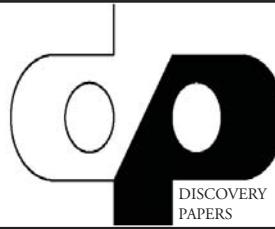


# LOVE STORY

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING  
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



Catalog No. 100808  
Mark 15:16-32  
47th Message  
Scott Grant  
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Bob Dylan may as well have been singing to us in  
“Ballad of a Thin Man”:

*Because something is happening here.*

*But you don't know what it is.*

*Do you, Mister Jones?*<sup>1</sup>

Yes, we've all experienced the sensation of not understanding whatever it is that's going on around us.

The players in the drama of the crucifixion were oblivious to the higher drama that was being played out. As we read Mark's narrative, though, we sense that there's more going on here than meets the eye—something that has very much to do with us. Mark tells the story succinctly but evocatively, hinting that the metanarrative of humanity, which began in the Garden of Eden, is reaching its climax.

Jesus acknowledged before the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council, that he was the Christ, the ultimate Jewish king. The Sanhedrin, hoping to persuade Pilate to execute Jesus, evidently translated his claim into language that the Roman governor could understand. The Jewish leaders—again, evidently—did not so much present Jesus to Pilate as having claimed to be the Christ but as having claimed to be the king of the Jews. Pilate was more likely to understand, and be threatened by, a king than the Christ, whatever he understood the Christ to be. Mark's narrative resumes after Pilate handed Jesus over to Roman soldiers for crucifixion.

## Romans mock Jesus

Mark 15:16-20:

**<sup>16</sup>The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. <sup>17</sup>They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; <sup>18</sup>and**

**they began to acclaim Him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” <sup>19</sup>They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him. <sup>20</sup>After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.<sup>2</sup>**

The Roman soldiers pick up where the Jewish leaders leave off. Just as the Jewish leaders took Jesus away to the house of the high priest, where the whole Sanhedrin gathered against him, the Roman soldiers take him away to the Roman palace and call together the whole cohort of soldiers (Mark 14:53-55).

The combination of Jesus' forlorn appearance and his claim to Jewish royalty make him an irresistible target for Roman sport. In the region of Judea, the Romans crushed and derided rivals to their rule. The soldiers charged with executing the bound and bloodied prisoner before them must be thinking something like, “Well, this wreck of humanity is about what you'd expect for the king of such a sorry lot.” They facetiously revere Jesus. The soldiers wrap him in a robe of purple, the color of royalty; place a crown of thorns on his head; hail him as the king of the Jews in a way that they would normally hail their own king, Caesar; and kneel before him as if they were bowing to a king. Jesus predicted that he would be enthroned at the right hand of God, but for now, at least, his enemies enthrone him in a degrading parody (Mark 14:62).

As the higher drama is being played out, it is no accident that Jesus wears a crown of thorns, because he is absorbing the curse that resulted from humanity's rejection of God. God told Adam in Genesis 3:17-19:

**Cursed is the ground because of you;  
In toil you will eat of it  
All the days of your life.  
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;  
And you will eat the plants of the field;  
By the sweat of your face  
You will eat bread,  
Till you return to the ground,**

**Because from it you were taken;  
For you are dust,  
And to dust you shall return.**

The Roman soldiers also beat him and spit on him, just like the Jewish leaders (Mark 14:65). This, we might imagine, is what the soldiers always wanted to do to a Jewish king. Mark implicates both Jews and Gentiles in the mistreatment of Jesus. Other New Testament writers implicate us all, because all of us have rebelled against God and because the Son of God was mistreated as a result (Romans 3:9-26).

When the soldiers finish with their fun, they strip Jesus of his “royal” garb and put his clothes back on him to indicate that he’s just a man—another man crushed under the boot of Roman power. They then get on with the business at hand.

Many today, like the Roman soldiers, consider Jesus to be—rather, to have been—simply a man. Perhaps he was a good man and a good teacher, they say, but his death means nothing more than the death of any man. Some today, like the soldiers, make sport of Jesus. More, however, make sport of faith in Jesus, whom they presume to be dead and gone. If we pay attention to the higher drama, however, we’ll appreciate that the death of Jesus defeats death itself: it overturns the curse. To dust shall we all return, says Genesis, but because of the death of Jesus, to new life shall we be raised, says the New Testament.

The soldiers, having had their fun with Jesus, now seek to profit from his death.

## **Soldiers cast lots**

Mark 15:21-26:

**<sup>21</sup>They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross. <sup>22</sup>Then they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. <sup>23</sup>They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it. <sup>24</sup>And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them to decide what each man should take. <sup>25</sup>It was the third hour**

**when they crucified Him. <sup>26</sup>The inscription of the charge against Him read, “THE KING OF THE JEWS.”**

When Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples, expressed belief that he was the Christ, Jesus told him, the other disciples, and a crowd, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8:34). Peter’s original name was Simon, but Jesus gave him the name Peter (Mark 3:16). Simon Peter boasted that he would rather die than deny Jesus, but when the pressure was on, he crumbled. In the place where we might expect Simon Peter, one of Jesus’ closest friends, we instead find another Simon, Simon of Cyrene. Simon Peter, it turns out, wanted nothing to do with taking up a cross at this point.

When Mark reports that the soldiers pressed Simon of Cyrene into service to take up the cross of Jesus, he is also evoking, again, the higher drama. If Simon Peter decides to sit this scene out, the Father sends another Simon, Simon of Cyrene, to carry the cross for his Son. That Simon of Cyrene, a Jew, hails from a North African city hints that the long-awaited regathering of Israel is under way (Isaiah 43:5-7, 54:1-3).<sup>3</sup>

Mark, who wrote in Greek, translates the name of the execution site, Golgotha, from Aramaic to Greek for his readers: Place of a Skull. But he leaves it at that, without going into the meaning of the name. Thus he lets us conjure our own horrifying images. Suffice it to say that Place of a Skull doesn’t sound like a spot you’d choose for a picnic. The way of the Lord leads Jesus to this place—this God-forsaken place. An early legend has it that Adam was buried where Jesus was crucified. Some paintings and stained glass windows of the crucifixion scene therefore depicted Adam’s skull at the foot of the cross. Whether true or not, it is a powerful picture of God’s answer to the sin of Adam. The death of God’s Son overcomes the death that comes from Adam’s sin, the cross of Christ being inserted into the skull of Adam.

At Golgotha, Jesus refuses a drink of wine and myrrh. In Gethsemane, he discerned that the cup of suffering was his to drink. He therefore refuses to drink from a cup that would have lessened the pain. In his final hours, Jesus will stay awake and feel the sharpness of the nails.

Literally, Jesus refused to “take” the wine-myrrh concoction, but the soldiers cast lots to decide which of them gets to “take” the clothing of Jesus. While Jesus refuses to lessen his agony, the soldiers figure out how to profit from it. All they hope to take away from Golgotha

is a few scraps of clothing. Mark alerts us to the higher drama with the first of several allusions to Psalm 22. David, the king from whom the Christ would come, said of his enemies, “They divide my garments among them, / And for my clothing they cast lots” (Psalm 22:18).

The charge against Jesus, that he is the king of the Jews, functions both as a joke and a deterrent. Pinning such a charge against Jesus gives the Roman soldiers another chance to laugh at their subjects, but it also tells them, in no uncertain terms, “Don’t mess with us. Take issue with our right to rule, and we’ll nail you to one of these crosses.”

If, however, the drama is being played out on a higher level, and if the kingdom of God is breaking into this world in the person of Jesus, then Jesus, in a sense, is guilty as charged. He is the king of the Jews. And if he’s the Christ, the ultimate king of the Jews, he’s also the king of the Gentiles. He’s king of the world. How is the king bringing in the kingdom? In a way that neither the Jews who handed him over nor the Gentiles who executed him could have imagined: by submitting to a brutal and degrading death.

Some today, like the Roman soldiers, imagine how they might profit from Jesus. Politicians who want nothing to do with Jesus, for example, shrewdly calculate how they can win the support of his followers. Others scheme to turn the faith of Jesus’ followers to their advantage by provoking and leveraging feelings of compassion and guilt. Tragically, all these politicians and schemers are after is a few scraps of clothing, so to speak. If we pay attention to the higher drama, however, we hear this from the Apostle Paul: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). If you believe in Christ, you become so identified with him, so close to him, that it can even be said that you wear him.

Beginning in verse 27, the narrative shifts from the Romans to the Jews.

## Jews mock Jesus

Mark 15:27-32:

**<sup>27</sup>They crucified two robbers with Him, one on His right and one on His left. <sup>28</sup>[And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And He**

**was numbered with transgressors.”]**<sup>4</sup> **<sup>29</sup>Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, “Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, <sup>30</sup>save Yourself, and come down from the cross!” <sup>31</sup>In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. <sup>32</sup>Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!” Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him.**

The word translated “robbers” in verse 27 would be better translated “insurrectionists” (*lestēs*). Barabbas, a *lestēs*, whom the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem chose over Jesus, was an insurrectionist (Mark 15:7, John 18:40). The charge against Jesus, that he is the king of the Jews, carries with it overtones of rebellion. To be the king of the Jews was a treasonable offense against Caesar, the emperor of Rome. Jesus, crucified between two insurrectionists, is thus depicted as the leader of a violent revolution. In another sense, Jesus is being crucified because he is not a violent nationalist. If he were a violent nationalist, the crowd that cried for the release of Barabbas would not have cried for the crucifixion of Jesus. Although Jesus is innocent of violent nationalism, much of Israel is guilty of it. As the king of the Jews, as the representative of his people, he dies in their place. Jesus dies the death of a rebel on behalf of rebels.

Earlier, James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples, asked Jesus, “Grant that we may sit, one of Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory” (Mark 10:37). When Jesus comes into his glory as the Christ, bringing with him the kingdom of God, James and John, like Peter, are nowhere in sight. Where we might expect to find two disciples, we instead find two brigands, “one on His right and one on His left” (v. 27). The disciples envisioned some sort of victory, perhaps hard-fought, but how can being nailed to a Roman cross be anything but defeat? At this point, the disciples want no part of this kingdom. If this is what sharing the reign of the Christ means, then James and John are thankful that Jesus didn’t grant their request.

Once Jesus is on the cross, the Jewish leaders, now joined by passers-by and even the two insurrectionists, resume their assault. Although the high priest accused Jesus of blaspheming God, Mark literally says that the passers-by were “blaspheming” Jesus. Jesus, though he dies as a criminal, is innocent, but the passers-by are guilty. By wagging their heads to ridicule Jesus, they repeat the

actions of David's enemies (Psalm 22:7). Both the passers-by and the leaders facetiously suggest that Jesus should use his supposedly supernatural abilities to come down from the cross. The Christ, in the eyes of most of Israel, was supposed to rid the land of Roman crosses, not die on one of them. A crucified Christ was a contradiction in terms. Jesus failed to live up to the expectations of his countrymen, and they find in him an outlet for their bitter frustrations.

If Jesus didn't die the way he died, he wouldn't have died for the sins of humanity. The way of humanity is to retaliate, if only in one's heart—to return hatred for hatred, curse for curse, insult for insult. You send your suicide bombers to me; I send my tanks to you. I send my tanks to you; you send your suicide bombers to me. That's how evil stays in circulation. What does Jesus do? The apostle Peter comments, "And while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 1:23). The Romans and Jews hurl their abuse at him, but it does not return. Instead, as he hangs on the cross, he absorbs their abuse into the purity of his being.

## The last temptation of Christ

As the king of Israel, the Christ, Jesus dreams of gathering Israel, not to mention the entire world, and bringing it back to God, beginning with Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37, John 11:52, 1 Peter 3:18). The people he gathered would comprise the new and living temple of God. But the building project appears doomed right from the start. Jesus' identity and vocation are being challenged as he hangs on the cross. He hears the taunts not just with his ears, but with his soul. Israel, represented both by its leadership and the populace, stands at his feet—not following but ridiculing. When he looks to his right and left, where he would expect to find his friends, he instead sees two angry brigands. His countrymen propose that he come down from the cross and get on with it. To them, the suggestion is a joke. To Jesus, it is as real as the nails in his hands. He could have called on more than twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53).

Everything about this scene screams for Jesus to come down from the cross. His friends have abandoned him, the Romans are killing him, and his countrymen are mocking him. And God? Jesus listened hard for the voice

of God and followed it to this place, this God-forsaken place, this place where even God seems strangely absent. At this moment, a possible conclusion emerges: it must be terribly wrong for Jesus to be hanging on this cross. Perhaps his dream is being drained from him with each drop of blood. Perhaps the best course of action, if there is any hope for the world, is to come down from the cross. Then he could proceed with his mission of gathering the world and building God's new temple.

Think for a moment about the times when you hear that awful voice within that threatens something you consider central to your identity and vocation. You know the voice. It goes something like this, "You're not much of a man, are you?" "You're not much of a woman, are you?" "You're not much of a parent, are you?" "You're not much of a manager, engineer, doctor, bricklayer, are you?" When you hear the voice, it demands that you prove it wrong.

Jesus hears the voice. It taunts him relentlessly: "Come down from the cross!" Scholar N.T. Wright sees a parallel with the legend of Odysseus:

*He is on his way back from the Trojan war, sailing from one danger to another. And one of the dangers he has to pass is the island where the Sirens live, singing their song of intense beauty and exquisite though deadly power. Odysseus is warned that no man who hears it can resist it, and that all who obey the lure end up dead on the shore. So he has his men stop their ears with wax and tie him, with his ears open, to the mast of the ship, with their only orders that if they perceive him trying to tell them to loose him they will tie him tighter. So Odysseus comes within sound of the Sirens' voices, and the strange longing surges through him so that he is in an agony of desire to obey, to yield; and his deaf sailors, seeing him struggle to be free, simply tie him tighter. He experiences to the full the desperate agony of listening to the song and of being unable, through his own prior decision, to do what it bade him. I see him in my mind's eye tied there, his arms stretched out to either side, lashed to the crossbeam of the mast, with his overwhelming longing to yield to the lovely voice held firmly in check by his determination to remain obedient, a determination already effected in his orders to his men. Jesus had no men to whom he could give such orders. The orders all came, and continued to come, from within himself.<sup>5</sup>*

What does the king of Israel do? He hears the sweet song of the Sirens, but he doesn't leave the cross.



## Jesus stays on the cross

The chief priests and scribes, mocking Jesus as the king of Israel, promised to “see and believe” if Jesus came down from the cross, but Jesus said his enemies had eyes and ears, but couldn’t see or hear (Mark 4:11-12). The Jewish leaders, like everyone else on the scene, are blind and deaf to the higher drama that is being played out before them.

The passers-by mock Jesus as one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it. They have no idea that Jesus would rise three days later to build a new and better temple comprising living stones (1 Peter 2:5). If he comes down, what kind of temple is he left with? That shell of a building in Jerusalem that God’s people co-opted for their own corrupt purposes. The passers-by who are mocking him would not benefit from such a temple. So he stays.

Both the passers-by and the leaders suggest to Jesus that he save himself, but if he saves himself, he wouldn’t be saving them. Jesus practices what he preaches: “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it” (Mark 8:35). The leaders want him to come down from the cross “now” so that they might believe in him, but if he comes down now, their faith in him will mean nothing. So he stays. He has proved to be such a disappointment that his countrymen abuse him mercilessly at his weakest moment, but he stays. He stays for them. Even them.

If we pay attention to the higher drama, we’ll realize that we’re part of it. The insecurity, anger, and hostility of the Roman soldiers, the two rebels, the passers-by, and the Jewish leaders are also in us. We, too, hurled our abuse at Jesus. The sins of all of us buffeted him. We hurl our abuse at him, but it does not return. In Stuart Townend’s song, “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” he sings:

*Behold the man upon a cross  
My sin upon his shoulders  
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice  
Call out among the scoffers  
It was my sin that held him there  
Until it was accomplished  
His dying breath has brought me life  
I know that it is finished*<sup>6</sup>

Some today are similar to those at the scene of the

crucifixion. They don’t want Jesus to leave the cross and prove himself, of course; they want him to leave the first century, prove himself, and fight their battles for them. Like those at Golgotha, they assume that what they’re asking for is impossible and they therefore dismiss Jesus. If we pay attention to the higher drama, however, we know that Jesus will not prove himself in such a manner because that’s not what those who demand such proof really need. What they need—what we all need—is faith to believe that Jesus has already prevailed in the battle we needed him to fight: the battle against Satan, sin, and death; the battle he fought and won on the cross. We need to believe that Jesus died the death of a rebel in behalf of rebels—us, who rebelled against God.

## Something’s happening here

What keeps Jesus on the cross? It isn’t the nails. Michael Card sings:

And why did it have to be a heavy cross he  
was made to bear?  
And why did they nail his feet and hands?  
His love would have kept him there.<sup>7</sup>

What keeps him on the cross? It’s love. It’s love for you. Rising from within Jesus is love for you so intense in its beauty that it overpowers the song that begs him to leave. He wanted to gather you to God and enfold you into his temple. Jesus finds the temptation resistible because he finds you irresistible. He stays on the cross for you. Even you.

Yes, when Jesus was crucified, more was going on than meets the eye—something that had very much to do with us. The Roman soldiers, the rebels, the passers-by, and the Jewish leaders were oblivious. As the higher drama was played out, Jesus stayed on the cross for them, but they were blind and deaf. Jesus stayed on the cross for you. Something’s happening here. Can you see? Can you hear?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bob Dylan, “Ballad of a Thin Man” (New York: Colombia Studios, 1965).

<sup>2</sup>Literary structure:

A Soldiers took him away into the palace (16)

B They dressed him up in purple (17)

X They mocked him as King of the Jews (18-19)

B’ They took the purple robe off him and put his own garments on him (20a)

A’ They led him out to crucify him (20b)

C They literally “brought” Simon to bear his cross and brought Jesus to Golgotha (21-22)

D He would not take wine mixed with myrrh (23)

D’ They cast lots for what each man should take (24-25)

C’ The inscription of the charge: the King of the Jews (26)

E They crucified two robbers with him (27)

F Passers-by hurled abuse at him (29-30)

F’ High priests and scribes mocked him in the same way (31-32a)

E’ Those who were crucified with him were also insulting him (32b)

<sup>3</sup>Simon is a Jewish name. He may have been in Jerusalem for the Passover, but more likely he was living in Jerusalem, in that he was “coming in” from the country. The fact that Mark mentions the names of Simon’s sons suggests that the family was known to Mark’s readers. Convicted criminals who were being crucified often were forced to carry the crossbeam to the site of execution. Jesus, having been beaten by the Jewish officers, may have been too weak to do so.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew 15:28, which appears in later manuscripts, was in all likelihood not part of Mark’s original work.

<sup>5</sup>N.T Wright, *The Crown and the Fire* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 38.

<sup>6</sup>Stuart Townend, “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” (Kingsway’s Thankyou Music, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>Michael Card, “Why” (Navarre Corp., 1987).