

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 15:16-22

Topic

Simon of Cyrene has his life transformed after being conscripted to carry the Cross of Jesus Christ part of the way to Calvary

Title

"Sinful Simon Met the God-Man Going to the Cross"

Introduction

When Sean Connery, in *The Untouchables*, derides his attacker for bringing a knife to a gun fight, he doesn't realize it's an ambush. Moments later he's sprayed with machine gun fire.

Superior weaponry isn't always obvious. That's no where more true than in what we refer to as spiritual warfare.

I would go so far as to say we almost always wonder, if not worry, if our spiritual weapons are up to the task.

Part of our confusion has to do with our understanding of what constitutes victory. In spiritual warfare, **victory can look an awful lot like defeat.**

If a believer is persecuted for his or her faith, then martyred, praising Jesus with their final breath... Is that a defeat, or is it a victory?

It's a substantial victory in terms of spiritual warfare, even though it appears, to the nonbelieving onlooker, like a defeat.

Mark is moving closer to the Cross upon which Jesus will die. First he recalls the Roman soldiers mocking the Lord, and beating Him, and spitting upon Him.

It was part of the spiritual warfare Jesus was waging against His enemies. Despite appearances that He was being defeated, Jesus was victorious over an entire garrison of soldiers.

Spiritual warfare and its weapons and its warriors will be our theme as we work through these verses.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Jesus Demonstrates The Weapons Available To You In Spiritual Warfare, and #2 Jesus Identifies The Warriors Available To Him In Spiritual Warfare.

#1 Jesus Demonstrates The Weapons Available To You In Spiritual Warfare

(v16-20)

In *The Avengers*, Thor's brother, Loki, is captured by Captain America and Iron Man. It turns out that he let himself be captured so that he would be taken to the hovercraft to be on board to aid in its destruction, and the downfall of the super heroes.

Jesus was captured by the Roman soldiers and the Jewish Temple guards. He let Himself be captured because He was on His way to the Cross, to destroy the works of the devil, and to conquer sin and death.

Jesus had a single objective His entire life: To die on the Cross as God's final sacrifice for the sins of the world. In the Gospel of John, talking to His Heavenly Father about the Cross, He said, "for this purpose I came to this hour" (12:27).

It seems, in regular warfare, there is always a heavily defended hill to be conquered. Heartbreak Ridge comes to mind, for you who can remember the Korean War. Hamburger Hill in Vietnam is another example.

Jesus' objective involved conquering a hill. As we will see, the hill was called Calvary. To get there, Jesus would have to go through the Roman soldiers holding Him. He'd have to survive, first their scourging (which He had done); and second, their mocking (which we see here).

[Mar 15:16 Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison.](#)

One of the commentators I consulted, who seemed familiar with Roman customs of the day, insists that this treatment of Jesus was unprecedented. It wasn't how Romans normally treated a prisoner in their custody who was on his way to be crucified.

Mark says, "the whole garrison" was involved. The overkill is a clue that something sinister was going on.

It's not a stretch to say that Satan was inspiring them to mock and mistreat the Lord. The Bible says that nonbelievers are taken captive by Satan to do his will.

What was the devil's objective?

He may have been coming at Jesus hard in order to convince the Lord to say *"No!"* to the Cross.

Three-and-one-half years earlier, after Jesus stepped forward to begin His public ministry, Satan had tempted Him in the Judean wilderness. One of his temptations was to offer Jesus all the kingdoms of the world without having to go to the Cross.

It seems likely the devil would again attempt to derail Jesus from going to the Cross. He may have thought Jesus was at His most temptable on account of the things Jesus had recently said aloud:

- The devil had heard Jesus plead with His Father, in Gethsemane, three times asking Him to "take this cup" of suffering from Him.
- The devil had heard Jesus tell Peter as He was being arrested that He had at His disposal twelve legions of angels, who could at any moment be called upon to put an end to His suffering.

This is my conjecture, but perhaps the devil thought that Jesus could yet be coerced into abandoning His life's mission. That He could break Him, as it were, through psychological and physical torture.

Action movies always have a torture scene, where the villain tries to 'break' the hero. After beating the good guy mercilessly, they pull-out some psychological torture, e.g., threatening to kill innocent family members.

Mar 15:17 And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head,

Mocking Jesus as King of the Jews was a physical torture, for sure. But it was psychological, too.

After all, Jesus WAS King of the Jews, and more. He was, and is, King over everyone, and everything.

It was a genuine temptation for Him to end His suffering by acting as King, perhaps by calling on those twelve legions of angels for an air strike to deliver Him.

Mar 15:18 and began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

The verb tenses that are used indicate this went on for quite some time. They "began" to torture Jesus, and they kept at it.

Mar 15:19 Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him.

Mark is very matter-of-fact in his presentation of the torture. He's methodical. It almost lacks emotion.

Sometimes the facts themselves evoke more emotional reaction than a visual representation.

I was watching *In the Heart of the Sea*, the recent Ron Howard directed film that purports to tell the true story that inspired Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. They got to the point where it was time to reveal that the open-ocean survivors had to resort to cannibalism. Instead of showing anything, one of the characters dispassionately described the proper procedures for cannibalizing a human being.

It was so much more effective than showing it would have been. It left me sick to my stomach.

Make no mistake. Jesus was being tortured.

Mar 15:20 And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.

They had dressed Jesus as the King of the Jews, and now they put His clothes back on. It was symbolic of His victory over the soldiers.

Instead of taking-up His deity to save Himself, represented by the kingly clothing they had dressed Him in, Jesus went forward clothed as a man, onward up the hill, to the Cross.

Let me ask you a question: Do you think Satan is stupid?

Clearly he is not stupid. Twisted, hateful, vicious, yes; malevolent, for sure; but not stupid.

God had revealed His plan to come into the world as a man and defeat Satan all the way back in the Garden of Eden. From that moment forward, the devil tried to keep Jesus from ever being born:

- He incited Cain to murder his brother, Abel, in an attempt to cut-off the godly line.
- He incited demons to somehow pollute human genetics by having them marry and mate with human woman, producing weird offspring.
- The devil tried to have baby Moses killed, so that Israel would have no deliverer.

When the birth of Jesus was announced, Satan incited King Herod to have all the young children murdered in an attempt to keep Jesus from accomplishing His mission.

I don't think Satan believed he would win if Jesus died on the Cross. I think the devil did everything he could to stop the Lord from ever getting to the Cross - and that included this torture by the Roman garrison.

Jesus was victorious because His objective wasn't to escape custody, or to kill the soldiers, or to overthrow the Roman Empire. His objective was to go to the Cross, to go to Calvary, to take the hill... And after the mocking He was still on mission.

We agreed earlier that martyrdom was a spiritual victory. All you have to do is read the story of Stephen in the Book of Acts to see that the death of a Christian, for his or her faith, defeats our enemies.

It's the nuclear option and Satan has no counter strategy against it.

You and I are probably not going to be martyred. Christians certainly *are* being martyred, at an ever-growing rate. But I don't really expect it in my life, in America, anytime soon.

We can be, and we are, being mocked and mistreated. I'd go so far as to say we are being psychologically abused by the devil using nonbelievers - his 'garrison' - out in the world.

It's spiritual warfare; yet our first impulse is usually something carnal like demanding our rights. We attempt to fight the battle with weapons that are similar to those being used against us.

The early Christians were impressed with how Jesus handled His mistreatment. Peter wrote,

1Pe 2:23 ... when [Jesus] was reviled, [He] did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;

Let me give you a disclaimer: We live in a free society, and we *do* have civil rights. I'm not advocating always abandoning them, or saying that we can never invoke them.

I **am** saying that our witness, and the Gospel, are more important than our rights, and that means sometimes we should *act* and *react* the way Jesus demonstrated for us when He was tortured by the garrison.

Will it appear as though you are being defeated? Yes, it will; but you will be victorious on the spiritual level, where things really matter.

The apostle Paul, in discussing spiritual warfare, said, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12). When your boss is mistreating you... Or your friends or family are mocking you... There is something deeper going on behind the scenes, something spiritual below the surface. They are being taken captive by the devil to do his will.

Draw from your arsenal. God the Holy Spirit lives in you and can give you peace and patience and perspective as you pray and stand upon the Word of God. He can tell you what to say, what not to say, and when to say or not say it!

Jesus defeated the garrison as a Spirit-filled man. So can *you* defeat your enemies.

Maybe this will help. Real spiritual victory is me being Christlike in the midst of my sufferings. Me being worldly is always a defeat.

#2 Jesus Identifies The Warriors Available To Him In Spiritual Warfare

(v21-22)

The Huns, led by the ruthless Shan Yu, invade China, breaching the Great Wall via grappling hooks. This prompts a panicked soldier to light the sentry fires. As a result of the invasion, each family is given a conscription notice. Mulan's father, Fa Zhou, has to serve in the army, but due to his age and previous war injuries, it's doubtful that he will survive. Mulan secretly disguises herself as a man, then takes her father's conscription notice, armor, and weapons so that he will not have to go.

Especially in times of war, those in authority have broad powers to conscript people and property.

On His way from the Praetorium to Calvary, Jesus falls under the weight of the Cross He is carrying. A passerby is conscripted into carrying the Cross for the Lord.

Mar 15:21 Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross.

A condemned man would typically be guarded by four soldiers and preceded by another soldier who would bear a placard stating the crime of which the prisoner had been found guilty. There's some evidence that the soldier with the placard would also shout out the crime as the procession proceeded. The lead soldier might be riding a horse, but not always.

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They would purposely take a long route to the place of crucifixion, winding through the streets. The Romans wanted to instill fear, as a deterrent to crime.

The man being taken to his place of execution would be carrying either the whole cross, or the cross beam, or the upright.

The Bible doesn't specify what part of His Cross Jesus was carrying.

We are not directly told, but it is safe to assume that Jesus fell under the weight of the Cross as He made His way towards the place of His crucifixion.

He had already suffered tremendously, and was weakened:

- He had been awake all night.
- He had sweat great drops of blood while praying in Gethsemane, indicating great physical stress.
- He had been handled roughly at His arrest.
- He was struck at the house of Annas.
- He was struck repeatedly in His trial before Caiphas.
- Pilate had Him scourged, a vicious whipping that often left men dead, but certainly meant massive blood loss and shock.
- The garrison had beaten Him for an extended period of time, hitting the thorny crown on His head repeatedly with a solid rod.

It's amazing Jesus was still alive, let alone that He could carry the Cross any distance at all.

Let alone that He would go on to grapple with dark forces for several hours on the Cross.

At that moment, Jesus had no human strength. He could go no further.

Have you ever felt crushed by the weight of your suffering? I've never been in a physical place like that. There have been a few times in my life when the trial that I was in, that Pam and I were in, was so crippling psychologically that I didn't see how we could possibly get up from it, and go on.

The apostle Paul was all too familiar with crushing suffering:

2Co 1:8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

2Co 1:9 Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,

In your walk with Jesus, you **will** sometimes have more than you can handle; but it will never be more than the Lord can help you carry.

Just when it seemed Jesus would not make it to Calvary, the Roman soldiers leading Jesus to His crucifixion conscripted a passerby to carry the Cross. He's identified as "Simon, a Cyrenian."

Cyrene was in Northern Africa. Think modern Libya. There was a large community of Jews in that region of Africa. The historian, Josephus, tells us that the Pharaoh sent a number of Jews from Egypt to Cyrene around 300BC in order to strengthen Egypt's claim to the region.

Simon may have been on a pilgrimage from Cyrene, some 800 miles away. If so, he'd have been walking for about 60 days in order to arrive at Passover.

Alternatively, he may have been a local who was distinguished from other "Simon's" by giving his place of origin.

One of the soldiers saw him, went over to him, and laid his sword on Simon's shoulder to signify he was being conscripted to help.

Way to ruin Passover. Carrying a criminals bloody cross to the place of execution for the oppressing Roman army was on no Jewish person's bucket list.

The Roman soldier who tapped Simon with his sword certainly seemed in command, but I think, with spiritual hindsight, we'd say it was God acting providentially.

Providence is God providing for His eternal plan by acting in history, but without violating human free will.

Simon's being conscripted provided that Jesus would get to Calvary and fulfill His mission.

If we pause for a moment, we might recall there were two additional things that Jesus had recently conscripted for His use:

- On Palm Sunday, to make His entry into Jerusalem, Jesus rode a donkey. The disciples were told to go into town where they'd find the donkey tied-up outside. If asked why they were taking the donkey, they were to answer, "The Master has need of it." Jesus *conscripted* the donkey.
- To celebrate Passover with His disciples, Jesus told Peter and John to go into town and find a man carrying a pitcher of water.

They were to follow him to a house, then tell the owner that the Lord was going to have Passover in the upper room of his house. Jesus *conscripted* the room.

Those two conscriptions lend credibility to our argument that this was indeed spiritual warfare, with the objective that Jesus take the hill.

The encounter changed Simon's life for eternity. We conclude that his life was transformed by Jesus because of the mention of his two sons, "Alexander and Rufus." Their names, with no further explanation, tell us that they were well-known to the believers reading Mark's Gospel.

It means they were well-known believers.

Some time before the Gospel of Mark was written, Simon received Jesus as his Savior. So did his boys. It was all put in motion by a seemingly random encounter of Simon with a condemned man on His way to be crucified.

Had he been five minutes earlier, or later, he would have missed this divine appointment. It lends credibility to the statement, "There are no coincidences."

Before we leave Simon and Alexander and Rufus, let me share a few facts about them:

- Though we can't say with 100% accuracy it's the same guy, "Rufus" is mentioned by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, where he says, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine" (16:13). If it is the same Rufus, then we see that his mom, Simon's wife, was also a believer, and especially dear to Paul.

- A burial cave in the Kidron Valley discovered in 1941 by E. L. Sukenik, belonging to Cyrenian Jews and dating before 70AD, was found to have an ossuary inscribed twice in Greek "Alexander Son of Simon." An ossuary is a container in which the bones of the dead are kept; it is sometimes called a "bone box." We cannot be certain that this refers to the same person; but it's likely that it does.

Jesus was pressing forward to the Cross, and His Father was giving Him aid along the way. What looked like defeat when Jesus fell was really an incredible victory. Every step He took was hard-fought ground that He was conquering on His way to Calvary.

Mar 15:22 And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull.

In first century Israel, Aramaic was spoken as well as Hebrew and Greek. "Golgotha" is the Aramaic form of the Hebrew word meaning "skull."

I keep saying that the hill was called Calvary. "Calvary" is derived from the Latin *calvaria*, "a skull." We are Skull Chapel of Hanford.

The name cannot mean that skulls were lying there; unburied skulls would not be tolerated by the Jews, and the singular number is against it.

Most probably, the name was derived from the shape of the place. It bore the resemblance of a human skull.

In 1842 a German theologian and biblical scholar from Dresden named Otto Thenius was the first to publish a proposal that the rocky knoll north of the Damascus Gate, which, as Thenius noticed, resembled a skull, was the biblical Golgotha. The site he suggested is today known as Skull Hill or Gordon's Calvary.

While this is the site most accepted by Protestants, we cannot be certain, and there are other suggestions.

The biblical wording does suggest Calvary is a hill. "To the place Golgotha" literally means, "**upon** the Golgotha place." The preposition *upon* denotes not direction but rather *attainment of a position upon*. It is consistent with the view that Golgotha was a knoll - a hill - that could be seen from afar.

Jesus fought His way through the enemy to take the hill. We'll see Him successfully complete His mission in the subsequent verses of chapter fifteen.

Simon of Cyrene was conscripted to be a warrior. It didn't look that way, but it was that way in the spiritual warfare being waged.

It establishes that God has, at His disposal, any number of warriors. Simon was a nonbeliever at the time, but God could use Him.

Obviously, believers are God's primary warriors.

Can you think of a time you were conscripted into serving the Lord? In one sense, **your whole life ought to be lived as if you've been conscripted to bear the Cross, dying to yourself in order to serve the Lord.**

I came across this quote:

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We followers of Christ are born conscripted into a spiritual army. Drafted by re-birth. A duty mandatory and necessary but still voluntary.

Psalm 144:1 reads,

Psa 144:1 Blessed be the LORD my Rock, Who trains my hands for war, And my fingers for battle.

You are a warrior, surrounded by spiritual warfare.

Spiritual victory can look an awful lot like defeat when, in fact, you're winning hard-fought ground.

It's never a defeat to be like Christ.