth. If he can do that, do you think he can transform your broken and twisted and hurting heart? And do you think if you take up your own cross, as Jesus spoke of, or face your trials and failures and fears, do you think that God can also use that formatively? Yes, he can. Indeed, the transforming power of Jesus on the cross reminds us of hope yet to come. There is much that in this life that is *not* fully healed, but it is a trustworthy saying that “Earth has no sorrows that heaven cannot heal.”

Second, to reflect on — Be open to learning from unexpected places and people. It was *religious* people killing Jesus that day, but a non-Jewish Roman soldier executing Jesus whom no one expected to be their preacher that day. But there it is, and God still speaks to us in unexpected ways, through unexpected people. Whom might you overlook? Children, atheists, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, oooooold people, or young? Talk radio (or NPR), someone from another religion? In the Bible God once spoke through Balaam’s jackass. Surely that widens the field of those from whom you might learn.

Third, for reflection — Recognize what a unique and beautiful gift we have to share. People say all religions teach basically the same thing? How often I heard that in world religions class as I taught it for 15 years. But where will you find God becoming real man and dying on a cross for our sins?

Go ahead, look at Islam, for example - the second largest religion in the world, one out of 5 of all the people on earth follow it. It respects Jesus greatly but emphatically denies Jesus is actually God, and in its holy book, the Qur’an, it says (“They killed Christ not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them . . .” Q 4:157-8)

Look in Islam, or Hinduism or Buddhism — the giant religions of our globe, or any other religion. Find where God came down and became one of us and died a horrific death for our sins. You won’t find it. “Not a God has wounds but Christ alone.” If that is what we humans really need, there’s only one option available on the market: Jesus. We have received good news no one else has. There is much discussion of “privilege” in our culture today. Learning about Jesus is an incalculable privilege. Stir up gratitude for that and lift up thanks to God. And think of so many who *don’t* know that comfort. Millions, and millions, and millions, next door and around the world, do *not* know. As my Japanese teacher once put it poignantly, “I just never knew that God could love me, personally.” What a privilege and responsibility we have to share this good news. Sharing it ourselves, and through supporting others. For example, you here at Hope, as part of the CRC send me & my family to Japan for 15 years because less than 1% of Japanese know Jesus. And that matters deeply.

Fourth, for your final reflection — Pray for those wrestling with the cross. It may not be a scandal in the same ways as the first century, but oh, it still causes many to stumble, for it calls a person to give up their self rule, recognize their need, and kneel before Jesus and the cross. And autonomy, self rule, is a golden calf that looms large in our modern western world. “Jesus died for my sins” ? Yup, just plain primitive, sounds like snake handling and singin’ and swooning. Here it is as nicely expressed by a Wall Street hedge fund manager Chris Arnade, who speaks for himself and many others: “When I went to grad school for physics I spent six years studying the big questions . . . I embraced the belief that humans can understand and figure out our world, and that there was no question too big that we couldn’t solve, accepting an implicit arrogance in mankind’s ability to rise above our surroundings . . . I was not alone. Most of us in the front row [by which he means cultural elites] had decided . . . moral certainties in religion were suspect, and that all we could know or value was what science revealed to us to be quantifiable. Religion was often seen as an old, irrational thing that limited and repressed people . . . Getting there [to the idea of religion as true] requires a level of intellectual humility that I am not sure I have.” Pray for folks like this . . .

But there are also people who struggle with the cross for a different, nearly opposite reason. Some of us are here today. We worry, doubt, fear that we are not worthy of the cross, or that our repeated failures and twisted & broken insides and history are too much to be healed, or forgiven. But it is a trustworthy saying, says Paul, says God’s word to us: “Christ came into the world to save sinners.” Sinners like us who are tempted to despair. So I close with a word especially for you if this is a struggle of yours, a word which also reminds us of how unique the execution of Jesus was: Here are four simple lines from a poem by Edward Shillito. This was from the World War One era when many people struggled to come to terms with that war’s overwhelming death and suffering of millions. In his poem Shillito speaks directly to Jesus —

“The other gods were strong; but you were weak;  
They rode, but you did stumble to a throne;  
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but you alone.” . . .

Not a god has wounds, but you alone.  
Let us pray.

“Open our eyes Lord, We want to see Jesus  
To reach out and touch Him, And say that we love Him  
Open our ears Lord, And Help us to listen  
Open our eyes Lord, We want to see Jesus.” Amen.