

*A King's Ransom: The Cross in Mark's Gospel*

Mark 15:22–39

Rodney J. Decker, Th.D.

A sermon preached 3/22/05\*

This is what Scripture says,<sup>1</sup>

Mark 14:16 The disciples..., went into the city and .... they prepared the Passover.<sup>17</sup> When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.<sup>22</sup> While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.”<sup>23</sup> Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.<sup>24</sup> “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them.<sup>25</sup> “I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”<sup>26</sup> When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives....<sup>32</sup> They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”...<sup>35</sup> Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him....<sup>43</sup> Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.<sup>44</sup> Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.”<sup>45</sup> Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him.<sup>46</sup> The men seized Jesus and arrested him....<sup>53</sup> They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together....<sup>64</sup> ...They all condemned him as worthy of death....

15:1 Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate....<sup>15</sup> Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified....<sup>20</sup> ...Then they led him out to crucify him....<sup>22</sup> They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).<sup>23</sup> Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.<sup>24</sup> And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.<sup>25</sup> It was the third hour when they crucified him.<sup>26</sup> The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.<sup>27</sup> They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.<sup>29</sup> Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,<sup>30</sup> come down from the cross and save yourself!”<sup>31</sup> In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!<sup>32</sup> Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.<sup>33</sup> At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.<sup>34</sup> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, “My God, my God, why have

---

\* This message was preached in the Baptist Bible Seminary chapel as part of a faculty Easter series, “The Cross in the Gospels.” Matthew was addressed by Dr. Bill Arp on 3/21, Luke by Dr. Richard Engle, 3/23, and John by Dr. Gary Gromacki, 3/24. This transcript may be longer than the chapel setting allowed; it also contains documentation. This is *not* a model sermon for local church purposes! It is more academic than is wise in such a setting and it uses Greek explicitly in several places—something you should never do in local church ministry, but which is appropriate in a seminary chapel where it is assumed that all have either studied Greek or are presently learning it (and then such use should be judicious—as I have tried to be here).

<sup>1</sup> The passage preceding Mark 15:22 consists of selected excerpts to provide a setting for the events of 15:22–39.

you forsaken me?”<sup>35</sup> When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.”<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.<sup>38</sup> The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.<sup>39</sup> 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!”

—  
 “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”  
 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”  
 And he died.  
 —

Why? Why did he die? Many different explanations have been proposed, but what does the text say? Scripture clearly explains why Jesus of Nazareth died on a cruel Roman cross, forsaken by God. There is no one passage which gives a full answer. It was a complex event and each gospel writer paints part of the picture. The Matthean portrait you saw yesterday is different from the Lukan picture we will look at tomorrow. And they both differ from the Johannine account come Thursday. The accounts each have their own focus and none contradicts the others. They supplement each other to provide a full-orbed perspective of the cross.

Today we want to ask what we learn from Mark’s record. To do that we must back up from chapter 15. In that climactic chapter we read of our Lord’s final hours, but the story of the cross begins long before Calvary. In one sense, of course, we would have to go back to eternity past, for this was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). But Mark does not begin there. He assumes a great many things in his theology of the cross.

Mark’s prologue contains implications of the cross with its quotation from Isaiah. There is an obscure reference in Mark 2:20 where Jesus refers to the bridegroom being forcibly and violently removed. We understand the allusion to the cross, but only because we know the rest of the story.

So far as *explicit* statements are concerned, Mark first introduces the cross at the end of chapter 8. Here we find the first of three key theological explanations of the cross. Although we are but halfway through the book, as of the end of chapter 8 we are only a matter of weeks away from the passion of our Savior. Now for the first time Jesus openly speaks of his impending death.

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.<sup>32</sup> He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him” (8:31–32).

This is not the obscure allusion of chapter 2. In this case notice that Jesus speaks *plainly* according to v. 32. The text also tells us that this was the *beginning* of Jesus’ teaching on the subject. The word *begin* is

not a translator's interpretive addition as it sometimes is; that word is explicit in the text: ἤρξατο διδάσκειν, he *began* to teach.<sup>2</sup>

In this initial, plain teaching regarding the cross, Jesus specifically tells us that he *must* suffer and die. This word for *must* tells us that it is a *logical* necessity (δεῖ). What we want to know is “why?” Why was it a logical necessity that Jesus die? But the statement does not include an explanation—only the fact that it was, indeed, essential. As Dr. Arp frequently reminds us (and rightly so!), we must be content with what the text says—and what it does not say. The only hint here—and it is only that—is that Jesus says, “the *Son of Man* must suffer.” If his use of the title “Son of Man” is relevant to our question, it may nod in the direction of the necessity being the fulfillment of prophecy, for “Son of Man” is a Messianic title from Daniel 7. But since that is not spelled out here, we must be content *in this passage* to know that the cross was necessary—it was part of God's plan and purpose for Messiah.

Passing by another implicit reference to Jesus' death in Mark 9:9–10, the next *explicit* theological statement comes in 9:31, “He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’”

Here we discover a new bit of information—Jesus' death is going to come as the result of a *betrayal*. In the first of Jesus' passion predictions in chapter 8 we heard only of suffering and death. In the second such prophecy the focus is on the treachery involved. There are no details given here. No clue that it is one of the Twelve. No indication as to how it will happen. No identification of the one who would betray him. The alert reader of Mark's gospel knows, for he will have read in 2:19 that it would be Judas who would do so—but that was Mark's editorial explanation. The disciples did not know at that time and they do not understand even here.

The cross was not a surprise to God. Both the Father and the Son knew what the future held. When the Son became incarnate as the Messiah—the Son of Man—he knew full well that his destiny was a Roman cross. He knew long before it happened that one of his own would betray him into the hands of men. Yet knowing clearly what lay ahead, he pressed on. Only a few days after this prophecy Jesus embarked on a journey that led directly to the cross. In chapter 10 we read of Jesus' departure from Galilee and of his traveling to Judea and Perea, and ultimately to Jerusalem. It is enroute to Jerusalem that we pick up the story in Mark 10:32.

“They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.<sup>33</sup> ‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles,<sup>34</sup> who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise’” (10:32–34).

---

<sup>2</sup> As many of you who can read a bit of Greek should know, it is sometimes precarious to put too much weight on the words “he began to [do something],” especially in some translations like NASB and ESV, for often that is a translator's decision as to how one might translate some imperfect verb forms. (This is what has been called an inceptive imperfect.) Often NASB and ESV (& perhaps other translations) over-exegete the text by inserting such words, but not so in Mark 8:31.

This is a most unusual passage. Even before we hear Jesus' words we sense that something significant is happening. This is the only time in the Gospels in which we are specifically told that Jesus is leading the way. We perhaps assume it everywhere else, but only Mark 10:32 makes a point of saying it. Not only that, but we are told that the disciples were *astonished*. Another group is said to be following them, and this group is afraid. *What an entourage!* Jesus striding down the road. The disciples tagging along with their mouths hanging open. And a fearful group of followers timidly bringing up the rear! Why the elaborate description? Why the astounded, fearful responses?

The answer lies in the first clause: they were on their way to Jerusalem. Although they did not yet understand what was about to transpire, they could tell from Jesus' demeanor—his focused stride far ahead of them, on his way to Jerusalem, seemingly impatient for some great event—they could tell that some dark fate loomed before them. They were not stumbling across an arid wasteland toward Mount Doom under dark clouds and a glaring red eye. All around them everything seemed like a normal, pleasant spring day. What changed an ordinary journey into fearful astonishment was Jesus himself—leading the way—walking well in front, intent on reaching some yet unseen goal—and that with unusual intensity. Just a few verses earlier we have twice seen Jesus stopping to take a little child in his arms (9:36; 10:16). But this is no longer a time to play with children. He is on his way to Jerusalem.

But he pauses briefly on that lonely journey—long enough to take the disciples aside and once again tell them what lay ahead.

“‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles,<sup>34</sup> who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise’” (10:33–34).

This is the most detailed of all three prophecies of the cross. It is no longer a general reference to suffering and death. Now we have a host of details pressing in on the astonished disciples:

- I will be betrayed.
- The Jewish leaders will condemn me to death.
- I will be handed over to the Romans.
- I will be mocked, spit upon, and flogged.
- And *I will die*.

If there was astonishment and fear before, what now?

It is in this context that we come to the heart of Mark's theology of the cross. Thus far all we have learned of the cross is that it was known—indeed planned—by God, that Jesus goes willingly and resolutely to Jerusalem to fulfill that destiny. His disciples, despite three clear explanations, still do not understand. They will not fully comprehend the reality and the significance of these events until after the resurrection. But here in the midst of astonishment, fear, and an amazing lack of apprehension, Jesus explains most directly why he must die.

The occasion for his explanation is the private request of James and John that they might have the two top positions of authority in Jesus' kingdom (vv. 35–40). It was a bold request—perhaps better described as brash, foolish, and selfish. Since our present concern is with the cross, we will not pause to consider their request or Jesus' initial answer. Look ahead with me to v. 42 where Jesus used the occasion to teach all the disciples a powerful lesson.

It is certainly understandable that the other ten disciples would be upset with the request of James and John, but Jesus' response puts a great many things in perspective.

“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.<sup>43</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,<sup>44</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.<sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (10:42–45).

There are two different views of what it means to be a leader. The normal view of leadership and authority is predicated on status and power. The great “rulers” of the world are those who have the most people under them and who can get the most done by simply issuing a command. The picture Jesus paints is a hierarchical one: people (here identified as Gentiles), with rulers over them, and greater rulers over the first tier of rulers. James and John wanted to be in the top tier of management. That is how the world does things—whether in politics/government, in the military, or in business. (Unfortunately, that's sometimes the way things are done in the church as well.)

Jesus, however, flatly rejects such a view as wrong for Christian ministry. “Not so with you” he says in v. 43. He offers in place of an authority-based, top-down structure a radically different view of greatness. God does not assess greatness based on the magnitude of one's authority. The real test, Jesus says, is not authority but service. To become great you must become a servant—not a lord, not a manager, not an autocrat or a general or a dictator, not a manipulator or a people-user, but a servant, a δῆκονος. And just so you don't misunderstand, he goes on to use even stronger language in v. 44, “whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” Slaves and servants are our role models for what God counts as true greatness.

But our primary interest in this text comes in v. 45. There Jesus offers the ultimate example of service. In so doing he also spells out in explicit theological terms the meaning of the cross. Jesus explains that he did not come to be served by others—and if anyone deserved to be served, it would be the Creator of the universe. Rather he came to serve others. That service is exemplified in and defined by his ultimate service: he gave his life a ransom for many.

Here is Mark's theological explanation of the cross. Jesus died to provide a king's ransom—the ransom that only a king could afford. When we think of a ransom we almost always do so in the context of kidnapping, most often these days by terrorists. But kidnapping is not the appropriate context for understanding Jesus' words. To understand what he meant we must read this text as it would have been read in the first century. James and John had just asked for the two top positions in Jesus' kingdom—they wanted to be great, “first of all.” But Jesus told them that they are not to emulate Tiberius or

Pontius Pilate or Herod Antipas. Instead they are to think of the opposite end of the social spectrum; not royal sovereigns, but humble slaves, for the word *ransom* comes from the context of slavery in the ancient world.

Slavery is a sensitive topic—one with which it is difficult for Americans, in particular, to deal. We seem to have a national guilty conscience regarding the treatment of slaves by our national ancestors of two centuries ago. We cannot view in a positive way anything associated with that which our society has judged to be one of the greatest forms of injustice.

“Whereas in many parts of the English-speaking world slavery is part of our history, in the Mediterranean lands of the first century, slavery was part of their life.... If the language of slavery is offensive, the offence would have been considerably greater for those who lived in societies where slavery was intrinsic than for us for whom slavery is simply an unpleasant and embarrassing memory.”<sup>3</sup>

Some downplay slavery in the ancient world to make these biblical metaphors a bit more palatable. We sometimes treat slavery as if it were simply an alternate employment system by voluntary workers. Some forms of slavery were something of that sort, but much of ancient slavery was no better or no more respectable than the practices of our own country during the days of slavery.

Wars in antiquity were often fought to acquire free labor—the armies were followed by slave merchants. The ancient law of war transformed prisoners into slaves. Some well-known Romans advocated buying children as slaves so they could be trained like young dogs.<sup>4</sup> In a Greek context, Aristotle viewed slaves as “a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave.”<sup>5</sup> And even in a Jewish context, under OT law Gentile slaves were treated as property and such chattel could be passed on as part of a family inheritance (Lev. 25:44–46).

It is this situation that forms the background of Jesus’ explanation of his death as a ransom. The word *ransom* is λύτρον. In the ancient world, one of the ways in which a person was released from slavery was a ceremony referred to as sacred manumission.<sup>6</sup> In a Greek context this took the form of a religious ceremony in which the slave owner took his slave to the temple and there *sold* the slave to the god, being paid for that slave out of the temple treasury. This was somewhat of a legal fiction since the slave (or his family or friends) had previously paid the money into the temple treasury. What is important here is to notice that the price paid to set a slave free was called a λύτρον—a ransom.

What Jesus is telling us is that the price to set us free from slavery was not 3.5 mina of silver or 500 denarii (both common amounts at various times in the documentary history of ancient slavery). It was

---

<sup>3</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*, NSBT, 8 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, transl. J. Ernest, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), s.v. λυτρόω; the specific reference here is to Cato, Roman orator and politician.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> See the details summarized here in Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Greco-Roman World*, transl. L. Strachan (New York: Doran, 1927; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 319–30.

not even the 2,000 denarii that a highly skilled slave might bring.<sup>7</sup> No, the price of our redemption was *Jesus' life*—he gave his life as a ransom. “It was not with silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18–19). He did not come so that many would serve him as slaves—rather he came as the slave who paid a king’s ransom to set many other slaves free. His very life—the life of the eternal Son-of-God-become-man—was offered as the manumission price to set us free.

This was not a ransom paid to Satan, who as a victor in war had taken prisoners who could only be rescued by ransom. To describe the cross as a ransom is not to say that its purpose was to deliver us from Satan; he has no standing to demand anything from God. No, the cross pays the price necessary that we be set free. Nowhere does Mark—nor the rest of the New Testament, for that matter—say anything regarding the recipient of this ransom. The metaphor of ransom focuses on but one aspect that is relevant: being set free. There is nothing to be added here regarding guilt or pardon. This is a different metaphor—one that is found elsewhere in the NT, but not here. Here the picture is that of freedom—freedom achieved by the gracious action of another.

Mark does not explicitly identify that from which we are set free. For that we must go to other passages. Had we the time we might trace the terminology of slavery through Paul and discover that he, too, uses such metaphors soteriologically to explain the cross, but that is for another time.

One remaining question in Mark 10:45 is the identity of those for whom the ransom was paid. Let me indulge in a more explicitly theological question for a minute. That Mark chooses to use the word *many* instead of *all* has prompted some to see here evidence for a selective payment intended to benefit only some. Though there might be some passages where such an argument might find some credence, I do not think that this text is one of them, and that for two reasons.

First, we need to remember that a positive statement about one group is not a negative statement about another group.<sup>8</sup> To assume that it is, is to commit a logical fallacy. A statement of benefit for a limited group is not necessarily a statement which excludes others. For example, if an announcement were made that due to a very generous gift, seminary tuition was being reduced to \$100.00 per credit hour and that students would receive a \$500.00 gift each semester for books, I could very well say that many students would benefit from such a gracious gift. And that would certainly be a true statement. It would also be true that *all* seminary students would benefit.

But this assumes that the word *πολύς* in Mark 10:45 is intended to be understood as *many* in contrast to *all*. That is a very Greek way of saying just that. But there is another alternative. It is called a Semitic use of *πολύς* (i.e., the word *many*) in which *many* (*πολύς*) is used to refer to *all* (*πάς*).<sup>9</sup> In such a case, it is possible that we are to understand Mark’s use of *many* (*πολύς*) in this passage to mean that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for *all*.

---

<sup>7</sup> Deissmann, *LAE*, 323; Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Mike Stallard for this particular phrasing of the logical issue involved.

<sup>9</sup> For documentation and discussion of Semitic *πολύς*, citing examples from biblical and Qumran Hebrew, see Maloney, *Semitic Interference in Marcan Syntax*, SBL diss. series, 51 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 139–42; see also the additional citations found in n. 326 on p. 221. See also J. Jeremias, *TDNT*, 6:543–45.

You can see the Semitic background in Isaiah 53:6, 12 where *all* (כָּל) and *many* (רַב) are used in parallel to describe the soteric work of Messiah. In Isaiah 53:6 we are told that “the Lord has laid on him (Messiah) the iniquity of us *all*.” But in v. 12 we read that “he (Messiah) bore the sins of *many*.” There are also examples in the NT where *many* (πολύς) and *all* (πάς) are used in reference to the same group—and that in soteriological contexts. Let me mention but one example. In Romans 5:12 we are first told that “death came to *all*, because all sinned”; but in v. 15 we read, “the *many* died by the trespass of the one man.” What is said to be true of *all* (πάς) in one verse, is said to be true of *many* (πολύς) in the other.

This idiom is, I think, a means of focusing on the larger quantities involved.<sup>10</sup> “All the eggs” may not be very many if I’m contemplating the typical egg carton that only holds 12 eggs. But “many eggs” could well imply far more than a dozen. Jesus’ ransom was paid for *many*. His death was adequate provision for an entire world of lost humanity. And that is many indeed!

But come back with me to Mark 15 and read Mark’s description of the cross in light of his earlier theological explanations. Think once more about that haunting, agonized cry,

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Why? Why was he forsaken by God? Why did he die? If you were to ask Mark, I think he would have replied very simply. He gave his life to set many free.

---

<sup>10</sup> My OT colleague, Dr. Alan Ingalls, would say it this way: “The switch to ‘many’ serves a rhetorical function of emphasizing the large number, while ‘all’ emphasizes only completeness or comprehensiveness.” In other words, there’s a reason for using *many* when referring to *all*. (Dr. Ingalls is not responsible for my explanations above, but he has helped me be more precise—and has perhaps saved me from a lexical fallacy in my original draft. For that I thank him.)