

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

by Steve Zeisler

In this series, we have seen that Jesus often asked questions not because he didn't know the answer but because he wanted to help his listeners understand themselves and God in a new way. However, the question we will examine in this message comes straight from the heart of Jesus, and it is a desperate plea for an answer that never came.

I once heard a professional actor describe the difference between a good actor and a great one. A good actor cues our response by his actions. For example, if the actor weeps, we know we are to feel sorrow. A great actor, however, invites us to see the world through his eyes so that we cannot help but feel pain, joy, or anger right along with him. The same is true of literature and preaching. The best communication happens not when you are instructed what you should think but when you find yourself carried away and persuaded by something bigger than you. In that light, we will consider Mark's account of the crucifixion.

Mark's gospel was written with a very clear perspective: the perspective of the apostle Peter. Biblical scholars are in wide agreement that the gospel of Mark was written by John Mark under the instruction of Peter, and that it is filled with Peter's memories and insights.

As a result, this gospel gives a very stark description of the execution of Jesus Christ. Mark's gospel was, almost certainly, the first composed of the four we have in the New Testament. It is fast-moving and unembellished, lacking lengthy interpretive commentary. Through Peter's eyes, we see that Jesus is utterly abandoned.

Throughout his ordeal we find our Lord bearing every weight alone. His friends, the leadership of the nation, the priests of his temple, and the Roman courts have all forsaken him. Midway through the crucifixion, the sun goes dark. The third stanza of Isaac Watts' hymn "At the Cross" reads,

*Well might the sun in darkness hide
And shut his glories in,
When Christ, the mighty Maker, died
For man the creature's sin.*

Even the sun refused to warm Jesus as he was dying. Ultimately, he was rejected by his own Father, and in lonely anguish he cried, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Mark's story is relentlessly hard. In Mark 14 we read that Peter boasted of his ability to protect Jesus, promising to stay by his side through whatever dangers might come. Yet Peter couldn't even stay awake to pray. When Jesus was arrested, gallant Peter ran off like a scared rabbit, and later, while Jesus was being beaten by the guards, Peter denied even knowing him. Peter was devastated by his own failure. Humiliated in front of those who had heard his bragging, he stood on the fringes and observed the remaining events of that night from a distance. Many details of Jesus' arrest, trials, and crucifixion that we read in the other gospels are missing from Mark's gospel because Peter stood so far back from the unfolding events, crushed in spirit, hating himself, fearing what would happen, seeing and hearing only bits and pieces.

The combined gospels record seven statements made by Jesus while he was hanging on the cross. Peter only heard one of them, that agonizing cry in the dark, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Father

himself had forsaken his Son. Heart-broken and hopeless, Peter left, more certain of his worthlessness than perhaps anyone else has ever been.

Later, of course, Peter heard the other stories. He learned that Jesus spoke a word of kindness to his mother at the foot of the cross and gave her into John's care. He heard that Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who executed him, and that during his trial he reached out to Pilate. However, when the time came for Mark to write his gospel, Peter gave his account of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion without these encouraging observations because that is how he experienced it.

Let's look at the events leading up to the crucifixion. Mark 14:43 begins the account of the arrest:

Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard."

First on the list of those who contributed to Jesus' death is a traitor. Sometimes, fictional accounts of Jesus' death make Judas out to be an earnest soul who was caught up in events and didn't mean to do what he did, but the New Testament shows no sympathy for Judas. He was a devil-hearted man who sold out the Lord for the price of a slave and betrayed him with a kiss of friendship. The world is filled with betrayers who, with knowledge aforethought, crush and hurt the people they love and sell out those who deserve loyalty. One of the toughest aspects of pastoral ministry is counseling those who have experienced a malicious betrayal of intimacy and love. Who crucified Jesus? First on the list was a betrayer.

Note verses 48 and 49. The crowd came with clubs and swords. Jesus looked at them and said,

"Am I leading a rebellion that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me."

Why did they come for him with swords and clubs in the middle of the night when no one else would see what they were doing? Because they were cowards. They couldn't face this righteous man in the daylight where they would have to admit to themselves what they were doing. The world is filled with cowards who never take a risk, who snivel and whine and do their deeds under cover of darkness. Who contributed to the death of Jesus? First a traitor, and then a community of cowards who were unwilling to let their deeds be seen in the light of day.

Verses 55 and 56 talk about Jesus' trial.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

Jesus' trial before the priests of Israel was a farce. There was no hint of impartiality. They called for the trial for the sole purpose of finding him guilty and executing him. The judges were corrupt and the witnesses perjured themselves. Sadly, corrupt courts and false witnesses and rigged justice, with all their capacity to destroy people, still exist today. Who killed Jesus? A people of false loyalty, cowardice, and corruption.

Verses 64 and 65:

They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

Now skip ahead to Mark 15:16:

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. 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 Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

The temple guards, high priests, and legionnaires of the Roman command gathered around the bound, weakened, defenseless Jesus. They spat on him, hit him, mocked him, and crushed a crown of thorns onto his head. There is a word for people who delight in crushing the weak: bullies. The world is full of bullies. Bullies abuse children and take advantage of the poor, elderly, and disabled. Neighborhood gangs that harass and dictators who use government power and weaponry to intimidate are bullies. Those who executed the Lord included traitors, cowards, corrupt officials, and bullies.

Mark 15:9-11 tells of Pilate's disdain for the priestly leadership who brought Jesus to him.

"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

Pilate knew there was nothing righteous in their words. They claimed to be acting on behalf of the people in requesting the execution of this dangerous rebel who blasphemed God. The truth is that they were envious of Jesus. They envied his prayers, his love for God, and the love that the people had for him. They were envious of a righteous man, and they hated him for who he was and for who they were not. Thus, amidst the traitors, cowards, corrupt officials, and bullies who crucified the Lord were the envious who would rather have him dead than face themselves.

Pilate held the power of Rome. He could have stopped all the pretense, but verse 15 says that he acted strictly for the sake of expedience.

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

How much injustice and cruelty has been done in the world for the sake of expediency? It is often too much trouble to do the right thing. People who know better can't be bothered to act righteously. It was easier to give them Barabbas. Many of the fictionalized stories portray Barabbas as an earnest revolutionary, a good guy at heart. In reality, he was a thug, a violent man who deserved this sentence, yet the crowd called for Barabbas rather than Jesus. Jesus was betrayed, bullied, and sacrificed for the sake of expediency.

The crowd was made up of amoral thrill seekers who wanted to see humiliation and violence. "Give us Barabbas and crucify the rabbi! He speaks so exaltedly of God--maybe there will be a show with angels. Maybe we'll see Elijah. Crucify him and let's see what happens!" Later, as Jesus hung from the cross, priests, criminals, and passers-by mocked him. Who crucified Jesus? What sort of people could do this? Friends, priests, Israel, Rome, elite, commoners, envious, apathetic, bullies, and cowards. Those who claimed moral purpose and those who were amoral to the core, bloodthirsty crowds, gambling soldiers, condemned criminals, a contemptuous governor, idle scoffers--the whole world crucified Jesus. No one spoke for him. There is not a kind word anywhere in the story that Mark tells us. There is no break in the relentless description of his humiliation and death. As the nails pounded into Jesus, the nails of emotion assaulted Peter. Why didn't you say something Peter? Why don't you call to him from a distance that you love him? Why don't you act? But he did nothing. Eventually darkness overtook the city, and for three hours Jesus suffered the agonies of hell. Finally, he called out to God, "Why have you forsaken me?"

Let's look now at the final portion of our text, beginning with Mark 15:20.

And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on

him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

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. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. 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!"

In the same way the chief priests and the teachers 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." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

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, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"-which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

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.

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And 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!"

Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

Again, notice that Peter does not hear the final words Jesus uttered. Jesus' final cry was, "It is finished." The sacrifice had an end. Peter heard a loud cry, but he didn't hear the words. Luke 23:46 tells us that Jesus also said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." But Peter didn't know any of that until later. As far as he knew, the scene ended with the centurion speaking a word of faith, women standing silently by to bury Jesus, and a temple curtain torn from top to bottom.

There was no gospel, that Friday, for Peter. There was only tragedy. Then came that glorious Resurrection Sunday, and Mark 16:7 makes an important observation. The women found the tomb empty, and they were told, "Go tell the disciples *and Peter* that Jesus is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." Tell everyone. Tell the disciples, and be sure you tell Peter specifically. His failure has a reversal. His Lord is alive again.

Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Catalog No. 4669
Mark 15:20-41
17th Message
Steve Zeisler
March 19, 2000
Updated: January 5, 2001

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1999 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.