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Passion Scenes: Questions at the Cross

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TEXT: Mark 15:16-39 (NASB1995)

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling

Elijah." And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Dear friends, grace and peace for you from God, our father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've been a lifetime fan of the Minnesota Twins baseball team. When I was a boy, some of my heroes were Zoilo Versalles or Bob Alisson, Jim Kaat, Harmon Killebrew, or Tony Oliva. I cheered them to victory and hoped they'd win every game. I watched the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 1965 World Series defeat my beloved Minnesota Twins. The Dodger hero of the series was left fielder Lou Johnson. So I read with interest a story recently that Johnson tried for over 30 years to recover his championship ring, which he lost to drug dealers in 1971. Unfortunately, Johnson had had drugs and alcohol cost him everything from the magical season and his World Series victory: his uniform, the glove he wore in the field, the bat he used to hit the home run in the deciding game of the series, and of course, that championship ring. When Dodgers President Bob Graziano learned that Johnson's ring was about to be auctioned off on the Internet, he pulled out his checkbook and wrote a check for \$3,457 to purchase Johnson's ring. He did for Johnson what Johnson couldn't do for himself, and then he gave the ring to Johnson. He paid the price to redeem the ring.

At the beginning of this Passion Week for us as Christians, we remember that God did for us through His son, Jesus, our savior, what we could never do for ourselves. He paid the price in the blood spilled of His precious son, Jesus. He paid the price for our redemption, for our forgiveness, to lift us out of our bondage and to set us free into a new life. God redeemed us in Jesus Christ. And that's the significance of the events of this Holy Week for us. Right on the heels of Jesus' humble ride on a donkey's back through the gates of Jerusalem as the crowd and children hailed Jesus as the delivering king, we know how quickly the script of the story flips to a sequence of suffering that boggles the mind. Jesus was betrayed, then arrested by the soldiers with force. As Judas' kiss pointed Him out, He was abandoned by His disciples, His friends. He stood trial before the high priest and the Jewish religious leaders brought many false

witnesses to testify against Jesus. Ever since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, the religious leaders had been seeking to kill Jesus. Then he was led before Pontius Pilate. He went through a second trial in the Roman court. Pilate was the Roman governor with the authority for justice in the region. Pilate was amazed that Jesus would be silent before all the accusations brought. Pilate, though, also was bewildered by the crowd, who, a few days ago were praising Him, now were screaming for his head. "Crucify Him," they said. Pilate, wishing to please the crowd and fearing for his own life and fearing a riot, asked them this question: What do you wish me to do with Jesus? "Crucify Him," they said.

What's puzzling, but flawed, is that we think we are Christ's judge. We think we can determine whether He's relevant to our lives today in the 21st century. We think we get to decide whether Jesus is, in fact, the son of God or not. But the truth is that the manner with which we respond to Pilate's question, "What would you have me do with Jesus?", judges us. The way we respond to that question determines our eternal destiny. Jesus is the savior of the world, regardless of how you judge Him. "So what would you have me do with Jesus?" Pilate asks. His own disciples betrayed, denied, and deserted Him. And the religious leaders, as we said, had wanted to kill Him. Ironically, when Jesus had shown His power over death itself by raising Lazarus from the dead, they wanted to silence Jesus and end His influence. They feared that Jesus was going to turn the whole understanding of God and our relationship with God on its head, and their power would be gone.

The crowd was amazing in their fickleness as they now rejected Jesus and called for His execution. The Roman soldiers played with Jesus for sport – like a cat would bat around a captured mouse. They put a crown of thorns on His head and a purple robe on His shoulders, they whooped him over the head with sticks and they beat Him with their fists and asked Him, "Who hit you, if you're the king of the Jews?" They pretended to feign loyalty to Jesus as king. And when they were done with their sport, they led Him out to the hill, called Golgotha, the "place of the skull." It was hanging time. And they crucified Him there on the crest of a hill called Mount Calvary. As He was crucified, His blood spilled out, yes, from the crown of his head, but His hands and His feet and from His back, that had been ripped open with the cutting whip when He had been tortured by them.

The mockery continued in a whole variety of ways, as yet another question comes to those who are mocking him with their wagging heads, they asked, "Why don't you come down from the cross?" The religious leaders resonated with that very question, saying, "He saved others. He can't save Himself. If He's the king of Israel, come down from the cross and then we'll see and believe." But this is the profound truth: He could not save Himself and save us. The nails didn't hold Him on Calvary's cross; His love for us kept him there. So He literally loved us to death by sacrificing His life on that cross. And as his blood red ran down Calvary's wooden beam, spilling into the humus, the earth, His blood, Emmanuel's blood, is also on our hands. I have betrayed Him. I have lived a self-centered life. I have rebelled against His right to rule over me. I have resisted His control. I have failed Him. His blood is on my hands, and yet His blood willingly sacrificed in His life, given for us, washes our hearts clean from all sin and all impurity. The blood of Jesus atones for our sins, and Christ's death as He cries loudly and breathed His last. And the veil in the temple is ripped from top to bottom, grants us access to the very presence of God. Jesus' sacrificial death allows us to draw near to our Heavenly Father. Do you remember the verse in Ephesians 2 where it says, "We were far away, have now been brought near by the precious blood of Christ."?

So Jesus was no victim, the one for whom angels sang at his birth, who healed the sick and opened the eyes of the blind, who allowed the lame to walk and raised the dead to new life, was not a victim. He was magnificent in His defeat because he willingly surrendered His life to save us. It's an amazing sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us. It says that as Jesus was crucified, it was this hour of darkness. And why wouldn't it be – the light of the world hung dying on a cross. The Lord of the Cosmos, the Lord of Life was willingly giving His life. And so darkness saturated the moment and darkness filled the land. And then comes this question, posed by Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The truth is that Jesus became sin for us. He bore divine judgment, taking our place for the judgment we should have received. So even the Father turned His face from Him as He became sin and received the judgment of eternity upon Himself. In Isaiah 53 it said, "The Lord was pleased to crush Him, that we might be forgiven."

There's an amazing story told by Henri Nouwen, Christian writer and theologian. He tells the moving story from the country of Paraguay. It's about a doctor who cared very much for the poor people in his little village. He would often treat them free of charge. But others, the authorities, the police, the government. and the village didn't like the

doctor. They didn't like his politics. They thought he was stirring up foment among the poor people, and he was too popular for them to take on directly. So instead, they kidnapped his son. They took the doctor's son, arrested him, put him in jail, and mercilessly tortured him. They tortured him so much, too much, that the son died. When the news of the son's death spread throughout the village, they wanted to hold a huge demonstration march. They wanted to carry the doctor's son's body through the village and demonstrate to the media, to the newspapers, all that had gone on. But the doctor father said, "No, I don't want to do that. I just want a funeral in the church here in the village, we will show in our own way." When the people arrived for the funeral, they had a surprise in store. The father had taken the body of the son just as he had found it in that prison cell on a blood-soaked, dirty mattress. Instead of all being dressed up in a nice suit and an expensive coffin, the corpse of the doctor's son in that little village was naked, lying on a mattress covered with scars from his torment. It was the strongest possible protest imaginable. What that father did was put the injustices of his village on grotesque display. Then Henri Nouwen asks,

Isn't that what God did at Calvary? He spread out for the whole world to see the injustice of this world. The cross showed what kind of world we live in: a world of violence, a world of cruelty, a world of injustice. And what kind of God we have: a God of sacrificial love who gives Himself for us.

Jesus was forsaken and darkness had its hour so that Jesus could take upon Himself the divine judgment that we deserved. All the grotesque, ugly evil of our world was vented on Jesus Christ. He took our place.

So we returned to Pilate's question: "What should I do with Jesus?" The soldier, the centurion at the foot of the cross said, "This one certainly was the son of God." So in this Passion Week, we realize that Jesus died for us and was raised from the dead, as it had been planned by God before the foundation of the world. Remember the words in Ephesians 1, where it said, "God chose us before the foundation of the world." And in Jesus Christ, we are holy and blameless before Him. We have redemption through Christ's blood, which He lavished upon us. So we echo the words of the dying thief at Jesus' side: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Now you have to answer the question: what will you do with Jesus?
Amen.