

"Darkness Over the Whole Land"

Who do you want Jesus to be? Of course, who you want Jesus to be, is quite different than who he really is. Yet it is a common temptation for us to want to tell Jesus who he is supposed to be. Or what he is supposed to do for us, or for our life.

Throughout the book of Mark, Mark has repeatedly been raising the question of who is Jesus. Now of course, Mark told us right in the beginning of the book who Jesus is. Chapter 1, verse 1. "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In the very first verse he tells us that Jesus is the Christ, and that he is the Son of God. Almost immediately after that we hear God the Father declare in chapter 1 verse 9 when Jesus is baptized, "This is my beloved Son." But then the rest of the book of Mark flushes this out. Right away Mark tells us that Jesus is the Christ, and that he is the Son of God. His original audience would have surely known this to be the case. But Mark draws them and us into the earthly ministry of Jesus. When Jesus was ministering to the Jews in Palestine, people did not at first know that he was the Christ and that he was the Son of God.

It's not until halfway through the book that Mark shows us the disciples finally come to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ. That's really the first part of the book. Who is Jesus? By the midway point in the book the disciples finally answer that question. Jesus is the Christ. But then Mark quickly shows us that this answer is not sufficient. People didn't know what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ. They didn't know what kind of a Lord and Savior that he had come to be. They didn't understand his mission as the Messiah. And so the second half of the book explains how Jesus revealed his mission of suffering. That mission comes to a climax here in our passage for today. And to signal the climax of this book, we see the confession of the centurion in verse 39. "Surely this man was the Son of God." Mark has shown us in this book what he told us from the first verse. He has shown the disciples coming to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ. And then he has shown this centurion coming to the conclusion that Jesus was also the Son of God. Mark's painted a picture for us of how people during Jesus' ministry gradually began to recognize who Jesus really is.

And so as we look at this climactic passage in the book of Mark, I want to remind us of this question Mark has been asking. I want us to look again today at who Jesus is. I want us to look again at what it means for him to be the Christ and what it means for him to be the Son of God. It's quite fitting that Mark drives home this message with the story of the cross. May this be a challenge for us - that we believe in the Jesus that the Bible says he is, not who we want him to be!

I want us to see first that for Jesus to be the Christ meant that he had to face judgment on the cross. That's what this passage shows us. It tells us how the Messiah underwent judgment on the cross. He was judged for sin. Of course, not for any sins he committed, but for ours.

We see this first by the darkness. Verse 33. Darkness covered the whole land for three hours from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. That's from noon to 3 pm. Why darkness? What did it symbolize? The darkness symbolized God's judgment. Think back to the ten plagues on Egypt. One of the plagues was darkness. That's in Exodus 10:23. All of Egypt was darkened, except in the place where the Israelites

lived. Well, the plagues against Egypt were curses. They were God's judgment against the hardened heart of Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Of course it makes sense for darkness to be a sign of judgment. The opposite is a sign of God's presence and blessing. It was God who spoke light into darkness when he created the earth. Jesus is referred to as the light of the world in John 1. And at the end of history, when the saints of God are made to live in the New Jerusalem for all eternity, the book of Revelation says there will be no more night. No more darkness. And at that time, there won't even be a sun or a moon it says, because the glory of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb will be its light.

But here, while Jesus was on the cross, there was no light. Jesus, the light of the world, suffered in darkness. His sufferings on the cross spread out over the land as darkness. Some critics of this passage try to say that there is no way this could have happened. They pick up the language in Luke that possibly suggests this was some sort of solar eclipse. They say there is no way an eclipse could have happened during the Passover, a time when it's a full moon. Others have tried to think of what other natural phenomenon in the area might have caused this darkness, and the critics have tried to discredit those options as well. Well, Luke may or may not have been referring to a solar eclipse. There may or may not have been natural phenomenon that could have caused this. But I think these sorts of critics are missing the point. This was a supernatural event. This was a miracle. That means it doesn't have to follow the normal, *natural*, laws of nature. The darkness came over the land because judgment had come over the land. God brought the darkness as a curse while Jesus himself had become a curse while he hung on the cross.

This of course was all prophesied ahead of time by the prophet Amos. In Amos 8:9 he records God's promise. "And on that day," declares the Lord GOD, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight." "On that day," God had said. That day had come. The great day of judgment. The great day where God's judgment would be poured out on God's people. Amos described that day as like the mourning over an only son. God's only son was on the cross, bearing this judgment. And yet, this great day of judgment is only partially fulfilled here. God's people were judged on Calvary. But the judgment that Christ bore on the cross is only effective for believers. If you do not belong to Christ, then your judgment is still outstanding. There will be a final great and awesome day of the Lord. There will be darkness again before the light of eternity. This just reminds us of the importance to know Jesus as your savior.

And so the darkness was a sign of the judgment that Christ was bearing on the cross. Christ bore our sins on the cross. The complement to this darkness is in verse 34. Those words. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus quotes Psalm 22 on the cross. He is simultaneously teaching us an important lesson while expressing the extent of his sufferings on the cross. All the sufferings embodied by Psalm 22 come to a climax here on the cross. That's what's he's telling us with these words.

Jesus explains the darkness to us. You see, Jesus is telling us the extent of his suffering. Jesus is telling us that God has turned his wrath upon him. If the darkness signaled judgment, it was but a picture of what Jesus was going through on the cross. That's why Jesus' cry on the cross happens at the end of the darkness. The darkness and the cry are connected. As the creation signals judgment, Jesus confirms it in his words. God had forsaken him. God was judging Jesus on the cross.

Jesus was experiencing nothing less than hell on the cross. But we know this was not what Jesus deserved. But it is what he expected. A few weeks ago when we studied Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, we had seen how distressed he was over the cross that he was about to bear. Now as we read these words, we understand why. Jesus knew that he was going to the cross to face judgment. Not a judgment that Jesus deserved. No, in Jesus own words, he was giving up his life as a ransom for many, Mark 10:45. In the words of Paul, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God," 2 Corinthians 5:21. Jesus became a sacrifice for sin. He took our place on the cross. He was our substitute. That was the mission he had come to do. Everything he had done up to this point in his earthly ministry had looked forward to this event. He had been born into this world for this purpose. To save sinners. The only way he could save sinners was to pay the penalty they couldn't pay. To take on their judgment.

Of course, what single mortal man could pay for the sins of so many sinners? If a single man will have to spend eternity in hell to pay for his sins, how could one man pay for the sins of so many on the cross? Well, because Jesus was not only a man. He was also the very Son of God. The author of Hebrews says that the blood of bulls and goats are never sufficient to atone for the sins of a man. How could a bull or a goat properly stand in the place of a human who willfully rebelled against God? But the insufficiency of bulls and goats finds its fulfillment in a better sacrifice. If the bulls and goats were an *insufficient* sacrifice, the sacrifice of the eternal Son of God was *more than sufficient*. The author of Hebrews compares the ineffective sacrifices that the High Priests regularly offered up in the Holy of Holies with the one sacrifice of Jesus. The one sacrifice. The one-time sacrifice. The bulls and goats were insufficient and so they kept being offered because sin still wasn't dealt with. But with Jesus, his sacrifice "one time" was all that was needed to atone for the sins of God's people.

And so do you see a little more about who Jesus is here? Jesus is the Christ. That meant he came to be a savior. He came to be a ransom for the sins of many. But he was also the Son of God. That's why he could be the sacrifice for sin. That's why he could be a ransom for many. That's why this one man could stand in the place of so many sinners. Jesus needs to be the Son of God to atone for sins like he does here. If Jesus is not God, if he's *just* a man, then his death is but an example at best. But if he is God come in the flesh, he is more than able to bear the infinite wrath of God against sinners. That's what he did on the cross. He took on our judgment on the cross. This is what it means for Jesus to be Savior and Lord.

The judgment that Jesus faced on the cross, especially describes what it means for Jesus to be our Savior. He saved us from sins by taking on our *judgment*. But the other point I'd like to make from this passage is about the *victory* that Jesus had on the cross. This especially tells us what it means for Jesus to be our Lord. For Jesus to be the Christ, it meant that he would find victory at the cross. This victory points to his Lordship.

We begin to see this in verse 37. Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last. The commentators that I read all wanted to point out how remarkable of a death this was. This is not normally how people died on the cross. People died on the cross in exhaustion. They'd often even fall unconscious first and then die after that. They didn't normally cry out with a loud voice and then die. There seems to be something triumphant and victorious in how Jesus died. That he actively laid down his life in victory. Up to the last breath he knew what he was doing. He was in control the whole time. The centurion recognized this. Verse 39 shows that the way Jesus died not go unnoticed by the centurion. Mark brings out

in his gospel that it was especially the way Jesus died that sparked faith in this centurion. There was something bold and victorious in Jesus' final cry and breath that made this centurion exclaim that this man was *truly* the Son of God.

The other gospels give us some added insight here. The last words that John records in his gospel is Jesus' triumphant cry of, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Luke's gospel records Jesus' last words as, "Into your hands I commend my Spirit" (Luke 23:46). These words would appear to be his final words before he died. These aren't words of defeat. They aren't words of one destroyed by the judgment of God. They are words of victory. Jesus had overcome the temptations to forego the cross. He had overcome the enemy. He had satisfied God's judgment against sinners. And so he dramatically gives this call of victory as he gives up his Spirit to the Lord. He cried, then he died. Jesus died on the cross. Judgment and victory meet at the cross in the person of Jesus. He is both our Savior and Lord.

We see this victory announced by what immediately follows. Verse 38. The veil of the temple was torn in two. Now I want to point out that there were two main veils or curtains in the temple. Not every scholar has agreed on which of the two curtains was torn here. And so in fairness I want to point out both options. Either option would have had a similar importance however. One curtain was the outer curtain. This was a curtain to the main entrance of the temple, one everyone could clearly see if it was torn. The other curtain was an inner curtain. This is the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was the most holy place in the temple, where the Ark of the Covenant had been kept. Only the High Priests were allowed to enter this place. They entered once a year with a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

And so if this curtain that was torn was the outer curtain, it would have been something very visibly seen by everyone. There is some historical evidence in extra biblical sources that might suggest something like this happened. If this was the case, then the message is clear. The physical temple was under judgment and effectively destroyed. The real temple had come in the person of Jesus, and now the old temple was of no longer any use. People would now come to God through Jesus, the true temple that was destroyed on the cross but which would be raised up on the third day. History of course would make this clear when shortly thereafter in 70 AD the physical temple was physically destroyed by the Romans.

But if the curtain that was torn referred to the inner curtain, the one between the Holy Place and the Holiest of Holiest, I think there is even greater significance. And this is the view I favor, by the way. By tearing this inner curtain, it tells us two things. The old sacrifices for sin are no longer needed. And the access to God, is now open for all; through Jesus. This is actually the exact point that the author of Hebrews makes. That we have boldness, quote, "to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh" (Hebrews 10:19-20). The tearing of this inner curtain symbolizes that we now have access to God through Jesus because our sins have been forgiven. We are made holy in Jesus, so that we can approach the Holy One. Access to God is through Jesus and by his cleansing blood that washes us clean and makes us holy.

And notice that this curtain in verse 38 was torn from top to bottom. This too was a miracle. If it had been torn by natural use, you might expect it to be from the bottom up. But that it was torn from top to bottom is as if God reached down from heaven and ripped it himself. Of course, that is exactly what happened. This is a miraculous event. It coincided with Jesus' death on the cross, because the barrier to God had been done away with. The tearing of the curtain was a sign of victory.

Victory over sin. Victory over the former separation from God. Victory in making cursed and defiled sinners blessed and holy. That we could have access to God by Jesus.

The cross meant victory. As much as the cross meant judgment, it also meant victory. As much as it shows Jesus as our suffering Savior, it also shows him as our victorious Lord as well. Just look again at the centurion's cry in verse 39. "Truly this man was the Son of God." This was uttered by a *Roman* centurion. If you remember back a few months ago we talked about the Roman coins. I read for you what was engraved on those coins. It titled the Roman Emperor the "Son of the Divine". I think it's striking that Jesus is proclaimed the "Son of God" by someone who supposedly had vowed allegiance to the emperor as the Son of God. What a picture of victory here. Jesus dies on the cross with a sign in three languages that read, "The King of the Jews." And when he dies a Roman gives him the title that was normally reserved for the King of the Gentiles. We're not sure how much this Roman really understood about Jesus at the time. Extra-biblical church history records that he became a Christian. I hope that is true. But you can't deny the picture here. Jesus, dead on the cross, is being proclaimed as Lord and King. King of Jews and Gentiles. Jesus' death also was a triumph.

Of course this picture of Jesus being Lord and King of both Jews and Gentiles only tells us more of his victory. A victory not just to benefit Jews, but to go out to the nations. This is the same with all the women who witnessed this in verses 40-41. Christ's kingdom was one for male and female, Jew and Greek. His kingdom was tearing down curtains and breaking down barriers. Jesus is Lord and Savior of *all*.

Again, I hope you recognize this thematic conclusion to the book of Mark. This book is just about over. Not much more will be said in this Gospel. But here the Roman centurion is the first human in the book of Mark to be recorded as acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God. The question raised in Mark has been answered. The question: Who is Jesus? Here it answered for us by the Roman centurion. It's answered pretty similarly to way we were told in the beginning. In Mark chapter 1 the heavens were torn open and the Father said of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son." Same word for the heavens being torn open as the word here for the curtain being torn. Only two places in Mark this word appears. Now the curtain is torn and the centurion declares that Jesus is the Son of God. We've come full circle. This is what Mark set out to show us in this book. He has shown us Jesus. He has revealed him as the Christ and he has shown he is also the Son of God. All the miracles and exorcisms confirmed this. The parables taught us about Jesus' kingdom. His predictions of suffering explained his mission. And the cross is where he accomplished the salvation of man. Jesus is our Lord and Savior.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, I asked at the beginning of this message, "Who do you want Jesus to be?" I asked that because this passage tells us who Jesus really is. This whole book tells us that, and especially this passage. It shows us what it means for Jesus to be our Lord and our Savior. He's our Savior who died for us, and now calls us to follow him. But is who you want Jesus to be the same as who he really is? Who the Bible says he is?

What I mean is this. We can say, yes, Jesus is my Lord and Savior. But sometimes what we really are saying is something more like this to Jesus: Jesus, you can be me Lord, *if*, you will be my Savior. But then we go on to tell Jesus what it means for him to be our Savior. It turns out that we have something different in mind. We want Jesus to save us from something specific in our life. Maybe it's your broken relationship. Maybe it's your credit card debt or your bad spending habits. Maybe you want him to save you from yourself, because you have a low self-esteem and you are looking for Jesus to make you feel better about yourself. What are you

looking for Jesus to save you from in this life? I don't know. You tell me. But in all these things, we can have a wrong idea about what it means for Jesus to be our savior. Jesus came to save you from your sins. That's what makes him your Lord.

You see, we can be just as mistaken as the people in verses 35-36. Those standing by, watching Jesus die on the cross, not understanding why he is there. When Jesus cries out about his sufferings, they either mistakenly or mockingly think he's calling for Elijah to save him. They were looking for Elijah to save Jesus from the cross. But they misunderstood why Jesus was up there. Jesus wasn't up there needing Elijah to save him. No, Jesus was up there to save Elijah, and you, and me! To save us all from our sins. They didn't understand what Jesus' mission was all about. They didn't understand how the Christ was supposed to be a savior.

The same was true when back then some people were looking for the Messiah to save the Jews from the Romans. But this is also misunderstanding what Jesus came to do. For Jesus to be our Savior, is to save us from our sins! That's what this passage shows us! We need to correct our skewed sense of what it means for Jesus to be our Savior! Not to save us from all our problems and troubles in our life. But from our sins.

Now it's not that Jesus doesn't care about all these issues in our life. He knows the troubled areas of our life. And Jesus does want to address them. But the way he usually addresses them is more a function of his Lordship in our life, than a function of his being our Savior. Now I know I'm being a little pedantic here, putting Jesus' work into different boxes, between him being our Savior and Lord. Obviously Jesus' work in our life comes as one united package. But bear with me for a moment because there's an important point here. You see the problems in life that we so often want Jesus to "save" us from, are usually things he wants to address as our Lord. What I mean is that as our Lord he is directing how to act in this life. As our Lord he tells us how to act in that troubled relationship. He commands us how to handle our money. He gives us a new perspective of how to view ourselves. As our Lord, he tells us how to live. That's so often how he actually saves us from these issues in our life. By telling us how to live in godliness. To change the sinful patterns that have made us fall into these problem areas in the first place.

I think it's an unchristian arrogance that sits back expecting Jesus to just save you from the problems we create by our sinful lusts and actions, instead of asking yourself some tough questions. Like, how have I contributed to this issue in my life? In what ways has my sin contributed to this? How does the Lord want me to start responding in this situation? What does biblical repentance look like? Just praying to Jesus to save you from some situation, without examining the situation like this, usually means you have a perverted sense of what it means for Jesus to be your Lord and Savior.

I'm calling us all to continue to reflect on what it means for Jesus to be the Lord and Savior in our life. As you do this soul searching, make the necessary course corrections. Repent of any areas where you've been skewing what Jesus came to do.

Of course as you do this soul searching, be reminded again of the gospel. Whatever sins you find in our life, Jesus paid the price for them on the cross. Trust in that salvation. That's what he came to save you from. Then go and follow him. Follow his leadership. Live with him as Lord in your life. As you do that, not every problem in life will be instantly solved. But do remember. The final outcome of Jesus being your Lord and Savior will be the freedom from all life's troubles. Right now he uses these trials to grow us. To grow us in obedience. But

one day he will return to bring us into eternity. At that great day, though the world will be judged, we will not be. Because that judgment already happened for us on the cross. If Jesus bore your judgment on the cross, your names is written in the Book of Life. That great day of judgment will be for us the great day of victory. Full, consummated, victory. Salvation in its fullest. No more problems. No more sins that we still struggle with. And we will be with our Lord and Savior for all eternity. Amen.

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