

**WITNESSES OF THE DEATH OF JESUS**

Mark 15:39-47

**Intro:** Back in the 1850's J. C. Ryle who ministered in the Church of England, and whose writings have been greatly blessed by the Lord for the people of God down to the present day, wrote these words about the death of Christ:

The death of our Lord Jesus Christ is the most important fact of Christianity. On it depend the hopes of all saved sinners for time and eternity. We need not therefore be surprised to find the reality of His death carefully placed beyond dispute (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, Mark*, p. 349).

He wrote these words at the beginning of his commentary on the verses we will consider today. In this section of Mark where we have been considering the events which led up to the death of our Lord by crucifixion, we see that John Mark, in writing his account of the life and ministry of our Lord, was in full agreement. If the Lord merely fainted on the Cross and was later revived, as some have said, or if the Lord experienced anything short of real death, then we have no Gospel. The very nature of the Lord would be called in question, that is, His Deity, as would His teachings. We read back in Mark 10:45 that, as the Lord was teaching His disciples on one occasion, He said,

45 For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.

On another occasion the Lord said,

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep (John 10:11).

And then the Lord followed those words, with these:

17 Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.

18 No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father (John 10:17-18).

There is no question but that in speaking of laying down His life, He was speaking of His death, and that in speaking of taking it again, He was speaking of His resurrection from death.

We have also seen in our study of Mark's Gospel how repeatedly He spoke to His disciples about His death. The first record of this in Mark's Gospel is in Mark 8:31 after Peter's confession that he believed that Jesus

was the Messiah. I have mentioned this verse, and others like it, many times as we have gone through the Gospel of Mark. This is what we read in Mark 8:31:

And He began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, **and be killed**, and after three days rise again.

Not only does Mark tell us about the death of Christ, but so do Matthew, and Luke, and John.

This was the message of the Apostles. Paul in Romans 5:8 wrote:

But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, **Christ died** for us.

Later in that same chapter, Paul wrote:

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God **by the death of His Son**, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life (Rom. 5:10).

To the Corinthians Paul wrote in chapter 15, verse 3,

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that **Christ died** for our sins according to the Scriptures.

Often the Bible refers to the death of Christ without using the word *death* or some form of the verb *to die*. So when Paul spoke of the death of Christ being “according to the Scriptures,” that is, according to what was predicted in the OT Scriptures, he could have been referring to verses like Isaiah 53:4-5:

4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

To the Philippian church, Paul wrote of the Lord Jesus Christ in these words:

8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient **unto death, even the death of the cross** (Phil. 2:8).

The writer of Hebrews mentioned the death of Christ many, many times. Often when I sign my name to a letter or card I use two verses from Hebrews: Hebrews 13:20-21:

20 Now the God of peace, **that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus**, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the

blood of the everlasting covenant,

21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

The Apostle Peter taught the Jewish believers to whom he wrote:

18 Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers;

19 **But with the precious blood of Christ**, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The Apostle John taught that “**the blood of Jesus Christ His Son**, cleanseth us from all sin (1 John 1:7). And as he wrote to the seven churches of Asia in the book of the Revelation, a part of his greeting to them was, “Unto Him that loved us, **and washed us from our sins in His own blood . . .**” (Rev. 1:5).

So it is very, very important to believe that Jesus Christ died, really died. Most of the verses I have read to you are found in the NT, but the trail of Christ’s blood, so to speak, runs from Genesis through the book of the Revelation. If Christ did not die, and die in our place, taking our guilt upon Himself, and paying our debt to God, and paying it in full, then we have no salvation. That is how very important it is to believe that “Christ died for our sins.”

But to strengthen our faith, we not only have the testimony of Scripture, but in the Scriptures we have the witness of those who saw Him die, of those who confirmed that He had died, and of those even that buried His lifeless body. That is why John Mark wrote what in our Bibles are the last nine verses of chapter 15. You could find the witnesses yourself, but let me have the privilege of pointing them out to you this morning.

Remember that there were many other witnesses that John Mark could have written about, many who were not people who believed in Christ, some who hated Him, but hundreds, perhaps thousands, saw Him die.

## **I. WITNESS #1: THE ROMAN CENTURION (Mark 15:39).**

This was a military man. He was the commander of one hundred men, that is why he carried the title, “centurion.” Whether or not he was in

charge of the men who put the Lord to death, I can't say. Personally I believe that he was, but that is just a guess on my part. We are told that he "stood over against Him, which means that he stood right in front of the Lord as the Lord was hanging on the Cross. No one had a better view of what was going on than he did. He heard that last final cry of the Lord, and he saw Him die, and, in amazement and wonder, he admitted to himself, and those standing near him, heard him say, "Truly this man was the Son of God." Now it is not recorded that he said *the* Son of God. It could be translated that way, but it may have been that he said, "Truly this man was a son of God," or even, "a son of a god" (with a small g). God knew his heart, but we can't say for sure. But one thing is clear: this centurion had never witnessed a death like the death of our Lord. The centurion's statement surely meant, "This man should never have been put to death. We have made a terrible mistake in crucifying him." But there was no question but that it was too late to do anything about it because the One on the center Cross was dead! And it was his responsibility to be sure of that!

## **II. WITNESSES #2: Three ladies (Mark 15:40-41).**

Two of the three are mentioned again in verse 47. Her name appears eleven times in the four Gospels: three times in Matthew (27:56, 61); four times in Mark (15:40, 47; 16:1, 9); once in Luke (24:10); and three times in John (19:25; 20:1, 18). These same three women are mentioned in Mark 16:1. Mary Magdalene is mentioned again in verse 9 of Mark 16. And there it is mentioned that the Lord had cast out of her seven demons. Somehow the idea got out that she had been a prostitute, but there is nothing in the Gospels to support that idea. And so I hope if you hear anyone lay that charge on her, please correct them. The Magdalene means that she was from the town named Magdala which was on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee, three miles north of Tiberias. There have been many attempts to identify these women, but we can't be sure about any. Even "James the less" can mean that he was short in stature, or younger in age, or simply less important than the others. So says Gould on p. 296. He also infers that by comparing this passage with Matthew 27:56 it may be that Salome was the wife of Zebedee, and so the mother of James and John.

Verse 41 in our text indicates that there were also other women who followed the Lord, who ministered to Him in material ways, and who had come with the Lord to Jerusalem. But it is important to realize that John

Mark was citing these women as witnesses of the death of the Lord Jesus. John Mark, led by the Holy Spirit in his writing, was conferring a great honor upon these women as being reliable witnesses to the fact that their Lord, the Son of God, really died! Women had a great part in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. It probably was not possible for John Mark to mention them all by name. But starting with the mother of our Lord, we see how courageously they stood by the Lord, helpless as far as helping Him was concerned, but probably giving Him the prayer support that the Lord did not get even from His disciples. While then as now, the main burden for the Lord's work rests upon men, yet this does not mean that women have no ministry. They were very important in the ministry of our Savior. And let us have no sympathy with those who say that our Lord's relationship was anything different from the most godly fellowship.

But let me hurry on to:

### **III. WITNESS #3: Joseph of Arimathaea (Mark 15:42-46).**

We have not heard of him before, and we never hear of him again. The Apostle John tells us that Joseph was assisted by another Pharisee, a man we meet for the first time in John 3: Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. See John 19:38-42. (Read.)

Joseph was one of the Jews of the highest rank in Israel. But the word translated "craved" is a very common verb for making a request (αἰτέω), but it indicates that Joseph felt himself inferior to Pilate (so his attitude would have been proper), but the verb also indicates that this was a strong request, an indication of the will of Joseph, as opposed to an indifferent attitude on Joseph's part. He expressed his desire to Pilate in a way that Pilate would see how sincere Joseph was.

At this time the centurion was called in and asked if it was certain that Jesus was really dead. The centurion could not afford to lie to Pilate or his own life would have been in danger. But there was no possibility that the centurion would lie to Pilate. And so Pilate, assured that Jesus was dead, ordered that the body of our Lord be given to Joseph. This was done, and the scene was set for the resurrection of the Lord. Of course, all of this was unknown to Pilate. But it may be that such a hope was in the heart of Joseph. We cannot say. But the body of the Lord was carefully wrapped, and then placed in Joseph's own tomb. This was the

greatest thing that Joseph could do to show His love for the Lord.

The Holy Spirit must have recorded this to teach us that we never can really know where we are going to find other believers. Perhaps there are more true believers in Washington, D.C. than we know. As with Joseph, the Lord may have them at the right place in the right time. How amazing that two Pharisees buried the body of the Lord Jesus, and in the tomb of one of them.

But doesn't there seem to be something very strange about this whole incident? It is very wonderful to learn about Joseph and Nicodemus, but the question I am inclined to ask is, Where were the disciples? What were they doing? Were they hiding for fear of their own lives, that they might be the next to be crucified? That, of course, was a possibility. That is what makes the women look so courageous, because if they were identified as followers of Jesus, their lives could have been in danger. Even Joseph and Nicodemus were running a risk as to what might happen to them if and when the other members of the Sanhedrin found out what they had done. You would think that not the names of the women, nor the names of Joseph and Nicodemus would be prominent in making sure that the body of the Lord was properly cared for, but that it would be Peter and James and John, and probably Andrew. These are details that we cannot fill in. But it leaves us with some unanswered questions, doesn't it? We do know that when the Lord was raised from the dead, He did not appear first to His disciples, but to the women who had gone to the tomb to anoint His body. See Mark 16:14.

**Concl:** Do you ever stop to think what you might have done, or where you would have been, if you had lived in those days? It is easy for us to feel that we would have been more faithful to the Lord. But perhaps we will come closer to the answer when we ask ourselves, how readily do we even speak to others about the Lord Jesus Christ? How readily do we believe God's Word? We see boldness in what the women did. We certainly see boldness in what Joseph and Nicodemus did. But we have to be amazed when we ask about the disciples. May we be sympathetic with them, but let us ask the Lord to give us the strength to live for Him and to speak to others about Him. After all, there will be no other opportunities for people to accept Christ after death. It is trust Christ now, or never!