

Good Friday: The Empty Cup

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[0 : 00] Well, let's begin with prayer.

Heavenly Father, today we pray that many will seek you while you still may be found, and many will call on you while you are near.

May your word go forth from my mouth, and may it not return to you empty. But achieve the purpose for which you sent it. May we all sit at the foot of your cross this morning.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now hear the word empty, and you hardly think of something good, don't you? If the indicator on the dashboard of your car is pointing at empty, that's not a good sign.

If you log into your online bank account and find it empty, that's never good news. And if you're about to set off on a 10-kilometer hike on an empty stomach, that's certainly not going to be good for your health.

[1 : 07] Emptiness and good are not words that you normally associate with one another. And yet today, in keeping with what we've been seeing all morning, we're going to see that if there is no emptiness, Good Friday cannot be good.

And so this morning, we're just going to hear the Good Friday story all over again. But we're going to hear it through the lens of the passage that we've just heard read from Mark 10, verses 32 to 45.

And we're going to see that, actually, if emptiness was not part of the story, then Jesus' death is nothing more than a catastrophe. But praise God, because there is emptiness, the cross is now good news to many.

And so settle in, and let's listen to Mark tell us all about Jesus again. And what I'm going to do is, I'm just going to take us through this little story under the heading of four A's.

And so here's our first A, ambition. And we're going to begin by zooming in straight away on two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

[2 : 22] Now, you might know Jesus has 12 disciples who go around with him. But of those 12, Mark gives us hints that James, John, and Peter are especially close to Jesus.

Just a chapter earlier, they are the only ones of the 12 who go up with him, up the mountain, and witness Jesus being transformed into glory in an event we often call the Transfiguration.

And now James and John have a request. They look around, they see that Jesus is free, no one else is around to disturb them, and so they come to him discreetly, verse 35, and they say, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.

Now think about that for a second. Clearly, James and John know what they want. And before they even make their request, they try to secure Jesus' approval.

This is not just petition, but manipulation. But Jesus is too savvy to be so quick to say yes without even hearing their request first.

[3 : 32] And so he asks Molly, What do you want me to do for you? And they reply, verse 37, Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.

Oh wow, talk about ambition. You know, in those times, the right hand was the place of greatest honour. The place usually taken by the firstborn son or heir or the chief advisor.

And in this case, the left hand can be taken as parallel to the right hand. And so James and John are really asking, Can we have the two best seats in your throne room?

We've already seen a glimpse of your glory, Jesus. And we believe that you're heading for glory. So can we just make sure that we're in a position where all that glory is going to rub off us as well?

After all, we're your kawan, right? They're full of themselves, aren't they? It certainly looks that way. But let's be charitable for a moment. Let's think about why they make that request.

[4 : 37] Let's backtrack in the story a little. As we join Jesus and his gang, verse 32, we're told where they are going. In fact, it's the first time in this section of Mark's Gospel that we discover their destination.

And that's Jerusalem. The time of one of the major Jewish festivals, the Passover, is drawing near. And so it's natural for many Jews to begin heading to the holy city to make their annual pilgrimage.

But perhaps James and John think that they detect a greater ambition in Jesus. Now put yourselves in their shoes for a moment. Here's what they know.

Who's in charge right now? It's the Romans. And they're no fun. You know, under them, you've got to pay tons of tax. Under them, you've got to bear with all their blasphemous propaganda.

Under them, you face losing your family land. And all your life, you've heard these prophecies of some messianic ruler. at the synagogue, you would probably have heard Isaiah chapter 11.

[5 : 49] And this Old Testament passage describes this messianic ruler as someone who comes with righteousness to judge the needy, who comes with justice to give decisions for the poor of the year, who with the breath of his lips will slay the wicked.

And if you are James and John, you would think, wow, looking at where we are right now under the Romans, that's exactly what we need.

And then you hear about this Jesus who's causing quite a sensation with his preaching about the kingdom of God. You see, with your very own eyes, there's Jesus whose miracles seem to demonstrate the very presence of the kingdom of God.

And then just a few chapters ago in Mark, when Jesus asks what we think about his identity, we find Peter loudly proclaiming, you are the Christ, you are the Messiah.

And Jesus doesn't deny that. And so could heading to Jerusalem this time be more than just about celebrating the annual festival? Are we talking about the pursuit of an even bigger ambition here?

[6 : 59] Could that long-awaited revolution finally be taking place? Well, James and John appear to think so. We'll find out in a moment that given what Jesus has been teaching, they shouldn't have assumed that.

But we can at least be a little more sympathetic as to why they make their ambitious requests. It's because they think Jesus is also being ambitious. He's getting ready to challenge the Romans.

And they're so full of confidence that Jesus is going to triumph. And so they want to be ready when that moment comes. Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left.

When you become Prime Minister, and we know that's a position reserved for you, Jesus, well, we want to become the Deputy Prime Ministers. And by the way, remember I said earlier that it's as if three disciples are especially close to Jesus?

But how many positions are available? Well, there's the right side and there's the left side and so there's only two. And so someone needs to be left out.

[8 : 10] And obviously, James and John have decided, sorry Peter, there's only so many positions of glory to go around. Better luck next time. And so are James and John right?

Is their confidence warranted? Well, at first glance, it's certainly understandable when we consider our second A, authority. Now, all throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus has certainly acted with authority.

Again and again, we read about how amazed people were whenever Jesus taught in the synagogue because he taught as one who had authority. Again and again, we read about how Jesus healed sickness and cast out demons without any effort as one who held authority.

And even in this passage, there are little features here and there that continually hint at his authority. Twice in this passage, Jesus refers to himself with the title the Son of Man.

Now, that's not just another way of saying that he's a human being. Rather, Jesus is using a title that is taken from the Old Testament. In Daniel 7, we're introduced to this somewhat mysterious figure from heaven who is called the Son of Man.

[9 : 27] And this figure is given all authority, all glory, all power. And indeed, it is said that all nations will worship him and that his kingdom will last forever and ever.

and Jesus identifies himself with this figure. He identifies himself as one who has all authority. And that authority is on display throughout, even in this passage.

In verse 32, he leads the way, walking in front of his disciples instead of just alongside them as rabbis normally do. In verse 33, he takes his twelve disciples aside and he tells them not what might happen to him or what could possibly happen to him, but what will happen to him.

This is what will come to pass, he declares, because I say so. And so no wonder James and John make their request to Jesus. They acknowledge he has authority and they want his authority to be used for their earthly glory.

But let's pause here and consider. Is that what we think too? Deep down, is the good news of Christianity for us all about how Jesus has the authority to grant us earthly glory?

[10 : 59] Is the good news of Christianity all about having confidence that Jesus can fulfill our every ambition? Is that why we say Jesus is good?

And why Good Friday is good? Well, this is what James and John think. They come to Jesus and they say to him, Jesus, we believe you, we follow you, we declare you're all-powerful, so do what we ask.

And quite possibly, that's what some of us listening today believe too. We've heard it said to us, believe that God has a great purpose for your life.

If you want to overcome all the obstacles to fulfilling your dreams, come to Jesus. If you want a breakthrough so that your difficult circumstances can be turned around, come to Jesus.

If you want divine favour, such that you can get that promotion and sit in the places of honour, come to Jesus. And so you come, you follow what you think are the rules, you tithe faithfully, you pray fervently, you conjure up that feeling of faith constantly.

[12 : 14] And you come to Jesus and say, Jesus, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. Please, Jesus, I've given you what you ask for, right?

My church attendance, my cell group involvement, my heartfelt commitment. So come away, come here and take away my sickness or my difficult family life, whatever it is.

Oh, I know I shouldn't ask for Ferraris, not that I want one anyway, but come make me happy. That's the deal, right? We offer you devotion, you fulfill our ambitions.

But if James and John have been paying attention, they would have realized that this is not what Jesus is all about.

Now, Jesus does have ambition. In fact, he's up front about it. Just look at verses 33 and 34. Listen, Jesus says, we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law.

[13 : 26] They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him.

Three days later, he will rise. That's his ambition. Now, this is not the first time Jesus has said this.

In fact, it's the third time he's spoken so plainly. He said similar things back in 8 verse 31 and 9 verse 31 and now that they are nearing Jerusalem, he gets even more detail.

Notice all those verbs. Delivered over. Condemned. Hand him over. Mock. Spit.

Flock. Kill. Those are hardly words of glory, are they? These are certainly not verbs of authority.

[14 : 29] In fact, Jesus seems to be completely at the mercy of others. For these are all things that are going to be done to him. And yet, that is where he wants to go.

Jesus is so resolute that he even leads the way to Jerusalem. This is how the Son of Man is exercising his authority.

Go and die. Think about that for a second. If you had all the power in the world, would you use it to give it all up and let it be used against you in an unjust manner?

And yet, this is how Jesus uses his authority, not as a quest for earthly glory. And instead, on that first Good Friday, Jesus' true ambition is revealed.

He has come to be our atonement. To be our atonement. That's the third A for today. For as terrible as those words in verses 33 and 34 are, condemn, mock, flock, kill.

[15 : 53] And all those are things that indeed did happen to Jesus. And yet, those words still don't get to the heart of what Good Friday is all about. You know, sometimes when we come to Good Friday, we stress the physical suffering that Jesus and Dior.

Sometimes, churches put up very striking visuals of that. But Jesus wasn't even the only person condemned that day. They were two robbers condemned to die with him too.

Indeed, many, many people in history have been mocked and flogged and even nailed to a cross by the Romans. Jesus wasn't the first.

He wouldn't be the last. And in that sense, there was nothing unique about Jesus being physically crucified. And if all Jesus was doing was going on a suicide mission, then we should call Good Friday Foolish Friday instead.

But when we return to his conversation with James and John, we begin to understand what Jesus is really doing. As James and John stand before Jesus, eagerly anticipating his reply, he looks them in the eye and he says, verse 38, you don't know what you're asking.

[17 : 16] Can you drink the cup I drink? Or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with? And so Jesus says, you still don't have a clue, do you?

You still haven't figured out what's about to make Good Friday so good. So let me tell you, it has to do with a cup. Now this is different from the cup of living water that I mentioned earlier with the Samaritan woman.

Rather, Jesus draws on an image from the Old Testament. The cup is an image of suffering, and especially of God's judgment.

In the Old Testament, God pours out the cup of his wrath on all those who defy him. And Jesus says, when I am crucified, that is what I am drinking, the judgment of God.

And like a baptism, it will be an overwhelming experience, one that I'll be totally immersed in, one that will swallow me up. Now that sounds like a terrifying thing.

[18 : 32] And we might very well ask, why does this cup exist in the first place? I thought God is love, and that the cross is meant to be a symbol of God's love. And the Bible says, yes, absolutely.

But let's hear how God is love. For here is the Bible's big story. The Bible says there is a God, and he created the world out of no other reason but love.

As God, he has no need for us. He isn't compelled to create. But he did. Why? Not out of neediness, but out of love.

And that's why the Bible doesn't just name God as creator, but God as father. But the Bible also says, don't get confused.

There is a God, but we are not him. We are his creatures, and we are answerable to the creator. But here's the problem.

[19 : 38] The fundamental human problem all throughout history is that God loves us, but that we don't love him back. We only want to use him. We want God to fulfill our ambitions.

We want God to do for us what we ask. It's the problem of James and John. We make God a means to an end.

And that end is our own selfish ones. And if that's what our relationship with God is all about, then who is God really in this relationship? Is it him or is it us?

The Bible says there is a God. We are not him, but sometimes we act as though we are. In other words, we disown God. And think about the consequences of that.

When we disown God, we are cutting ourselves from the one who loves us and provides for us and protects us and knows what's best for us. No wonder we become deeply unhappy.

[20 : 42] But even more seriously, when we disown God, we are saying that we hate everything he stands for. And the shorthand word the Bible uses for all that I've just described is sin.

Sin is everything I've just said. And because God is loving and just, he has to act justly. He has to punish sin.

Where there is no sin, there is no wrath, but there will always be love in God. But where there is sin, there has to be wrath, because there is love in God.

God is God. Otherwise, just as a parent who is indifferent to all his child's transgressions, ultimately is not loving him. So a God who is totally indifferent cannot be a God who is loving.

And so God has to pour out his cup of wrath on us. It necessarily has to come from his character of love. Why is Jesus drinking this cup?

[21 : 57] After all, he loved God the Father with all his heart and soul and strength and mind. He never disowned God. He never sinned. And so he doesn't need to drink this cup of wrath.

So why is he doing so? Well, Jesus tells us himself in verse 45, he has come to give his life as a ransom for many.

He has come to pay the price that will secure the release of many captives. And what is that price? His very own sinless life, offered up in place of our sinful lives.

For Jesus did only what God can do. When Jesus asks James and John whether they can drink the cup, he's asking a rhetorical question. He's asking a question which already has an answer.

They can't. But they don't understand still. They say confidently, we can. But of course they can't.

[23 : 05] They have no idea what they're talking about. And it's the same with us. If your entire life is a browsing history that God can look through, could you face God?

Could you stand in his presence? No, you can't and I can't. But Jesus can.

His entire life is a history of complete obedience to God. Here's the good news. Jesus looks at James and John and he looks at us with tenderness and he says, I'll let you have my history and I'll take on your history.

I'll drink the cup. I'll pay. And so when Jesus goes to the cross, he is not paying for his own sin. He is paying for ours.

As God the Son is mocked, flogged, and crucified, he empties the cup of wrath, bearing the full penalty for our sin so that judgment will never fall on us.

[24 : 26] He paid it all. And on that cross, he says, I thirst so that we never ever again have to thirst. we will have living water. And that is the meaning of atonement. That is the meaning of the cross. And that is why Good Friday is so good.

Not because Jesus has come to fulfill our every ambition, but to rescue us from our own selfish ambitions. The very thing that has brought about God's judgment on us.

And that takes us to our fourth and final A for this morning. Aspiration. You see, when we come to Jesus, he fundamentally elders our ambitions.

For those in God's kingdom have naturally different aspirations. Look at verses 41 to 44. When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.

[25 : 36] Jesus called them together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. Seeing how the other disciples react, Jesus knows that it's time for a lesson, and so he calls them together, and he says, In the ways of the world, when you're in charge, you get to boss people around.

You get them to do whatever you want. But in God's kingdom, that's now transformed. And now you aspire to sacrificial service, not selfish ambition.

If you want glory, aspire to be lowly. Why? Because that's what I did because of Good Friday.

Look at verse 45, For the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. But let me tell you the most important way you can put into practice verses 33 and 34.

[26 : 54] the first and most important thing you have to do is not so much to serve like Jesus. That will come after. That's the second thing you have to do.

But the first and most important thing you have to do is to be served by Jesus. And to be served by Jesus, you must come empty and let him pay the ransom.

Imagine if you were kidnapped, but you heard that somebody was about to pay your ransom, but you refuse to let him pay. You say, no thanks, I got maybe one or two cents in my wallet.

Let's try to use that instead. But if you did that, you will remain captive. And that is what you are doing if you come to Jesus thinking, I can do life on my own.

Jesus will just give me advice from time to time. That's what you're doing. If you come to Jesus thinking, I just need Jesus to give me that extra little something, but otherwise my life is okay. I remain in charge.

[28 : 01] But when you do that, you are not letting Jesus serve you. You are still full of yourselves. You're putting yourself first, not last. You're treating Jesus as a counselor or a genie, not as your savior.

But you need him to serve as your savior. You need him to empty that cup of wrath for you. That's what he came to save you from.

And so you need to come empty, humble, contrite, depend. if you're not a Christian today, that's what you need to do, to be shielded from the wrath of God.

But guess what? Even if you're a Christian today, that's what you still need to do, empty yourself in repentance and faith day after day. And when you do that, he will fill you up.

He gives his life, he will bring you life. It's a life that will frequently require you to have the courage to say sorry and to accept the sorry of others.

[29 : 18] It's a life that will frequently require you to trust him when you can't see ahead. It's a life that will demand you to love others beyond what you think you can give.

But it is a life that is ultimately fulfilling because it is a life paid by the king's ransom. And if the king has already served you in this way by dying on the cross, will he not also serve you as you aspire to his way?

And so my friends, this is the story of Good Friday. Jesus drank the cup so you don't have to. He emptied himself for you so that you can be full.

The son of man has come not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Will you give your life to him?

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we come together this Good Friday, we are reminded again of why Good Friday is so good.

[30 : 49] Thank you that even when we were still so bad, even when we were still ungodly, even when we were still your enemies, and yet you send your son Jesus to come and die for us.

Because of that, we are completely justified, and we are completely safe from the wrath to come. And so Father, we just pray, Lord, that we would never lose this message of Good Friday.

We would remember that you have sent your son to empty the cup for us, and in return we receive the cup of living water. And so help us to walk in your way, not to be first, but to be last.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. All this we pray for his name's sake.

Amen.