

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Mark 15:21. In fact, let's look at verse 16 real quick where we read, "Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshipped Him. 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."

We have finished on Mark's gospel, and through Mark's gospel, the six trials that Jesus faced during the night as He headed for Calvary. We are told in John 19:14 that it was 6:00 in the morning that Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified. And here we read of the mistreatment at the hands of these crucifiers, if you will; how the Lord was mocked and abused. I can't imagine putting clothes over a back torn open and then torn off again. But the Lord suffered so that we might live.

And then we get this verse, verse 21, that says this, "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." There are a lot of guys that show up in the Bible that you aren't told much about. But yet if you'll stop to consider them, there's a lot that you might know. Six years ago or so, on Sunday mornings, we spent a couple of months going through (or maybe a little bit longer) looking at those who just kind of popped up in the Bible and then disappeared. And Simon was one of them. There's a fellow in Judges 3:31 (the very last verse), a guy named Shamgar - just shows up for one verse. And yet God points them out, and they have a great impact, and certainly Simon does this morning. And so I thought this would be a good time to stop and consider Simon's life. We have John to thank - John, in writing his gospel; he's the only one that tells us that Jesus went forth bearing His own cross. All of the other gospel accounts (both in Matthew 27, Luke 23 and here in Mark) only mention this ministry or this service of Simon; and so he would be compelled to go forth and bear the cross for Jesus. But first Jesus carried His own cross. We gather from the gospels that, because of the beating that Jesus took and the blows and the loss of blood, He was not strong but weak. He was led out from Pilate's place there

in the Antonia Fortress - four soldiers around Him, another in front of Him carrying His charges upon a board. And it does appear that Jesus might have been able to get to the gate of the city. Matthew says, in chapter 27:32, that it was "as they came out" of the gate that they then grabbed this fellow, Simon. It's important, and I only point it out because, in the Old Testament, when you look at the type of Jesus and His cross, we are told that story there in Genesis 22:2 of Abraham being told to take his only son, Isaac, and to sacrifice him. It is the first place that you'll read the word "love" in the Bible, "the one whom you love." It's not the love of a husband for a wife but the love of a father for his only son. And he is told to take him to that place that He would show him in Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there. And, as you read the story there in Genesis 22, it says after they had traveled for three days that Abraham laid the wood of the sacrifice upon the back of his son, and he took it up the hill. And you might remember he was 25 years old; he's not a dumb guy. He said, "I see the wood, I see fire. Where's the offering?" And then Abraham had to explain that he would be the offering.

So here, in the providence of God, He saw to it that this cross would first be laid upon Jesus before being then transferred to another; and it does seem like Simon was the guy that took the cross from the city gates and took it up the hill to Golgotha. Which is important because the will of God is kind of interesting. When it comes to your salvation, Jesus bears the cross all by Himself. You can't help. You can't get your way to heaven. You can't work your way there. There's nothing you can do to contribute. The sacrifice that He makes, the atonement, the Bible says He treads the winepress alone (Isaiah 63:3). In other words, His suffering is all His. But when you get saved, for the conversion of the world and reaching the lost that are dead in sin, we are all called to bear the cross of Jesus and to preach that cross. In fact, the Bible would say the bearing of the cross is the privilege of the saints. And you and I are called to do that. In fact, it is in Luke 14:27 that the Lord says, "If you won't bear your cross and come after Me, you can't be My disciple." So, you get both pictures, right? The Lord bears His cross to save us. But we're called to bear the cross to the world, and, as such, Simon represents the whole church.

Verse 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. And they brought Him to the place of Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull." Notice (in verse 21) the words "a certain man" from Cyrene. Now Cyrene is, today, where Tripoli would be, where Libya is. Which means that this

fellow had traveled 800 miles to come to the Passover. It was the dream of every Jew who lived far away to one day come to the place where God had put His name and join in the worship of God through one of those three big Feast Days throughout the year. And this fellow had come a long way. He had traveled for many weeks, if not longer. Cyrene was on the trade routes. In fact later on, as you read through your Bible, you'll find that the Cyrenians actually had their own synagogue in town (chapter 6 of Acts) where they spoke their own language and they had their own customs. The Lord had touched many lives from that place. Maybe Simon is the first of many. But they had a place in town.

But notice that there're a couple things that we can learn from verse 21. Number one - he's "a certain man," and "he was coming out of the country and passing by." Know this about Simon - this was not his expectation when he got to town. This wasn't his plan. He was here for an entirely different purpose when, all of a sudden, a Roman soldier sticks out his sword, lays it upon his shoulders, and demands of him that he carry this burden - the cross of Jesus - for a mile. It was Roman law. It could not be questioned or resisted. The Jews were a dominated people. In fact, Jesus brings that whole practice up in the Sermon on the Mount when He says (Matthew 5:41), "Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two." Don't show the resistance. Just submit. Be a different kind of an individual. But understand that the Jews hated this law not only because they were under dominance, if you will, but it was an outward evidence of that. You could be grabbed and forced to work for the Romans, and that's hard for a people that wouldn't even admit that they were under anybody's thumb. They said to Jesus (there in John 8:33), "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free?'" Well, they were in plenty of bondage, even then. And so that was the law, if you will, that was applied to Simon. And understand that for Simon, as a Jew in town for the Feast Days - for the Jews in particular, this was humiliating and disgraceful and probably terrifying. Not only that but Simon isn't a guy that you know in town. He's new in town. He's unknown. In fact, the word here "certain man" or translated "one man" distinguishes Simon from Cyrene from all of the other Simons in town that day. And there were a lot of them (that was a very popular name), but he was an obscure kind of a visitor. He was there to fulfill a lifelong, maybe, ambition to be in town for one of these amazing Passover times, and he had been a pilgrim. He was coming to fulfill his responsibility, and yet God had a plan for him that wasn't on his itinerary, wasn't on his list. And he was just a "certain" Simon. God had him picked

out. He was the one. And even in the Greek it says this "particular man," as opposed to every other man; he was the one that God chose.

You can be in church this morning and feel like you're lost in the crowd. Nobody knows you. But yet God does. And, as such, Simon had a different plan in coming to town than God had for his life. No one knew Simon. But the Lord knew him. God had a plan for him. God wanted to speak to him. God would do a wonderful work in his life. But Simon didn't have this on his agenda at all. And so often it is the Lord who works in our lives to set us apart, and we feel like we're just afloat in a crowd, and yet God has His eye on us personally. And that's true biblically. Later on, when Saul is called by the Lord, you can read (in chapter 9 of Acts), "Call for one called Saul," and the word "one" there is the same word that you find here for "certain." "Go find Saul," that "particular" Saul. There were many Sauls, but this one was special; this is the one that God was working in his life. I always thought that that was so cool, that God knows us when no one else seems to care. He's coming for us. He looks for you. His work is personal.

And Simon was in town, and he was a "particular" Simon, and he had just gotten here; and this wasn't part of his plan, but it was part of God's plan. And, in the midst of this work of God in saving the world, Simon gets put center stage in that plan. But it started off a pretty humiliating experience. This isn't what he wanted to do. "I've never won anything. How come I get picked now?" And he did. And he did. Perhaps like this Simon, it's taken a lot to get you through the doors of the church. I think I can understand that. Maybe you've come to pay your respects to the Lord, and God has other ideas. That's what Simon was doing. He was showing up to do his religious duty. He had other plans.

So he came from Cyrene to attend the Jewish Feast Day, a privilege that he, maybe, had saved for all of his life. He had come so far to worship. It had cost him a lot of money to get here. It had been a lifetime of planning to make it happen. And then he no sooner shows up into town, he's getting ready to go through the gate of the city to go to the Temple (which he maybe had never seen), and he doesn't even get through the gate because he's grabbed. The Lord arrests him at the gate. Every Jew longed for this experience. It was the vacation with a purpose. He had looked forward to taking pictures of the City of David and worshipping at the Temple of God. I am sure that he knew nothing about Jesus, that he knew nothing about the trials, that he knew nothing about the strife. He lived 800 miles away. There was no computer. He just showed up. He comes from

North Africa, and he comes into Jerusalem, and the only scope he has of anything is, "I want to be that guy that one day has gone to Jerusalem to worship." If he came here, as most would have come in that day, he would have had to go overland to find a Roman galley ship and find passage from Alexandria in Egypt, maybe down to Joppa, and then have to travel forty miles or so up and over the hills of Jerusalem. If he had never been here, he came with great expectation. I mean, the Temple was magnificent. It's everything that you read, and everyone that had seen it was so moved by it. And he wanted to be here; he was part of the glamor and the splendor of the tribes of God gathering together.

If we are to believe verse 21 (and we should) that he was just passing through, he had just gotten here, he might very well have been standing at the gate with sea legs, that that motion in his head for those weeks out at sea might still have affected him. And he certainly wasn't prepared to see a Roman execution, let alone to be part of one. That's not on his list at all, even though the Romans marched their criminals through the streets (or would-be criminals, Jesus certainly wasn't one); but they walk you through the streets as much as possible to make sure everyone saw, "This is what happens to you if you mess up in our town. We deal severely with troublemakers." And so it was quite a scene. I mean, everything you read in the Scriptures - the crowds were thick along the roads. We will read (in a couple of weeks) women were weeping for Jesus' mistreatment, that the crowds would part, that there was noise and bustle, there was yelling and screaming. And you read of Simon he was just "coming out of the country," and his determination was, "I'm just going to pass by. I don't want to be involved. This is not why I've come. I'm not going to stick around and watch this." And so he just has to stop because, out of the city gates - and they're small, these little gates that go through the wall - he has to wait. If you've ever gone to Israel with us, we try to take fifty people through a gate, and if a car's coming, we have to wait because the car wins every time. So, here comes a soldier bearing a list of His charges (Jesus'), and He's surrounded by four men, and the process is long, and Jesus is dying and broken and bloodied, and just every step is labored. And apparently, for the Roman soldiers, it was going way too slowly. And so Simon wasn't here for this. He wanted to "pass by." "I've just come out of the country. I've just arrived in town. I'm glad I got here when I did."

But look at God's timing and how amazing the providence of God is because, as "he was coming out of the country" and planning to come to "pass by," Jesus is coming out of the city, and there's no way he can go anywhere. Imagine 800 miles away,

and Jesus' crucifixion that has been going on all night, and finally it resolves to Pilate handing Jesus over at 6:00 in the morning, and they clash at the gate. Here's Jesus the Savior, and here's Simon the would-be worshipper who hasn't come for this. Simon wasn't early. Jesus wasn't late. In all of this bustle, perfect timing. What were the chances of Simon getting stuck in this? I wonder if he hadn't said to himself, "How in the world is this possible? This always happens to me." I say that to my wife a lot. I always get stuck behind the Prius driver. (Laughing) And if you have one, sorry. Speed up. (Laughing) And the Lord wanted him there at just that exact moment. And I like that picture because I've seen, so often, people end up in church by the providential work of God, how He orchestrated every step. I don't know how many people I've seen get saved, and when I ask them, "What brought you to church this morning?" they will say things like, "Well, I wasn't planning on coming, and so-and-so called," or, "This came up," or, "I woke up early" or whatever it might have been. We had a lady from Fullerton this year send us a note that she had received one of the flyers on her doorstep, and she and her husband hadn't been to church in years and decided they'd come to the Easter service, and they got saved; because of a flyer that showed up on their doorstep. But she wasn't planning on going, and she showed up. So, sometimes you get to church, and you think, "Well, I'll just go and put in my time. I've got other plans. I've got breakfast, I've got the thingy going on later today." But God has a different work.

It had been a long journey for Simon. And I would say to you it usually is a long journey before you get to the Lord and give up. But there's a time, there's a place, there's a plan in place. And maybe that's your time today. But it was certainly Simon's this day. I think if you'd have interviewed Simon (before this happened) that he would have told you he would have been thrilled to just be part of the pageantry that was the Passover, that he could have rested his entire life showing his family and his friends the pictures of him standing in front of the beautiful Temple, and the priests going by; or maybe taking his lamb in to be sacrificed for his sins; and how the LORD had brought them out of Egypt with a high hand. And his Facebook page could have been filled with pictures. "Here's me at the Feast." He would have had a great personal experience. He would have gotten a return on his investment to get here. But God had another plan. It was far greater than Simon's plan.

When I got saved (many years ago), I got saved going to meet a friend to buy drugs. I showed up at his house with money. He had gotten saved three days

earlier and had failed to tell me. But there was a Bible study at his house, and I was welcomed in with a bunch of grinning, weird-looking Christians. (Laughing) "Come on in." "What is this?" "Sit down, here. You want some coffee?" "No. Didn't come for coffee." God had other ideas.

A few years ago, talking about Easter, we had a fellow come. He came into the church when we used to have services over at the field at Whittier Christian, then we had a 9:00 or 11:00 here. Anyway, the times were off, and the poor man walked in as we were closing in prayer. Missed the whole service. And he also got saved. And I thought God has such great ability to save, doesn't He? It makes such plans. I've met men that have gotten saved only because they came to church to keep their wives happy. I've met kids who get saved whose parents drug them here for years. "Made me go." Now they're glad to be here. I've met a lot of those "CEO" folks, you know, the Christmas- and Easter-only folks. I call them "CEOs." They make their annual appearance. And God has other plans.

Some people come to church to scoff, and they stay to pray. They hear the message and meet the saints and are overwhelmed by God's Spirit.

And that's what happens to Simon because what we read is he wants to "pass by," doesn't want a part of this at all. "I don't want to be a part, I don't want to be here for this. You're messing up my schedule." But they forced him, and for the next however long, he was the one following that broken Man who was going to hang on that tree that was upon His shoulder. Which, by the way, would make him, as a good Jew, unclean. The blood upon him, now, would keep him from being able to go to the Temple to sacrifice, to participate. This cross had messed up his whole religious plan, as God intends.

The question becomes - what happens to Simon? Because this is literally all that we read of him. What happened of this man that was forced into duty? We don't know whether Jesus said anything to him at all on this little journey behind the Lord to Golgotha. We don't know if He looked at him in any particular way. We don't know if Simon stayed to watch the crucifixion or just, in frustration, ran off; went to change his clothes and wash the blood of another Man off of his body. We don't know anything at all about any of that. But we do know a lot about what happened later, and we are given some pretty interesting insights into this man who came that day and wanted to "pass by" and had just shown up in town. We do know what happens to a man who comes in contact with the love of God found in His Son

at the cross - the One he had to look at every step that morning. By the time that Mark writes this gospel, Simon's sons are well enough known in the church to be mentioned by just their first names. And it was a large church at the time, early church. Alexander and Rufus. We know from Romans 16:13 that Paul greets one of his (Simon's) sons by name and refers to the faith of Simon's wife, Rufus' mother, and says of her, "She was always like a mom to me." And this family that started off fairly religious (from 800 miles away) a little bit later on finds themselves in a position not only of leading in the early church, but Simon's wife became a tremendous blessing to a young Paul as he began his ministry and his outreaches. What had started off for Simon as something very resentful, and, "I don't want to be here," eventually changed his life and that of his family. In fact, if you read in Acts 11 of the early church's goal of reaching out to the world with the gospel, you will find that there, in the early church, were many of them from Cyrene (verse 20); and that the saints had a prominent role in the early church as they were being sent out. In fact, we'll read that there were, as they were scattered, men from Cyrene and from Cyprus who came together at Antioch, and they began to speak to the Hellenists (those who were Jews who didn't grow up in Jewish households or, at least, cultures), and they began to preach Jesus to them. And the hand of God was with them, and a great number of them believed and turned to the Lord. But it says, particularly, these men that were out witnessing were men from Cyrene. Don't know if Simon went home and began to cause a stir.

But it is interesting to me that often when God begins a work in your life, you can meet God in very humbling circumstances, and yet God has great plans. You don't have a plan for you. You don't have a desire for Him. You're having a tough time of life, and it is there that God meets you. And you can watch Simon kind of turn from a religious man to a relationship with God that will impact the church for the next generation. And he wasn't looking for this.

As God's people, we have been saved by His grace. Right? And the cross has been given to us so that we might bear the cross, or the testimony of it, to others. You really are a cross bearer, and the minute you avow your faith in Christ loudly and openly - as Jesus is your Lord and Savior - if you vocalize your faith and live it out constantly, that's what you do. You bear the cross before the world. Jesus would put it this way in Matthew 10:32, "If you confess Me before men, I'll confess you before My Father who is in heaven. If you deny Me before men, I'll deny you before My Father in heaven." Paul said to the Romans (10:10), "With the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

So here's Simon bearing this cross, and before him is a broken Man - bloodied, crowned with thorns upon His head, back torn open, and soon, if he stayed, side and hands and feet pierced. And he has to deal with, "What is this going on?" and he learns this is for him. He looks and he sees it's for him. So, we bear the cross when we talk of His work and we share His Word. That's what we do. That's what we're called to do. We're all called to be Simon. It doesn't start out in any of our plans, but it certainly ends up there.

And God would use Simon and his family for years to come. But you can't hope to be used by God by concealing your allegiance to Jesus. It can be a pretty uncomfortable place to stand. For Simon, it was forced early; it was embraced later. And I think about how Simon's spiritual life got started. He had a religious life that wasn't satisfying. He pursued it with vigor. And the Bible says (Jeremiah 29:13) if you seek the Lord with all your heart, you'll find Him, and I think that's what happened to Simon. He did all that he could, and God let him know all that He was and who He was. He came in his religious devotion, and the Lord said, "Here's life. Here's life." He became a part of the crucifixion process. It was an ugly place to be. It was a place he didn't want to be. It left him ceremonially unclean. He could no longer participate in the Temple services. But I think by the time he went home, he could walk with his head held high and his heart singing praises. Because cross bearing, as humiliating as it reads in the text, is a blessed occupation. Simon would have just "passed by." He would have made his appointment at the Temple; he would have taken the tour of the place; he would have gotten lost in the crowd and probably made a wrong turn somewhere in town (being so big and confusing); he would have had his momentary life of religious excitement, only to go home and tell about it. But he'd have gone home without life. And now he has life. Cross bearing for Simon put him in step with Jesus. He had to follow His pace. He had to keep his eye on Him. He was forced to keep up or to slow down or whatever it would take. And he had to keep his eyes on this broken body before him, who was redeeming the world right before his eyes. Cross bearing for Simon puts him in link with Jesus forever. The saving work of Jesus - you can't tell the story without telling Simon's story.

We can't interfere with Jesus' passion because His love drove Him to the cross. But we can participate in His compassion. We can't purchase liberty for the people that are enslaved, but we can tell them about their emancipation. And that links us together, right? We have a finger in Jesus' work because we can point out what He did. That's the blessing of Simon's life. Simon may have been pushed. I don't

know if he was a loud guy or a complacent guy or a compliant guy. He might have been pushed by the Roman soldiers and threatened before he agreed. I don't know. But I suspect that Jesus' eyes, if he gazed at Him at all, would have told him that it was going to be all right. And in one verse, Simon shows up on the scene, and he's gone. But it is that moment of crossing paths with the cross of Christ that changes his life forever.

We're cross bearers, aren't we? And the people that meet you in a moment's time, life can be changed forever. Follow Simon's example. Embrace the privilege. Tell somebody every day about God's love. Invite someone to church with you every week. It never hurts to ask. And you wouldn't believe how much God could do with you if you were willing. But you see, so often, like Simon, we approach the job with horror and shame and, "Oh, my, I don't know." Spurgeon wrote a poem in the margin of his Bible, here at Mark 15, and he wrote this, "Shall Simon bear the cross alone while all the rest go free? No. There's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me." Interesting guy. One verse. I think if you get one verse with your name in it, in the Bible, you ought to be happy. Don't you? I just want one line in heaven with my name on it. Not that says, "Keep him out" but, "Let him in." (Laughing)

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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