

5. That Clever Ending: Mark as an
Early Understanding of the Death of
Jesus

Where is the interpretation of the death of Jesus in Mark?
(10:45; cf. Isa 35:10; Jer 31:11)

Why did Jesus have to die?

One of the most basic questions for a Christian, and yet one of the most puzzling. As a teen growing up I knew why Jesus died - it was to provide forgiveness for my sins. And yet, when we dig into the NT we find a more nuanced answer. If you asked one of the writers of the NT why Jesus died, the answer you would receive would depend upon when you asked him - early 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s-90s.

Jesus died

Jesus died for me

Jesus died for me, for my sins

This is a gross oversimplification and yet it highlights a developing awareness that the death of Jesus was somehow an event that had personal implications, 'for me' and that it related to sin.

Luke 24:44-47

Jesus with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Possible starting points - first gospel of Mark, or first epistle - I Thessalonians. Our starting point is Luke's account of Jesus' post resurrection appearance to two disciples, then he explained using the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms 'what must be fulfilled'. - (1) Messiah must suffer; (2) Messiah must rise; (3) repentance through his name. How might we find out which texts Jesus shared? How about Acts, Luke's second volume.

Ps 16:10 in Acts 2:31 (cf. vv. 25-28)

Peter at Pentecost:

Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah,
saying,

‘He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.’

(cf. Ps 110:1 in Acts 2:34b-35; Ps 2:7 in Acts 13:33)

‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.’
Starting backwards! We find a number of quotes from the psalms in his account that relate
to the resurrection of Jesus.

Ps 118:1 in Acts 4:11

Peter to the Council:

This Jesus is

'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.'

'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.'
When we come to quotes used by early church figures they simply tell us that Jesus had to die.

Ps 2:1-2 in Acts 4:25-26

Believers praising God after Peter and John's release:

It is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

'Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

The death of Jesus is within a context of ongoing rebellion by the Gentiles, the 'people', the kings of the earth and rulers.

Isa 53:7b-8 in Acts 8:32-33

The passage Philip explained to the Ethiopian eunuch:

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

In Acts 8 Philip explains to an Ethiopian a passage he is struggling with – from Isaiah 53 – a passage extensively used to explain the death of Jesus. But note what he omits and includes – he omits references to ‘the one who bears our iniquities, who carried our diseases, who was stricken, struck down be God, ‘stricken for the transgression of his people’, an ‘offering for sin’. Maybe the Ethiopian read these passages, but the passage highlighted by Luke refers to the slaughter of a lamb-like figure – his death was a denial of justice.

Why did Jesus have to die?

How did Jesus answer this question to the grieving disciples? Very simply, 'it was part of God's plan'. That was probably as much as they could take in at that time. My experience as a pastor tells me that in instances of unexpected death - a daughter is killed in a car crash, a young mother dies of cancer, the grieving relatives need hope, not an theological explanation as to why the driver was driving too fast, or why cancer develops! For the disciples it is not simply that the unexpected happened (death of Jesus), but that the theologically unexpected happened (the long-hoped for saviour of Israel was murdered by the very ones he had come to save). Let's move on. How was Jesus' explanation reflected in the preaching of the early church leaders? Was it something they kept to themselves?

How was this explanation reflected in the apostles' preaching?

Let's move on. How was Jesus' explanation reflected in the preaching of the early church leaders? I would like to highlight for you a consistent emphasis we find in the sermons of Peter, Stephen, and the early sermons of Paul. I'm going to fire at you a series of targeted quotes from various sermons (not proof texting, its simply that a 30 minute sermons allows for little context!).

Acts 2:23

Peter at Pentecost:

'[...] this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.'

How is the death of Jesus presented? Peter to worshipers in the temple? Rejection, murder!

Acts 3:14

Peter in Solomon's Portico:

'But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.'

Acts 4:10b

Peter before the Council:

'[...] this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.'

Peter to the council after he was arrested for proclaiming the resurrection in the temple -
'you crucified'

Acts 5:30-31

Peter and the apostles to the Council:

‘The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.’

Peter to the Council after being rearrested for preaching in the temple - ‘you killed’

Acts 7:52

Stephen to the Council:

'Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.'

Stephen to the Council, after being arrested - an act of betrayal, murder, and rebellion.

Acts 13:27-28

Paul to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia:

'[...] the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognise him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him. Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed.'

Paul to Jews in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (Turkey) - act of ignorance, a dreadful mistake. A 15 year jump!

1 Thess 1:10; 2:14b-15a; 4:14

Paul:

[we] wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—
Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

‘[...] you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they
did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets,
[...]

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so,
through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

Is this just Luke's view? No, in Paul's earliest epistle, 1 Thessalonians, the death of Jesus is recounted in much the same terms, simply the event that preceded the resurrection. If this epistle was written in the early 50s, it means that for the first 20 years of early Christianity the death of Jesus played little role. Other matters dominated. We should note that reality does not always match texts, that simply proving the texts say something does not prove that this was the only thing being said.

So what drove the church forward?

The pain of the cross was drowned out by the joy of the resurrection (Theological speculation about Jesus' death did not lead to the disciples 'creating' a resurrection myth). History tells us that when a leader dies, movements usually die. In the joy of Liverpool's three goals one forgets about the three goals they conceded - another wonderful act (day of restoration).

The “Earliest” Gospel



Note the emphasis on the Lord's great and glorious day (contrast)

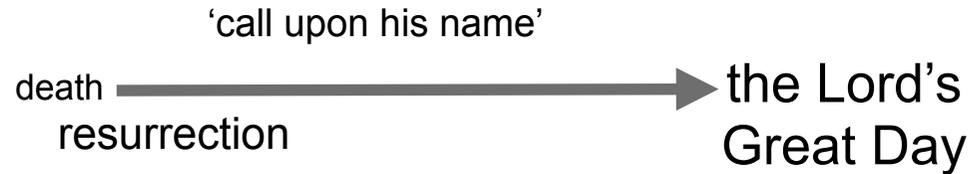
Acts 2:17-22 (cf. 10:36-43)

And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

To call upon his name - call upon his character (not based on your understanding of the tabernacle service/calendar). Jesus death = murder, salvation is as it always has been, located in the mind, the heart, the character of Yahweh.

Something missing? Everything's about the future, what about the present? What is Peter doing - reading events in light of the OT (day of the Lord, call upon his name). He has no time to come up with new theology, he simply interprets events through familiar concepts.

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How do we know we will be forgiven?

How do we know we will be forgiven if we call upon his name? Luke has introduced us to the murdered saviour, the murdered risen saviour, who extends the hand of forgiveness to the very ones who instigated the ultimate act of injustice.

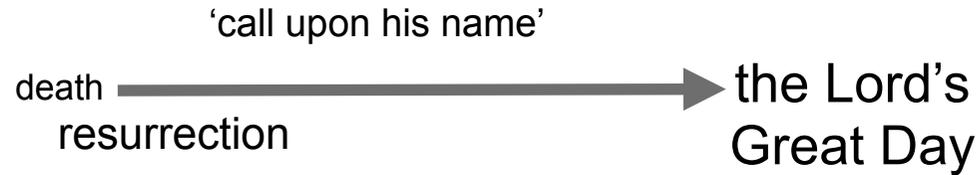
Acts 2:36-38

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The “Earliest” Gospel



Let me reverse the rabbinic rule of moving from the lesser to the greater. If God would forgive those who murdered his son if they called upon his son’s name (the greater), how is he likely to respond if you or I call upon his name?

Secure your future, next week we will look at the role of the death of Jesus in changing your present. Amen.

Mark 16:1 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

What is the ending of the Gospel? Early manuscripts do not include verses 9-20. The resurrection is a twist in the tale which the disciples/women were not expecting. As a reader we know about it due to the three passion predictions.

