

Homiletics Analysis: Mark 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Mark 15 moves with relentless, compressed urgency through the final hours of Jesus' earthly life: the Roman trial before Pilate, the crowd's choice of Barabbas, the mocking of the soldiers, the road to Golgotha, the crucifixion and its attendant details (the hours, the title, the thieves, the mockers), the three hours of darkness, the cry of dereliction, the death of Jesus, the tearing of the temple curtain, the centurion's confession, the women watching from a distance, and the burial by Joseph of Arimathea. The chapter is unified by a single, irreversible movement: the innocent Son of God handed over, condemned, humiliated, and executed — and yet, at every turn, the narrative quietly insists that this is precisely what it looks like when God is doing what He said He would do.

Mark's characteristic *euthys* ("immediately") urgency carries the reader through scene after scene without pausing for extended commentary. The evangelist trusts the events to speak. What accumulates is a portrait of total abandonment — by the Jewish leaders, by Pilate, by the crowd, by the soldiers, by the passersby, by the co-crucified criminals, by the disciples (notably absent except for the women) — set against a God who does not abandon but acts through what appears to be His own absence. The cry of dereliction (v. 34, quoting Psalm 22:1) is the chapter's theological center of gravity: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At the moment Jesus is most completely alone, the narrative quietly signals that God is most completely at work — the curtain tears, the centurion confesses, the burial is secured.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two inseparable effects through this chapter. First, He is calling readers to see what the cross actually is: not a tragedy overcome by resurrection, not a defeat that God subsequently reversed, but the appointed, purposeful, substitutionary act through which the Son bears the full weight of human sin and divine wrath so that sinners can go free — with Barabbas as the compressed theological image of every reader. Second, He is calling readers to see who Jesus actually is: the King of the Jews (stated mockingly four times and yet true every time), the Son of God (confessed first not by a disciple but by a Gentile soldier), the one whose death tears open what was sealed between God and humanity. The intent is not merely to inform readers about the crucifixion but to position them before it — to see themselves in the crowd, in Barabbas, in the centurion — and to respond to the One who died abandoned so that they need never be.

Subject Sentence: The Son of God dies abandoned and condemned, bearing the sin of the world in full.

Primary Claim: God is showing us that the cross is not the moment things went wrong — it is the moment God was most completely keeping His word; and the only fitting response is to see ourselves as Barabbas: guilty, released, and standing in the place of the One who took our condemnation in full.

Interpretive Evaluation

The cry of dereliction (v. 34) — the most disputed verse in the chapter

The central interpretive battleground in Mark 15 is the cry of v. 34: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1). Three readings require evaluation.

The Patristic/Orthodox weakening: Some in the broader catholic tradition argue that Jesus is merely reciting Psalm 22 as a liturgical act — beginning the psalm so that hearers will remember it ends in vindication (Ps. 22:24-31). On this reading, the cry is not genuine abandonment but a kind of coded confidence. This reading must be **refuted**: Mark provides no hint that the crowd hears a psalm-recitation beginning in hope; they hear a dying man cry out and misunderstand it as calling for Elijah. The text takes the cry with full gravity. More decisively, if the cry means “I am actually confident in God’s presence,” then it cannot also be the moment the curtain tears and the centurion confesses — the narrative treats what happens at and after the cry as unprecedented, not as liturgically expected.

The Arian/Kenotic weakening: Some readings use the cry to argue that Jesus’ divine nature was absent or that the Father genuinely ceased to be present in any sense during the crucifixion, producing a split in the Trinity. This reading must also be **refuted**: the cry is addressed to God (“My God, my God”), maintaining the relational address even within the experience of forsakenness. The Reformed reading, with Chalcedon as its grammar, is that the eternal relational union of the Trinity is not broken; rather, what Jesus experiences is the full legal and judicial consequence of bearing human sin — the wrath that estrangement from God produces — not an ontological rupture in the Godhead. Calvin’s language is precise: Jesus bore the torments of a condemned man before God, experiencing what divine abandonment *produces*, as the sinners’ substitute.

The Reformed reading: The cry is genuine, not liturgical performance. It expresses the real experiential content of substitutionary atonement: Jesus, as the sin-bearer, undergoes what sinners deserve — the full experience of God’s righteous judgment upon sin. This is the most exegetically honest reading of Mark’s text, which gives no signals of irony, liturgical framing, or triumphalist overlay at this moment. The Psalm 22 allusion is real but does not domesticate the cry — it locates it within a larger covenant story where the

righteous sufferer is ultimately vindicated, but the vindication is on the other side of genuine suffering, not instead of it.

The Barabbas episode (vv. 6-15) — illustration or theology?

Some treatments of the Barabbas episode reduce it to historical background or an illustration of Pilate's weakness. This underpowered reading must be **qualified**: Barabbas functions in Mark's narrative as a vivid enacted parable of substitutionary atonement — a guilty man (revolutionary, murderer) released while the innocent man is condemned. Mark's placement and description is deliberate. The name "Barabbas" (bar-Abbas, "son of the father") carries an irony that may be intentional: the false son of the father is released; the true Son of the Father is delivered to death. Whether or not the ironic naming is authorial intent, the structural theology is unmistakable and should be preached, not merely noted.

The mocking as ironic revelation

The soldiers mock Jesus as king (vv. 16-20); the passersby mock him as a failed temple-rebuilder (vv. 29-30); the religious leaders mock him as a failed savior ("He saved others; he cannot save himself," v. 31). The Wesleyan and broadly evangelical tradition tends to read these mockeries as straightforward dramatic irony — what the mockers intend sarcastically is true literally. The Reformed reading **acknowledges** this as correct and presses further: the mockeries reveal the very *mechanism* of salvation. He cannot save himself *because* He is saving others. He could rebuild the temple *because* He is tearing it down and replacing it with His body (John 2:19-21). The irony is not merely rhetorical but theological — the cross is the place where what looks like defeat is the means of victory, what looks like powerlessness is the exercise of ultimate power.

The centurion's confession (v. 39)

The centurion's statement ("Truly this man was the Son of God") is read in some traditions primarily as a dramatic surprise ending — the outsider sees what insiders miss. The **Reformed reading** preserves this but grounds it more precisely: the centurion's confession is not merely a narrative twist but a fulfillment of Mark's opening programmatic statement (Mark 1:1, "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"). Mark's Gospel begins by telling the reader who Jesus is; it ends with the first human being in the narrative to confess it openly and accurately — and he is a Gentile soldier standing at the cross. This is Mark's theology of revelation: the cross, which looked like defeat, is the event through which Jesus is most fully disclosed.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 52:13–53:12** — The Suffering Servant passage is the Old Testament foundation for what Mark 15 displays: the servant despised and rejected, bearing the iniquities of many, cut off from the land of the living as a guilt offering, and yet

the LORD's purpose prospering through him. Mark's account is the fulfillment Isaiah described without fully seeing.

- **Psalm 22** — Jesus' cry from the cross quotes this psalm directly, and the psalm's imagery pervades the crucifixion account (garments divided by lot, v. 24 / Ps. 22:18; mockers wagging their heads, v. 29 / Ps. 22:7; bulls surrounding, vv. 1-2 / Ps. 22:12). The entire psalm — genuine suffering moving toward ultimate vindication and worldwide proclamation — is the canonical interpretive lens for the cross.
- **Exodus 26:31-35; Leviticus 16** — The temple curtain that tears (v. 38) is the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple — the barrier that made only one man, only once a year, able to approach God. Its tearing from top to bottom at Jesus' death is the canonical announcement that the old covenant's restricted access is permanently ended; full access to God has been opened through the sacrifice of Christ. Hebrews 9-10 makes this connection explicit.
- **Romans 3:21-26** — Paul's exposition of the cross as the demonstration of God's righteousness — propitiation through faith in Christ's blood, the justification of the ungodly — provides the canonical doctrinal framework for what Mark 15 narrates. Mark shows; Paul explains. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient alone.
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** — "He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is the most compressed canonical statement of the substitutionary exchange that the Barabbas episode enacts and the cry of dereliction expresses — the innocent condemned so that the guilty go free.

Aim: To lead readers to see the cross not as a familiar story to be heard again but as the event that names their own condition (Barabbas), exposes their own abandonment of Jesus (the absent disciples), and calls them to the only honest response: the centurion's confession made not at a distance but in personal reckoning.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Early morning council; Jesus bound and handed over to Pilate	Sanhedrin's decision ratified; the machinery of Roman execution is engaged
2	Pilate questions Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus: "You have said so"	Guarded affirmation — neither denial nor full claim in the political sense Pilate intends

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3-5	Chief priests accuse; Jesus remains silent before Pilate's amazement	Fulfillment of Isa. 53:7 ("like a sheep before its shearers is silent"); Pilate's amazement signals recognition of something unusual
6-8	Custom of releasing a prisoner; crowd arrives asking for Barabbas	Barabbas identified: insurrectionist, murderer — the paradigmatic guilty man
9-10	Pilate offers to release "the King of the Jews"; recognizes chief priests' envy	Pilate sees through the charge but lacks the will to act on his perception
11	Chief priests stir the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead	The religious leadership orchestrates the crowd's choice — a profound irony
12-14	Pilate presses: "What shall I do with the King of the Jews?" Crowd: "Crucify him!"	Three times Pilate's rhetoric edges toward Jesus' release; three times the crowd's answer shuts it down
15	Pilate releases Barabbas; has Jesus flogged; delivers him to be crucified	The substitution is enacted: the guilty man released, the innocent condemned
16-19	Soldiers dress Jesus in purple, crown of thorns, mock him as king	The mock coronation — every element is sarcastically true: he is the King
20	Jesus stripped of purple, led out to be crucified	The mockery ends; the execution proceeds
21	Simon of Cyrene compelled to carry the cross	Jesus apparently too weakened by flogging to carry it; Simon's sons (Alexander, Rufus) named — likely known to Mark's audience
22-23	Golgotha ("Place of the Skull"); wine mixed with myrrh offered and refused	Jesus refuses the numbing agent — He will bear the full experience
24	Crucifixion; soldiers divide his garments by casting lots	Ps. 22:18 fulfilled; the act is both mundane (soldiers) and covenantally significant

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
25	Third hour (9 a.m.) — crucifixion begins	Mark's temporal precision marks the day's structure
26	Inscription: "The King of the Jews"	Written in accusation; true in fact; irony is the mechanism of Mark's theology here
27	Two criminals crucified alongside, one on each side	Isa. 53:12 ("numbered with the transgressors")
29-30	Passersby mock: "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it — save yourself!"	The temple charge from the trial now returns; the mockery is theologically loaded (see Interpretive Evaluation)
31-32a	Chief priests and scribes mock: "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down from the cross, that we may see and believe!"	The most devastating irony in the chapter: He cannot save himself <i>because</i> He is saving others
32b	The criminals also revile him	Total abandonment: crowd, leaders, criminals — no one stands with Jesus
33	Sixth hour (noon) — darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour (3 p.m.)	Three hours of cosmic darkness; creation responds to the death of its Creator
34	Jesus cries: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" — "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"	The cry of dereliction; Ps. 22:1; the theological center of the chapter
35-36	Bystanders misunderstand — think he calls Elijah; one offers sour wine; others wait to see	The misunderstanding underlines Jesus' isolation; no one comprehends what is happening
37	Jesus cries out with a loud voice and breathes his last	The loud cry before death is unusual — signaling voluntary surrender rather than depletion
38	Temple curtain torn in two,	Divine action (top to

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	from top to bottom	bottom); the barrier between God and humanity removed; the hour of access has come
39	Centurion: “Truly this man was the Son of God!”	Mark 1:1 echoed; first full human confession in the narrative; made by a Gentile at the cross
40-41	Women watching from a distance: Mary Magdalene, Mary (mother of James and Joses), Salome; who had followed him in Galilee	The disciples are absent; the women remain — and will be the first witnesses of resurrection
42-43	Evening; Joseph of Arimathea, a respected council member who was waiting for the kingdom of God, boldly asks Pilate for the body	A member of the Sanhedrin breaks ranks; his boldness noted
44-45	Pilate confirms death; grants the body	The death is officially confirmed — against later docetic claims
46	Joseph wraps Jesus in linen, places him in a tomb cut from rock, rolls a stone	Proper burial; the stone is rolled — setting the stage for 16:3-4
47	Mary Magdalene and Mary (mother of Joses) see where he is laid	The same women who watched at the cross now witness the burial — continuity of testimony

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–15	The Guilty Released, the Innocent Condemned: Trial, Barabbas, and Pilate’s Verdict
2	16–20	The Mock Coronation: The King Dressed and Mocked by Soldiers
3	21–32	The Crucifixion: Golgotha,

Division	Verses	Label
		the Hours, and the Three-Fold Mockery
4	33–39	The Death: Darkness, Dereliction, the Torn Curtain, and the Centurion’s Confession
5	40–47	The Witnesses: Women, Joseph, and the Secured Burial

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Son of God dies abandoned and condemned, bearing the sin of the world in full.

Primary Claim: God is showing us that the cross is not the moment things went wrong — it is the moment God was most completely keeping His word; and the only fitting response is to see ourselves as Barabbas: guilty, released, and standing in the place of the One who took our condemnation in full.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe the cross from tragedy to triumph accomplished through suffering.

The most common mental frame for the cross is a defeat that the resurrection overcame. Mark 15 demands a different frame: the cross is the thing, not the tragedy before the thing. God was not watching helplessly as His plan unraveled — He was executing it, with every detail (the lots, the darkness, the torn curtain, the Gentile confessor) falling into place. If you find yourself thinking “but then the resurrection happened,” you have not yet grasped what Mark insists on showing you: it was *finished at the cross*. The resurrection vindicates and announces what the cross accomplished. Preach this to your own mind: the cross is not God’s darkest moment — it is His greatest act.

2. (Affections/Worship) — Sit with the weight of the dereliction before you rush past it.

Mark gives three hours of darkness and one cry of desolation before giving you the torn curtain and the confession. He does not let you skip from the darkness to the glory. The cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is not a liturgical performance — it is the sound of your condemnation being borne by someone else. Let it land before you move to the comfort it purchased. The worship Jesus calls you to is not the worship of someone who heard good news from a safe distance — it is the worship of someone who

understands that the darkness at noon was for them specifically, and who is stunned by it. Ask God to give you a hearing of the cry that actually costs you something emotionally, rather than a familiarity that costs you nothing.

3. (Mind/Belief) — You are Barabbas — receive the identity before you argue with its implications.

Barabbas is not a dramatic illustration of the gospel. He *is* the gospel's first enacted instance in Mark's passion narrative. A guilty man — not metaphorically guilty but actually guilty of insurrection and murder — goes free while an innocent man dies in his place. Mark is not subtle: this is the structure of your salvation. Before you move to "what should I do now that I am saved," stop and receive the prior reality: you are the guilty one who went free. You did not contribute. You did not deserve release. You were simply released because the sentence landed on someone else. Let the identity of Barabbas form you before the imperatives of discipleship claim you.

4. (Will/Behavior) — Confess specifically what the centurion confessed generally, and let it reorganize your actual week.

The centurion confessed "truly this man was the Son of God" — the first accurate human confession in Mark's Gospel. But your confession cannot stay at that level of generality. If Jesus is the Son of God who died to bear your condemnation, then He is Lord of the specific places in your life where you are still acting as though you are your own judge and executioner, or your own savior. Name one: a financial decision you are making as though God is not sovereign over your provision; a relationship where you are playing both plaintiff and judge; a pattern of self-sufficiency that has never been handed to Him. The centurion's confession calls you to confess the same thing with specific content — "truly this is the Son of God, *and therefore...*"

5. (Affections/Worship) — Let the torn curtain recalibrate how you pray.

The curtain tears from top to bottom — God tearing it, not humans tearing through it — at the moment of Jesus' death. The barrier is gone. The Most Holy Place is open. There is no longer a reason to approach God tentatively, from a distance, with the ambient feeling that you might be turned away. The women watch "from a distance" (v. 40) because the cross has not yet registered as access — they will learn. You already know. The torn curtain is the permanent announcement that the distance has been removed. If your prayer life is still characterized by the sense that you are standing at the veil hoping to be admitted, you are living before the cross rather than after it. Pray as one for whom the curtain is already gone.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Mark 15 is the supreme narrative demonstration of substitutionary atonement — not as abstract doctrine but as enacted history. The innocent Son of God bears the full weight of human sin and divine judgment so that the guilty go free;

Barabbas enacts it, the darkness signifies it, the cry of dereliction voices it, and the torn curtain announces its completion. The chapter also displays the sovereignty of God operating through apparent defeat: every act of human wickedness in this chapter — the false charges, the cowardly verdict, the brutal mockery, the abandonment — becomes the instrument through which God accomplishes the salvation He promised. Jesus is simultaneously the most helpless figure in the chapter (bound, flogged, nailed) and the most sovereign (he cries out with a loud voice and then voluntarily breathes his last, v. 37). The chapter teaches that God's power is not in spite of the cross's weakness but *through* it — a permanent recalibration of what power means.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Mark 15 is ground zero for the Reformed doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement: Jesus bears the penalty that the law requires for human sin, in the place of sinners, so that the law's demands are satisfied and sinners are released. The cry of dereliction is not theologically embarrassing — it is theologically essential: it means the wrath that our sin deserved actually landed somewhere, on someone, fully and finally. The chapter also displays the Reformed understanding of election and grace operating apart from any human merit — Barabbas contributed nothing to his release, and neither do we. The torn curtain grounds the Reformed insistence on direct and unmediated access to God through Christ alone, apart from any priestly human mediation (a direct counter to any sacerdotal system). And the centurion's confession — a Gentile, a soldier, an outsider — displays the universal scope of the covenant of grace: the cross is not for Israel only but for all whom God calls, wherever they stand. All five points of Reformed soteriology are implicit in this chapter: total human inability (no one defends Jesus; all abandon or condemn); unconditional election (Barabbas is chosen for release, not because he deserved it); limited/particular atonement (he bore sin for those the Father gave him); irresistible grace (the curtain is torn from above — God acts); and perseverance secured (the burial is confirmed, the witnesses appointed — the story is not over).

Main Takeaway

The cross is not the place where things almost fell apart — it is the place where God did exactly what He said He would do, at exactly the cost He was willing to pay. You are Barabbas. The charges against you were real. The sentence that fell on Jesus was yours. The curtain is torn, the access is open, and the centurion's confession is waiting to become your own — not as a theological opinion but as the organizing fact of your life.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the cross as the prelude to Easter rather than the event itself.** The resurrection is indispensable, but a sermon on Mark 15 that cannot stand without immediately invoking chapter 16 has failed to let the cross be the cross. Mark structures the chapter to make the cross complete in itself — the curtain tears, the centurion confesses, the burial is secured, all before resurrection is mentioned. The preacher who rushes to Easter every time darkness appears is training congregants to tolerate the cross rather than inhabit it.
- **Preaching the Barabbas episode as mere illustration rather than enacted theology.** Barabbas is not a colorful detail or a dramatic device — he is the first enacted instance of what the cross accomplishes. Reducing him to “a vivid illustration of substitution” keeps him at arm’s length. The preacher should name the substitution plainly and position the hearer as Barabbas — guilty, not deserving release, released anyway. This is not illustration; it is the event.
- **Domesticating the cry of dereliction.** The most common homiletical error on v. 34 is softening it into either (a) a liturgical recitation of Psalm 22 that signals hidden confidence, or (b) a moment of human weakness that the resurrection reverses. Mark gives no signals of either reading. To preach the cry honestly is to preach the full cost of substitutionary atonement — that Jesus bore what forsakenness actually is, not a performative version of it. The hearer needs to understand why the darkness descended and what the cry means for their own account with God.
- **Missing the irony structure as theological content.** The three waves of mockery (passersby, religious leaders, criminals) are often preached as dramatic irony — “they didn’t know how right they were.” This is true but incomplete. The irony is not decorative; it is the mechanism of Mark’s theology. “He saved others; he cannot save himself” is precisely and literally true: the inability to save himself is the means of saving others. The preacher who notes the irony without pressing its theological content has left the passage’s main work undone.
- **Skiping the women and the burial as “transitional material.”** Mark 15:40-47 is often treated as throat-clearing before the resurrection narrative. It is not. The women witnesses establish the continuity of testimony between the cross, the burial, and the empty tomb (the same women see all three). Joseph of Arimathea’s bold act is explicitly noted — a member of the Sanhedrin who breaks ranks publicly. And the official confirmation of death (Pilate’s inquiry, v. 44) is Mark’s early response to docetism and resurrection-denial. These verses are doing real theological work.
- **Preaching the centurion’s confession as a feel-good ending rather than a structural announcement.** The centurion is not a feel-good moment of “even a Roman soldier got it.” His confession echoes Mark 1:1 precisely — the Gospel’s

programmatic opening statement is here confirmed by the first human voice in the narrative to say it plainly, and he says it at the cross, not at the empty tomb. This is Mark's deliberate theology of revelation: the cross, not the resurrection, is the place of disclosure. A sermon that treats the centurion as a pleasant surprise has missed Mark's architecture.