Mark Lesson 51 (2023)

**JESUS’ DEATH ON THE CROSS**

*(Subtitle: The Power of Unconditional Love)*

Mark 15:21-47

Key Verse: 15:34

“And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’).

 In a bustling city, there was a dedicated teacher named Sarah. Her students came from diverse backgrounds, but she noticed one of her students, a young boy named Alex, often seemed distant and troubled. He was frequently disruptive in class, lashing out at his classmates and teachers. She realized that what Alex needed most was not lectures or discipline but love and understanding. She discovered that Alex was facing a difficult home life and had experienced more than his fair share of hardships at a tender age. Despite the challenges, Sarah responded to Alex with unwavering patience and kindness. She listened to his stories, offered encouragement, and never gave up on him. Over the course of months, something remarkable happened. Alex’s behavior started to change. He became less aggressive, more engaged in class, and even developed a passion for art. Sarah’s persistent love and support had touched his heart in ways she couldn’t express in words. Years later, Alex returned to visit Sarah, now a successful artist and a beacon of hope in his community. He said, *“You showed me what love and acceptance look like when I needed it the most. Your love transformed my life.”* This story is a beautiful reminder of the transformative power of love – love that touches lives, brings about positive change, and offers hope in the most challenging circumstances.

 In a similar vein to how Sarah’s unwavering love and encouragement had a profound impact on Alex’s life, we will focus on the concept of the power of love in a broader context today. Our focus will be on Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus’ crucifixion is one of the most significant and profound events in human history. Mark vividly portrays the crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus, underscoring the love and forgiveness he extended, even amid the agonizing ordeal of his crucifixion.

 Our exploration begins with the arduous journey of Jesus to Golgotha. In verse 21, we read, “A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.” The fact that Jesus either did not or could not carry the crosspiece of his crucifixion device reflects the intensity of his suffering and exhaustion. In an effort to expedite the process, Simon of Cyrene, an onlooker, was forced to carry the cross.

 In verses 22-27, we are presented with the grim and brutal reality of Jesus’ crucifixion. Look at verses 22-24. “They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means ‘the place of the skull’). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.” Probably, the wine mixed with myrrh was given to the crucified to reduce the pain like anesthesia. However, it was not an act of mercy. It was done to make their labor of crucifying easier. Jesus refused this drink, choosing to endure not only death but also the excruciating agony of dying for the sins of all humankind.

 Mark mentioned Jesus’ actual crucifixion without a detailed description, assuming that his Roman readers would be familiar with its horrors. But for us today, it’s essential to understand the profound suffering Jesus endured. Crucifixion was one of the cruelest methods of execution in ancient times. The condemned person would be stripped of their clothing and nailed to a wooden cross. Nails are driven through their hands and feet, or ropes are often used to secure them to the crossbeam. Then, the cross, along with the person, would be raised upright and anchored in the ground. The position on the cross caused excruciating pain, primarily due to the constriction of the nails or ropes. Breathing became difficult, and the body’s weight hanging from the arms could lead to suffocation over time. The pain and suffering Jesus endured on the cross are almost beyond our imagination. It’s a form of execution so horrifying that most of us would likely choose any other means of death.

 Moving to verses 25-27, we learn that it was 9:00 in the morning when Jesus, along with two criminals, was executed. In a twisted display of irony, Jesus was labeled the chief offender with a written notice above his head that read, *“THE KING OF THE JEWS.”* Pilate, who wrote it, did so to mock the Jewish religious leaders and the crowd that had demanded Jesus’ crucifixion. This proclamation held a more profound truth that was concealed in sarcasm, for indeed, Jesus was the King, not just for the Jews, but of all humanity, and his crucifixion held profound significance beyond the immediate circumstances.

 In verses 28-32, we witness the continued barrage of insults hurled at Jesus by various individuals, including two criminals crucified alongside him, passersby, and other Jewish religious leaders. Verses 29-32 capture the verbal abuse he endured. Look at verses 29-32. “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, come down from the cross and save yourself!’ 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! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down from the cross, that we may see and believe.’ Those crucified with him heaped the insults on him.” In this section, we witness the cruelty and hostility of the onlookers and those who opposed Jesus. Their taunts and insults added emotional and psychological torment to the physical agony Jesus was already enduring.

This conduct exemplifies the sickness of fallen humanity, revealing the extent to which people can be driven to cruelty. At the same time, the total humiliation of Jesus illustrates his submission to God’s will as the Suffering Servant, as foretold in Isaiah 53:3, “He was despised and rejected by humankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.” In many ways, Jesus sets an example for all who are called to be servants of God. It is a reminder of what the apostle Paul expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:31 – dying daily to oneself to live in Christ. Just as Jesus endured the insults and mockery, his response is a testament to humility and submission to God’s divine plan.

Verses 33-41 provide a vivid account of the events that transpired when Jesus died on the cross. These events include extraordinary occurrences: the unusual darkness that covered the land in the morning, Jesus’ two loud cries, the tearing of the temple curtain, and the confession of the Roman centurion. Each of these events carries great significance, but we will place our primary focus on Jesus’ poignant cry from the cross.

Let’s take a closer look at verses 34-37. “And at three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema 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.’ Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, 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 utterance of ***“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani”*** by Jesus – meaning ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*** – expresses the profound depth of his agony more powerful than any words spoken on the cross. Those who heard it and misunderstood may have thought Jesus was invoking Elijah for assistance. However, the true meaning behind Jesus’ cry is a matter of profound significance.

As Jesus hung on the cross, bearing the weight of the world’s sins and suffering, he cried out with the words of David’s psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This was not a question seeking an answer; it was a poignant and rhetorical expression of his deep agony. It conveyed the affirmation of his relationship with God as his Father and the overwhelming feeling that, at that moment, the Father had turned away from him.

It is essential to understand that God, in his triune nature, did not literally abandon Jesus. The members of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – are eternally united. However, the sense in which God had forsaken Jesus was that the Father withdrew from communion with the Son. No longer did he show his love toward his son. Instead, Jesus had become the object of God’s wrath, for he was the sinner’s substitute. In essence, Jesus became a sin for us as Apostle Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” A holy God cannot look favorably upon sin, and Jesus willingly bore God’s curse and judgment for sin.

This separation was not a literal or permanent abandonment, but it was an actual event experienced in time and history. It was a profound and symbolic moment in which Jesus, out of his immense love for humanity, allowed himself to be forsaken by God.

As we reflect on the depth of Jesus’ love, we realize that his willingness to be forsaken in our place is the epitome of love. His love for fallen humanity is so profound and unwavering that he would endure even the feeling of abandonment by God to offer us acceptance and forgiveness. In Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,” highlighting the sacrificial love that led Jesus to be forsaken so that we may find salvation and reconciliation.

 The writings of Apostle Paul revealed a deep and selfless love for his people, the Israelites. In his words, we can feel genuine concern for their spiritual well-being and salvation. In Romans 9:1-3, for example, he passionately expresses, “I speak the truth in Christ- I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race.” Paul’s love for his people mirrors the profound willingness of Christ to be forsaken in our place. It signifies the depth of love and commitment to the well-being of others, even to the extent of enduring abandonment and suffering on their behalf. This is the Power of Love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross.

 In verse 37, we witness again that as Jesus approached his final moment, he let out a strong, loud cry. This was not the feeble gasp of an exhausted and defeated man. It was a triumphant shout of victory. While exact words are not documented in Mark, they could have been, “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* (Lk. 23:46) or “*It is finished.*” (Jn. 19:30) To cry out with such conviction and hope of victory in the face of death is a testament to the extraordinary nature of Jesus.

 Look at verses 38-39. “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’” Examining these verses, we observe that the temple curtain was torn from top to bottom, a symbol event recorded by all synoptic gospel writers. While Mark does not offer an explicit explanation, this act represents God’s opening of the way into his presence through the death of his son, Jesus Christ. Additionally, the centurion who stood before Jesus during his crucifixion witnessed the entire process, including how Jesus faced such a brutal death. As a result, he concluded not only that Jesus was innocent but that he also manifested a divine nature. The centurion’s declaration, “Surely this man was the Son of God,” reflects the profound impact of Jesus’ sacrifice on those who were present at the crucifixion.

In verses 40-47, we encounter several individuals who bore witness to Jesus’ death on the cross and took care of his burial. Notable among them were three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. These women had been devout supporters of Jesus and his ministry, standing by him through his final moments.

According to verses 42-46, as the evening approached, likely around 4:30 p.m. before the sunset on that fateful Friday, a man named Joseph of Arimathea approached Pilate with a bold request for Jesus’ body. After confirming Jesus’ passing, Pilate granted Joseph custody of Jesus’ corpse. Joseph’s actions were a final, heartfelt tribute to the Lord, ensuring he received a proper burial.

The devoted love displayed by these women and Joseph of Arimathea stands in stark contrast to the mockery and ridicule of Jesus by his enemies. Their unwavering commitment to Jesus was born from the genuine love they had experienced through him. As they gazed upon the crucifixion of Jesus, despite its heart-wrenching nature, they began to grasp the profound power of love that Jesus had demonstrated through his sacrificial death on the cross.

As we conclude today’s sermon, let us contemplate the profound significance of Jesus’ death on the cross. His crucifixion, though a brutal and inhumane act, serves as the ultimate manifestation of God’s unchanging love for humanity, as eloquently expressed in Romans 5:8, “But demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

In the haunting words of Jesus from the cross, *“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*, we hear not only the agony of Jesus in his final moments but also his unwavering determination to bear the weight of our sins on our behalf. In willingly taking on our condemnation and enduring the curse, we find the highest form of love for sinners. He embraced abandonment so that we might experience complete acceptance, forgiveness, and the healing that makes us whole.

 In the words of John Shelby Spong, *“Without forgiveness, no friendship could ever be sustained, no marriage could ever be successful, and no partnership could ever last*.” Forgiveness is the vital thread that weaves together the tapestry of our relationships, liberating us from loneliness, isolation, and fear. It is the very matrix of community, the meaning of any relationship. The God revealed in Christ Jesus is the embodiment of the Power of Love. He not only defines the purpose and meaning of our existence but also illuminates the path we must take (Jn. 14:6). Through Christ’s resounding demonstration of love, we find the way to the Father, the source of all love.

As we conclude our sermon, may we carry with us the profound truth of Christ’s sacrifice, acknowledging the depth of God’s love and redemption it extends to us. Just as the young boy Alex demonstrated, people bear deep wounds. What they need, above all, is not mere lectures or superficial religiosity but rather the unwavering love and support of our Heavenly Father, as exemplified by Jesus on the cross.

Love and forgiveness enable us to see each other as we are. Forgiveness is, in fact, synonymous with love. Without forgiveness, we cannot truly experience the richness of life or undergo the internal transformation that makes us whole. May we go forth from this place today; we may live out the power of love, embrace forgiveness, and extend grace to one another.