

**THE WORD OF DESOLATION****MARK 15:33-36**

Have you ever been in total darkness? I mean a darkness so complete and all-encompassing that you could almost feel it. It can be disorienting to say the least and sometimes downright terrifying. I can still recall something that happened to me when I was just a boy. One night I woke up in the middle of the night and the darkness around me seemed total and profound. All was still and it was pitch black. I couldn't even see shadows of any kind. The longer I lay there the more my imagination grew as to what was lurking in the corners or under the bed or down the hallway. As my imagination grew, so did my fear. Unfortunately – and coincidentally – at that very moment our pet cat decided to jump up onto a small, rickety table in my room. It collapsed under her weight with a resounding crash. My sister says she can still clearly recall my blood curdling scream in the middle of the night that made her hair stand up on end! To make it worse, my dad rushed into the room to try and comfort me, but he forgot to turn on the light first. I didn't know who was grabbing me in the middle of the night, so I continued to yell. I thought I was a goner for sure. Darkness can be terrifying.

It got very dark the day Jesus died. Between noon and three o'clock in the afternoon, an eclipse of the sun rendered Jerusalem dark and overcast. People were frightened by this strange, unexpected darkness. What was it dark in the middle of the day? Jewish people believed an eclipse of the sun signified a day of judgment. That was certainly true of the day Jesus was crucified. Darkness can be peaceful and comforting, true enough. But the darkness of that crucifixion day was ominous, disturbing, and cold. It was as if nature itself wanted to conceal and cover over the cries of pain from those who were dying, the sobs of those grieving, and the ridicule of those taunting.

*Cross Words: Jesus' Statements Before He Died.* That's the title of the message series we're thinking about together as we get closer each week to Holy Week – Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday. Jesus made seven statements as He hung on the cross dying and we're considering the fifth one today. Towards the end of that three hour period of frightening darkness, Jesus spoke again. Let's read what he said, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Mk 15:34 NLT) Let's call it the word of desolation. Jesus' first language was Aramaic and that's what Mark recorded here. Those were Jesus' actual words. This statement might well be the most wrenching of all seven, because in it we begin to understand the immense suffering of our Savior. Jesus was at His lowest point spiritually and emotionally. But Jesus' statement was also a cry of identification. Because of it, we know Jesus has fully identified with human suffering at every place it touches your life or mine. We're not going to solve the riddle of suffering today. Why God allows it will remain a mystery. But there is one thing we can say about suffering. Not one of us has ever suffered - or will ever suffer – in a way Jesus has not already experienced. We worship, honor, and adore a Savior and Lord today who did not – and never has - exempted Himself from suffering. Jesus experienced at least three kinds of suffering on the day He was crucified. First...

**JESUS EXPERIENCED THE SUFFERING THAT DESTROYS.**

People are often reluctant to admit that sin is one very obvious cause of human suffering. And yet, all suffering can ultimately be traced back to the reality and presence of sin in this world. No, I'm not suggesting that someone with a terminal disease, for example, got sick as a direct result of committing some sin. But any and all physical disease can be traced back to this mysterious, but very real spiritual force the Bible calls sin. It's invaded our world. The effects of sin can be observed even in our physical bodies as well as in the natural world around us. Sin results in suffering. Sometimes our own sin causes us to suffer. Sometimes our sin causes others around us to suffer. Sometimes people sin against us and we suffer for it. It doesn't always matter who sinned first. Sin just causes suffering indiscriminately.

Sin is a pervasive reality that touches every dimension of life and human experience. For example, people who become dependent on drugs or alcohol will end up hurting both themselves and others. A person who's an habitual liar will suffer the consequences of being distrusted by others. A spouse who's unwilling to forsake destructive behavior or attitudes can destroy a marriage and everyone in the extended family will suffer for that sin. A sexually promiscuous person might contract a physical disease and then inflict that illness on an innocent person such as his or her spouse. Racist words and actions harm both the racist and the person he or she abuses. Parents who refuse to love their children strongly or discipline them wisely will likely produce adults who hurt themselves, their parents, and others. You've heard about people who won't let go of some offense committed against them years ago. They internalize their resentment and in the end that sinful bitterness can cause physical illness and psychological harm. Anyone want to argue that sin doesn't cause suffering?

The Bible says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Rom 3:23 NLT) No exceptions. Everyone is a sinner. The Bible also says, "For the wages of sins is death." (Rom. 6:23 NLT) Sin results in suffering, and – to be more precise – it's a suffering that destroys. But the Bible clearly teaches Jesus was sinless. He never committed an act, or uttered a word, or developed an attitude that displeased or grieved His Father. How, then, can Jesus identify with you and me? That's what the cross is all about. There, Jesus actually took upon Himself your sin and my sin. On the cross, God the Father transferred the guilt of your sin and mine onto Jesus. You could say Jesus became a sinner on the cross. And with that transfer of guilt came the condemnation sin always causes which is death.

Sin always destroys. It destroys our relationship with God. It destroys our relationships with other people. Sin destroys anything beautiful, good, and wholesome. Sin destroys the soul, the spirit, and the inner life of a person. It destroys our physical bodies. Because sin separates us from a holy God, Jesus experienced complete and utter separation from His Father when He hung upon the cross bearing the penalty of our sin. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mk 15:34 NLT) That wasn't some line from a movie. Jesus' cry was utterly authentic. God the Father – in order to be true to His own holy nature – abandoned and turned away from His own Son when Jesus became a sinner on the cross. Sin matters to God. He can't excuse it, compromise

with it, or tolerate it. Instead, He must judge it. And on that day – the day Jesus died – God the Father judged sin in His own Son. For the first time in His earthly life, Jesus had no sense of any intimate, spiritual connection with His Father.

So, what's the implication? Jesus knows what it feels like to be spiritually lost, to be unsaved, and to be far from God. Jesus knows what it's like to look inside yourself and feel the total absence of God's presence anywhere. Jesus knows utter desolation - to feel utterly abandoned and forsaken by God. Jesus knows what guilt, condemnation, and complete separation from God feel like. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" that's exactly what had happened.

You and I suffer some of the consequences of sin – whether it be our own sin or those who sin against us. God mercifully spares us the full brunt of what sin could do to us. But nobody here today is required to suffer the full and ultimate consequence of sin which is eternal abandonment by God. Jesus took that ultimate penalty upon Himself. He died in your place and mine. Yes, you can insist on paying the penalty for your own sin by going to your grave refusing to surrender to Jesus. God will give you what you want – an eternity without Him. Many people choose just that. They would rather die for their own sins and spend eternity in Hell than receive the gift of life and grace offered through Jesus. If you insist on eternity without God, God will give you that. But God doesn't want that for you. Jesus experienced fully the suffering that destroys so you could escape that suffering forever. The greatest question of your life is whether you've ever received God's free gift of eternal life through Jesus.

A young boy was consistently late coming home from school. One day, Mom and Dad warned him he must be home on time that afternoon or painful consequences would follow. Nevertheless, he got home later than ever. Mom met him at the door and said nothing. Dad met him in the living room and said nothing. At dinner, the boy looked at his plate. It featured one piece of bread and a glass of water. He looked over at Dad's full plate and then at his dad, but his father remained silent. The boy began to realize just how badly he'd disappointed his parents. Waiting for his son to feel the full impact of his bad behavior, Dad did something totally unexpected. He took his son's plate and placed it in front of himself. Then he took his own plate full of delicious meat and potatoes, put it in front of his son, and smiled at him. When that boy grew up to be an adult, he said, "All my life I've known what God is like by what my father did that night." There's a second kind of suffering Jesus experienced on the cross.

## **JESUS EXPERIENCED THE SUFFERING THAT HURTS.**

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mk 15:34 NLT) Did you know Jesus was quoting the Old Testament? David, Israel's greatest king, used that phrase first in one of his psalms. He wrote, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer. Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief." (Ps. 22:1-2 NLT) For several years, David was stalked by King Saul, who preceded David on the throne. Saul had become so insanely jealous of David, he tried to kill him. David made a lot of

enemies over his life. He even narrowly survived an attempted coup d'état by his own son, Absalom. David knew all about fear, anxiety, and stress. In other words, he endured the kind of suffering that hurts deeply. Sometimes David's suffering was so acute he felt as if God had abandoned, forgotten, or forsaken him.

He described his feelings in Psalm 22 and what he wrote there became prophetic. It was literally fulfilled in the experience of Jesus on the cross. Consider what David wrote, "My life is poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.... My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs; an evil gang closes in on me. They have pierced my hands and feet. I can count all my bones. My enemies stare at me and gloat. They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing." (Ps. 22:14-18 NLT) Remarkable, yes? David wrote that description hundreds of years before Jesus literally and physically fulfilled them.

We forget Jesus experienced the pain and hurt of suffering. Not just physically, but emotionally as well. Jesus knows what it feels like to be poor, to be hungry, to be homeless, to be in tremendous physical pain, to have your motives questioned, to be left out, to be rejected by other people, to be deeply hated for no good reason. Some of you here today may have been violated – sexually, physically, or emotionally abused. No one was more violated than Jesus. Have you ever been stabbed in the back or betrayed by a spouse or a friend? Jesus was betrayed by a disciple He had personally selected and then abandoned by all of them the night before the cross. Have you been treated unfairly? No one was treated more unfairly than Jesus.

There was a woman by the name of Emma and she was a survivor of the Holocaust. Almost every day at 4:00 in the afternoon, she would stand outside a certain church in Manhattan and scream insults at Jesus. Finally the pastor, a Bishop Myers by name, went outside and said to Emma, "Why don't you just go inside and tell Him yourself?" Emma disappeared into the church. An hour went by and the bishop got worried. He decided to look in on her. He found Emma in the sanctuary of his church lying prostrate on the ground absolutely still in front of the cross. He reached down and touched her on the shoulder to see if she was OK. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said quietly, "After all, he was a Jew, too."

It's impossible to "out suffer" Jesus. I don't want to minimize any suffering in your life that still hurts you deeply this morning. I simply want to remind you and all of us that Jesus knows the depth of your pain. That's exactly why you come to Him again and again when life just gets to be too much to bear. You know that in Jesus you're loved and understood. But Jesus offers more than understanding. He also gives us a kind of spiritual strength and comfort you can't fully explain. You just have to experience it to know how wonderful it is. The Bible says, "This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." (Heb. 4:15-16 NLT) Jesus provides supernatural grace and strength for the suffering that hurts deeply.

When Jesus cried out in His agony, some onlookers misunderstood Him and thought He was calling out to the prophet, Elijah. What was that about? There was a common belief at that time among Jewish people that when a righteous person was in some kind of distress, Elijah – a great Old Testament prophet who lived some 700-800 years before Jesus – would appear and rescue that person. These bystanders at the cross were curious to see what would happen. Jesus' agony was just a spectacle to them. Has something like that ever happened to you? What I mean is this. You're going through some kind of painful experience and some people seem to be more curious about you than caring. Will you make it through? Jesus is never curious about the hurts in our lives. He's always caring because He Himself experienced great hurts.

That's why you can take every sorrow, every disappointment, every rejection, and every failure to Him and know that Jesus fully understands your hurt in all of its dimensions. That's why David said he kept coming back to God. "For he has not ignored or belittled the suffering of the needy. He has not turned his back on them, but has listened to their cries for help." (Ps. 22:24 NLT) God never despises your hurts, or treats them lightly, or looks down on them. God Himself has been there in the person of His Son, Jesus. Let me mention a third kind of suffering Jesus experienced on the cross.

### **JESUS EXPERIENCED THE SUFFERING THAT REDEEMS.**

Suffering will test your faith. You wonder if God is hiding from you. You question the reality of His love, the greatness of His power, even the authenticity of His presence. I can't solve the mystery of suffering today or on any day. I can't tell you why a godly husband and father like Bryan Shaw, for example, dies of brain cancer leaving a grieving wife and 10 children who would so benefit from having him in their lives. I can't explain why precious little children contract terrible, terminal diseases. I have yet to read or hear a completely satisfying answer to why God allows suffering. And when it's me that's the one suffering, no explanation makes sense or is good enough.

The Bible never answers the questions, "Why does God allow suffering? Why am I suffering?" Instead, it points us toward another question, "How can my suffering bring glory to God?" The great Christian leader, Paul, had an amazing insight regarding that question, "We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment." (Rom. 5:3-5 NLT) Paul knew God and he knew suffering. Here's a fact: suffering – surrendered back to God, given to Him, and then transformed by His hand – redeems. That's a spiritual fact as real and true as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. I may not like that fact, but it's true whether I like it or not. It's written into the fabric of the universe God has created.

You recall how an oyster makes a pearl, don't you? There's this happy little oyster sitting on the ocean floor minding its own business. Then a bit of grit or sand somehow gets inside its shell. That irritates the oyster. It suffers. But in dealing with that irritation, the oyster creates a pearl. Something of lasting beauty. The oyster's suffering

was redeemed. Something of great value and worth - a treasure – was caused by the suffering. Suffering – given back to God – does the same thing in us.

The suffering of Jesus was redemptive in two ways. First, His suffering redeemed or saved us from the ultimate consequences of our own sin – death and eternal separation from God. Our text today confirms the redemptive nature of Jesus' suffering. "And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (Mk. 15:38 NLT) A great curtain hung in the Jewish temple separating the holy place from the most holy place. When Jesus died, God the Father tore that curtain open from top to bottom. Meaning what? Meaning you and I can come into His presence now. We can have an eternal relationship with Him now. We can know His love now.

Jesus' suffering was redemptive in a second way, too. His suffering was somehow necessary in His own development as God's Son. I know that sounds very strange. If He's God, why should He need to "develop" in any way? I don't know, but I point you to what the Bible itself says, "Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered." (Heb. 5:8 NLT) Why did Jesus have "to learn obedience"? Hard to say. There's a profound mystery there. Evidently, God the Father used suffering in the life experience of His Son, Jesus, to develop Him in some way. If He used suffering developmentally in Jesus' life, won't He also use it your life and mine? He can and He will. There's a whole lot of people here today who can share with us what personal suffering given to God has produced in their lives. Suffering changes you, molds you, matures you, and shapes you. Suffering given to God builds your faith instead of destroying it. Suffering given to God results in more compassion for other people instead of less. Suffering given to God draws us closer to Him instead of pushing us away. Suffering given to God creates something in your soul that's eternal instead of temporary, beautiful instead of ugly. Suffering given to God redeems.

A man found the cocoon of an emperor moth and took it home to watch it emerge. One day a small opening appeared and for several hours the moth struggled but couldn't seem to force its body past a certain point. The man thought something was terribly wrong. He took a pair of scissors and snipped open the remaining bit of cocoon. The moth emerged easily enough now, thanks to his help. Its body was large and swollen, but the wings were still small and shriveled. The man expected in a few hours the wings would spread out in all their natural beauty. But they didn't. Instead of developing into a creature free to fly, the moth spent its life dragging around a swollen body and shriveled wings. Here's what the man didn't know. The tight, constricting cocoon and the struggle necessary to get through that little opening in the cocoon is God's way of forcing fluid from the moth's body into its wings. The man's "merciful" snip was, in reality, cruel. Sometimes the struggle is exactly what's best for us.

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'" (Mk 15:34 NLT) Jesus' word of desolation. But it was more than that. It was a cry of identification with you and me. Jesus experienced fully the suffering that destroys, the suffering that hurts, and the suffering – given to God – that redeems.