

A Strange Death & Strange Witnesses

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Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0 : 00] You can take your Bibles once more and turn with me to Mark chapter 15. We just sang of Jesus taking the highest station in glory.

! Well, here we do see him lifted high, but it's upon the cross in his suffering and death. Mark chapter 15, we'll begin reading in verse 33.

Hear God's word yet again. 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. 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.

[1 : 16] 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. Well, this event, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, is absolutely necessary for our salvation.

There is in Christianity nothing more important. Because without death for him, there is no life for us.

No atonement. No forgiveness of sin. Only the fearful expectation of God's judgment of his enduring wrath forever. Man has sinned.

[2 : 23] Man must suffer and die. For the wages of sin is death. Man must die. And so sin came into the world.

And with sin, death came into the world. And it's because of this that death has come to all men. Because all have sinned.

All have sinned in Adam, our representative, when he sinned. For by the trespass of the one man, Adam, death reigned through that one man.

And what we're seeing this morning is that even so, victory over death came by one man. Jesus Christ. And came by his death in our place.

Romans 5.19 says, For justice through the disobedience of the one man, Adam, the many were made sinners. So also through the obedience of the one man, Jesus, the many will be made righteous.

[3 : 27] So what was lost by the disobedience of Adam will be reclaimed by the obedience of Christ, the last Adam. It was Adam's disobedience that brought us all under condemnation and death.

And it was Christ's obedience that freed his people from that condemnation and made us right with God. Now what was that obedience that accomplished that for his people?

Well, it was his perfect obedience to every commandment of God. Children, he never disobeyed his parents. He never lipped off to mom. He always obeyed. Tempted in every way like us, yet without sin.

It was 33 years of perfect obedience. But then that 33 years of perfect obedience was capped off by the hardest obedience of all.

As Paul says in Philippians 2:8, he was obedient unto death. Even the death of the cross. And it was that death on that cross outside of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago where Jesus was condemned instead of his people and died the death that we deserve to die under God's wrath and condemnation.

[4:51] And it was that obedience unto the death of the cross that has freed his people from condemnation and has made us right with God forever. Hallelujah.

Hallelujah. What a Savior. What a death. And so that's what our focus has been. And it continues to be this morning.

It's of the utmost importance to us. And that's why we're slowing down in our study of Mark's gospel. Indeed, all four gospels slow down when they come into this last week of our Lord's life and spill more ink on his sufferings and his death than they do on any other aspect of our Savior's life.

And so this death, as gruesome as it is, it has a magnetic attraction for every believer in Jesus.

We're not quick to want to leave this theme, are we? Oh, that old rugged cross so despised by the world has a wondrous attraction for me.

[5:58] For it was on that old cross Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify me. The beautiful, terrible cross.

I wonder, are you caught in the magnetism of Christ crucified? Does this theme warm your heart and pull you in to where you're lost with wonder, love and praise and consecration to him?

If not, it's a sign you're not ready for heaven yet, because this is the great theme of all the songs in heaven. Worthy is the lamb that was slain.

Slain, it's the slain lamb of God that is receiving adoration and praise even now. And we who know him one day will add our voices to those in heaven above.

The cross, the death of Jesus Christ. So we've seen his suffering. We're now looking more particularly at his death itself. Two points this morning. A strange death and strange witnesses to his death.

[7:09] So first of all, a strange death. You remember how Jesus wet his mouth on the sponge that was stuck to him on the stick, and his tongue had been stuck to the top of his mouth, and he freed that and swallowed to clear his voice because he wanted everyone there that day and you and me to know what his last words were.

And then verse 37, Mark tells us, with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. Now, Matthew and Mark do not tell us what the loud cry was.

Luke and John do tell us, and what they tell us is that there were two parts to his loud cry. John records the first part, to tell us that there were two parts to tell us that there were two parts to the top of his mouth.

And then verse 37, Mark, finished. It's finished. And Luke records the last part of his loud cry. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

And when he had said this, he breathed his last. Now, we know this was a unique death. There was none like it. Never will be another like it.

[8 : 21] It was an atoning death because Christ died for sins and brought in an everlasting righteousness. It was a substitutionary death, for it was the righteous dying for the unrighteous.

But what do I mean by a strange death? Just this, that there's a strangeness about the way that he died. For after saying in a loud voice, it is finished.

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. With that, he breathed his last. He took his last breath. He didn't take another. And his spirit was gone like that.

But not like the rest of man at death, whose spirit is taken from them. Jesus hands his human spirit back to his heavenly father.

Into your hands I commit my spirit. Again, John, who was there at the cross, adds further commentary in chapter 19 and 30 of his gospel.

[9 : 28] When he had received the drink, Jesus said, And with that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. He handed it over.

And I think there's something intentional being shown here between the way that Jesus died and the way that most people die. All others die. Their spirit is taken away.

Jesus gave up his spirit in a way that we do not. Matthew says something similar in Matthew 27, 50. When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

It's a different word in the Greek, but it means he yielded it up. He let it go. He sent it away. He handed it over to his father.

Now, I'm told that crucifixion often lasted much longer than six hours, which is all that Jesus hung on the cross, or at least was alive while he was on the cross.

[10 : 31] Some people could last up to, some men up to a day or two days. But before they eventually died, they most usually would first lose consciousness.

And that could be because if they had no more strength to push up, to take the tension off of their lungs and be able to get a breath of air, perhaps insufficient oxygen was the cause of blacking out.

And then later dying. But not Jesus. He goes from speaking with a strong, loud voice to breathing his last and he's gone.

Just that quick. It's like he was in control of his death. As if it was a voluntary, deliberate act of his will, handing his spirit over into the hands of his father.

Nobody else dies like that. And so, you see why I speak of this death as being strange. There's something of mystery here, I believe.

[11 : 40] The Roman centurion thought so too. The one in charge of the death squad that day had seen many men die of crucifixion, no doubt. But none to die like this man died.

And it all reminds us of what Pastor Colin read for us last Sunday evening at the Lord's table from John chapter 10. It was just four or five months before Jesus' death.

And this is what he said. Verses 14 to 18. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep. And my sheep know me. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me.

But I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down. And authority to take it up again.

[12 : 46] And this command I received from my Father. And Jesus was obedient to his Father's command. But not once or twice, but four times.

It's almost like Jesus is making a point here. That his life was ultimately not taken from him. But that he laid it down of his own accord.

His death was such that makes clear this voluntary nature of his death. His life was not forced from him by the Romans, by the Jews, not even by his heavenly Father.

Jesus was given special authority from his Father both to lay that life down and to take it back again.

A unique authority. Has anyone ever been able to take their life back again? No, only Jesus. And the same authority with which God gave him to take it back again, God gave him to lay it down.

[13 : 49] Further indication of the strangeness is seen when Joseph of Arimathea went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. You just see it down in verse 44 of our text in Mark 15.

Pilate was surprised. What? What? Surprised to hear that he's already dead. The other two thieves are still living. Still alive.

So summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. Tell me, is it so? It's a bit strange. And when he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.

Well, the Jews didn't want dead bodies of cursed men left on the crosses because of the special Passover Sabbath that was about to begin at sundown.

So the soldiers, with the permission of Pilate, hastened the death of the two thieves by breaking their legs with a hammer. And that meant they couldn't push up and get air, and they would more sooner, more soon die.

[14 : 53] But John records, as they were doing that, and they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead.

That's the reoccurring thing. Pilate's surprised. Is he already dead? Yes, he is, says the centurion. Now the soldiers find that he's already dead.

No need to break his legs so that not a bone would be broken as scripture had prophesied. And instead, one soldier just takes his spear and gives a jab up into our Lord's side.

And blood and water flowed out. Also fulfilling the scriptures, they will look on him whom they have pierced. So I say the strangeness of this death was the way our Savior died.

By dismissing his spirit, laying it down for his sheep that loved to wander. That he might heal us from our wandering. He loved us freely.

[15 : 57] He died for us willingly. So that we might sing, I'll live for him who died for me. Did he die that willingly for me? Did he give up his spirit for me?

Then let me give myself up for him. Now it was a strange death for other reasons too. Namely because of its accompanying circumstances.

And we'll consider several. And now we're into the second main point of strange witnesses to the death of Jesus. And the first of these is told us here in verse 38.

The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Now that's strange. The moment Jesus died here, the curtain was torn there.

There's clearly a connection. Matthew says Jesus gave up his spirit. At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

[16 : 55] The earth shook and the rocks split, Matthew says. Now we'll return later to the first witness of the torn veil. But here we're introduced to a second strange witness accompanying his death.

A sudden earthquake shaking the ground, tearing the rocks in pieces. And we're right to refer to this as an act of God, right?

This is an act of God. Who in providence exercises a control over all his creatures. Inanimate and animate.

In all their actions, all the time. Did the earth split? God's hand was behind the earthquake, the rocks splitting.

And so Jesus dies in the world's eyes as the biggest loser. The biggest nobody. Helpless with nobody wanting him.

[17 : 51] Not even God who didn't bother to come and rescue him from the cross. And God responds by shaking the earth as if to differ with man's opinion of his own son.

No, this was no loser. This is the most important event in all of human history. The death of my son. On behalf of the salvation of an innumerable number of sinners.

sinners. Now, God's using the creation itself to testify then to the significance of this death on Golgotha.

It's an absolutely unique death from all other deaths. People are dying all the time, but when have you heard of a death like this? The very creation responding to its maker's suffering and death.

An element unique to this event. We've already seen the sun refusing to shine for those three hours when Jesus is bearing the wrath of God from noon till three.

[18 : 58] And then at three o'clock, the sun comes out again and Jesus makes his loud cry of victory. It's finished. Into your hands I commit my spirit. And he takes his last breath and immediately there's this earthquake.

And in the temple, the veil is being torn in two. This sort of stuff just doesn't happen. at people's death. The timing is too precise.

The living God of creation is speaking and he's getting the world's attention. I wonder if he has your attention. Is this event the most important event to you?

That the son of God was dying under his father's wrath, not for his own sins, but for the sins of his people.

Does that mean anything to you? Does it mean everything to you? Hebrews 2.14 and 15 tells us one reason this ought to be very important to you, Christian, in a very personal way.

[20 : 06] It says, since the children, talking about the children of God, since the children have flesh and bones, he too shared in their humanity. Why? So that by his death, not by his resurrection, by his death, he might destroy him who holds the power of death.

That is the devil. And free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. Have you found this death of Jesus to be the funeral of your fears of death?

Has his death given you confidence in the steady approach of your own death? Has it enabled you to look death squarely in the face, whether it arrives this afternoon or another 20 years, 50 years from now, to look it in the face and say, where, O death, is your sting?

Where, O grave, is your victory? The power or the sting of death is sin. And the power of sin is the law that condemns us to eternal damnation.

But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. He gives me the victory through my Lord Jesus Christ. Because this very death of deaths is the death of death in the death of Jesus Christ, as John Owen said.

[21 : 37] This is the death of death. He died the death for sin that we might not have to die. That death for sin. And I'm speaking about that death under God's wrath and condemnation.

That death as the penalty and punishment for our sins. No, that death has been died for us once for all outside of Jerusalem when Jesus, our substitute, died in our place.

And his death has forever changed the experience of death for every believer in Jesus. The weapon of death has been ripped from Satan's hand. That weapon with which he held people in fear of death all their lifetime.

We've been freed from that bondage into the fear of death. A death that would have drug us in our sin before the Almighty God to be punished forever by him.

Oh, but now in Christ, death has been defanged. Its stinger is gone. The worst death can do to us, brothers and sisters, is to usher us into the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, our loving Savior.

[22 : 42] Death is now but my entrance into glory. No wonder Paul could say, for to me, to live is Christ but to die is gain. It is better by far than earth here, than life here.

Death had lost its sting. Satan has lost his weapon of fear. And all because of the death of Jesus Christ in the place of his people. Sometimes I think we think that the victory over death was only won at the empty tomb.

And we're coming up on that season and we're going to emphasize the victory over death at the empty tomb. But Hebrews 2, 14 and 15 locates the victory over death on the cross when Jesus suffered death under God's wrath that we would have suffered and the way it changed death forever for every believer in Jesus.

Drink in the comfort of it. As we come to the cross again and we see him breathe his last. It is finished. What's finished? My fear of death. It's gone. It's gone. So there's the earthquake.

There's the rent. The torn veil. The third accompanying sign in Testament witnessed to Christ's death is given by Matthew. And he says the tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.

[24 : 08] They came out of the tombs and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. Uncle Joe you're back. Aunt Sarah you've been gone a long time.

Can you imagine? Here's a foretaste. Here's a preview. A preview of the last day when Jesus returns.

He'll make a shout that the graves will open and the dead in Christ will rise first then we who are still alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Therefore comfort one another with these words. That day is coming and Jesus gave a foretaste of it. The message is clear. God's holy people have eternal life not because of any holiness of themselves.

They have eternal life because of Jesus' death at Calvary. As Jesus is dying here they come to life there. There's a connection here and we're meant to see it.

[25 : 20] That doesn't happen with any other death. When someone dies it brings someone out of the grave. But it did at our Savior's death. What we owe to the death of our covenant head Jesus Christ.

Life now more abundant and free and then eternally with our Savior. These are three strange witnesses but they're the witness of creation as it were.

They're the witness of God as to his son and his own opinion of him the importance of his death. But fourth we have a very unlikely witness to Jesus Christ.

It's the centurion overseeing the crucifixion. Verse 39 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.

Now this man had a front row seat all day. Think what he's seen and heard. Well he's seen it all. He's seen his men nail him to the cross hoist him up.

[26 : 31] He's heard the seven words of Jesus from the cross. The seven different sayings of Jesus. But we're told that what he found convincing was hearing his cry and seeing how he died.

He'd seen many men die on crosses. It was his job. You go into job to work tomorrow men he went to work to crucify people. He'd seen men die but never one like this.

The strange darkness at noon that never happens. Jesus' cry of dereliction my God my God he's calling on his God.

And then the lifting of the darkness and Jesus' loud cry it is finished father into your hands I commit my spirit.

He's talking to God as his father as if he's his son. And as soon as he breathes his last it's like his father responds shaking the earth breaking the rocks in pieces.

[27 : 52] He's convinced he's convinced surely this is the son of God. He's convinced that what men were mocking that day is the true truth.

They laughed and mocked at his claim to be the son of God and he's convinced he surely must be the son of God. And it's like if Jesus owned people the Jews will do nothing but mock Jesus claim to be the son of God then God will raise up a witness for his son from a Gentile Roman centurion that looked over death squads and he will be the witness to my son behold my son in whom I'm well pleased surely he was the son of God.

Perhaps this man was converted perhaps he became a valuable witness to the gospel writers to know what happened at Calvary these seven sayings that we had he heard them all we don't know we'll have to wait for heaven perhaps he was the first fruits of the cross among the Gentiles which many more would come later like you like me surely have we not confessed that Jesus is the son of God perhaps this was the first Gentile after his crucifixion to confess it well that's the I say the strange and unlikely witness to Christ and now lastly fifth are the witnesses of the women verses 40 and 41 some women were watching from a distance and there are three of them named 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 now what what's a bit strange about these witnesses!

is that a woman's testimony was not allowed in a court of law so her testimony doesn't matter so don't bother bringing her word in that's the way society was in this day and yet here they are listed as witnesses to Christ's death the most important event in human history and they're found in all four gospel accounts these women that in itself has a ring of the divine for the four gospels because if it was just men writing the gospels they wouldn't have added women as witnesses for sure their witness was worth nothing in the day and age but the holy spirit says no I want these women to be recorded as witnesses of my son to verify the truthfulness of his death

[31 : 16] God honors them for their faithfulness to his son they followed him and his band around caring for his needs and when men had forsook him and fled and only John of all the apostles at least is mentioned at the cross we ask where are the men they seem to be missing in action but here are the women the fairer gender showing a courage that should shame the men they served him in life they are still standing with him in death identifying with him and one of them is Mary Magdalene out of whom he cast seven devils and she like the others had received so much from the Lord Jesus that she gladly served him I will serve him why because

I love him he has given life to me what was her life before Christ in control by seven demons what was your life before Christ a slave to Satan no less thinking you're free serving yourself doing what you want that's exactly the chains by which he held you but oh look at her now she's free what does she use her freedom to serve the one who set her free so having honored him God honors these women in all four gospel accounts as his witnesses to Jesus death and he also gives them the honor of being recorded as some of the earliest witnesses to his glorious resurrection as we'll see in the next chapter just three days later sisters know that if nobody else knows about your service to

Christ Jesus does and Jesus is pleased with your service and will honor you for your service they're in the home they're in your neighborhood they're in your relatives here in the church he is not unjust he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you've helped his people and continue to help them so these are the strange witnesses to this all important death the torn veil the earthquake the dead coming to life the Gentile centurion the women and even the crowd that day as Luke records when all the people who had gathered to witness this site saw what had taken place they beat their breast and went away aware that something fearsome had taken place that day it was important that this most important death had witnesses eyewitnesses as

Paul could say to that Agrippa I believe it was these things were not done in a corner hidden away in some little corner of the earth where nobody saw it now you're making this no no this was done in wide open along the road going into Jerusalem many passers by mocking the Savior they saw it the crowd they were there and these eyewitnesses are written down and the people who read the first accounts of Matthew Mark Luke and John they could have said okay let's let's go visit Mary Magdalene let's ask her did Jesus really die on a cross let's go ask Salome let's see if we can find that Roman centurion these who gave witness to this awesome event God wanted witnesses and he raised them up from the creation from the Gentiles from women that were despised in their day because this event must not be forgotten have you given it that importance in your life look at the ends to which

God went to raise up witnesses! Have you heard the witnesses? Have you heard what they're saying not just well there's another death this is the death and if you put your trust in the Savior it will change the way you die!

[36 : 01] you will die under his smile and be received into his loving arms way to face the wrath of him who sits upon the throne crying for the mountains and rocks to fall upon you and to hide you from the wrath of God and him who sits upon the throne what a death oh that you would flee to this Christ he lives yes he rose three days later and he received sinners let's come back to the one strange witness that Mark mentions the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom the very moment Christ died the direction of its tears from top to bottom it's an act of God from above just like salvation salvation is not man trying to reach God with his religion no salvation is God reaching down

God coming down in Christ to save man it's a top to the bottom salvation and even the tearing of the veil is God's act the meaning of it is clear the way for sinners to come to God is wide open now this takes us to the Old Testament the most holy place of the temple was the inmost sanctuary where God dwelt with his people on earth his dwelling place his earthly dwelling place where he manifested his presence on earth and that thick curtain blocked anyone from going into the most holy place and the message of that was stay out keep your distance you're sinful I am holy you cannot come near to me or you will die only the high priest can come and only once a year and never without the blood of a sacrifice slain what's

God saying in the old he's saying I will only dwell with sinners on the basis of a life given blood shed and a life given only on the basis of a sacrifice will I the holy one be able to with sinful people and it was a very and so God did not forgive and remove sins by these animal sacrifices in fact that's why they had to be made over and over and over it was a reminder that they've not yet been taken away and they all pointed to the fact that God will provide the lamb one day that will actually deal effectively with sin that's why the priests were constantly making blood sacrifices every morning and evening in fact this very Friday afternoon at three o'clock found them at it again Josephus tells us three o'clock was the time for the evening sacrifice and so these priests are in the courtyard of the priests and they're going about their work they're slitting the neck of the lamb removing the blood and preparing the animal for sacrifice and meanwhile a little ways outside the city gates

God's sacrificial lamb is wetting his lips they might shout it is finished into your hands I commit my spirit and at that moment these priests hear a tearing sound to their horror they turn and they look and they see that the way into the most holy place has been opened and they are now exposed to the presence of God and they're not ready they're not prepared for this but God is putting his world on notice that the one and only sacrifice for sin that could do away with sin has been made outside the city gates and that has forever changed a sinner's approach to God it's no longer stay away the torn veil now says come come sinner come hear hear the torn veil calling you come sinner come

I've torn that veil God is saying from top to bottom and when you come you can come with confidence of being received I turn none away let me close with the account of Esther you remember Esther she was the queen her husband's the king of Persia she is a very important person she happens to be a Jew but the king doesn't know it and one of his top men Haman has set a date when the Jews throughout his kingdom will be open game for anyone he wants to wipe the whole race out and Mordecai who raised Esther sends a message to Esther to tell him about this the king has given Haman his ring and Haman has sent out this call for the extinction of the Jews now go in and plead with the king for our defense and she says oh

[41:39] I can't you know there's a there's a law that if anyone goes uninvited into the king's presence they will be killed the only exception is if he raises his golden scepter and I've not been called into his presence for thirty days Mordecai says don't think you will be spared Esther perhaps you've been raised up for this and if salvation does not come through you it will come from another because God has promised great things concerning this people even a coming savior those are my words not his but he did say he will raise up someone confident confident bold no

I I imagine if she's a woman of like passions as you women are and as I am she came trembling fearing for her life and looking at that golden scepter and yes seeing it rise now that was the king of Persia a peon in history that's forgotten by men we're talking about the most holy place where the king of kings and lord of lords sits upon the throne that rules the universe with all authority and power given to him he says to you if you come unto God through Christ you can know that you will be accepted accepted in the beloved the way is open come with confidence come with boldness no reason to fear oh will I be received I'm such a sinner if he only knew what I've done he does know and he says come come to me and all who come to me

I will never turn any away I came I wasn't turned away if you've come and not been turned away say amen everybody has come to him not a one is turned away come to him come whoever you are young old Jesus is the way in I am the way no one comes to the father except through me it was through the torn veil of his flesh therefore brothers since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus by this new and living way open for us through the curtain that is his body since we have such a great high priest over the house of God let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith full assurance that's how we come boldness confidence because Christ has died the death for me let's pray thank you father for your son thank you for the witnesses that you had that day from creation from a

Roman centurion from these dear women thank you that this event has been proclaimed throughout the world and is drawing new disciples to yourself many Gentiles we thank you that it's reached our shores and brought us to this savior may others here today take refuge in the Lord Jesus his death for sinners help us to make better use of this new and living way and to come often to come with all of our burdens and to to find a a loving pitying ear loving heart almighty hand to help us we thank you in Jesus name amen as