

## **DESCENDING INTO GREATNESS**

### ***“The Flatliners”***

I have to admit that when I first heard a couple of years ago that Osama Bin Laden had listed Canada as one of 5 “Christian nations” to be targeted by Muslim extremists for Jihad, I did enjoy a little chuckle at his expense. In the first place, calling Canada a “Christian nation” clearly proved to me that Bin Laden doesn’t really understand Christianity or Canada or both. Secondly, I thought, Canada? Come on! Canada is the global middle child, the mediator, the peacemaker, the one who wants to be liked by everybody. What had we ever done to warrant Jihad? I thought that maybe Osama needed to get out a little more often.

Over the last couple of weeks, I guess I’ve learned a lesson or two about Canada. The other night, I caught myself watching a special edition of *The National* with Peter Mansbridge for an in depth investigation and analysis of the capture of 17 men, many of them Canadians plotting terrorist attacks on Canadian soil. At the time of their arrest, they had in their possession three times the explosive materials that were used in the Oklahoma City bombing, allegedly with the intention of destroying the Federal Parliament buildings in Ottawa, the CSIS head offices in Toronto and other targets in Southern Ontario. Suddenly our little corner of the world was allegedly on the frontlines in a global war on terror, an effort to prevent extremist terrorists from reordering society under the banner of fundamentalist Islamic beliefs by violent means. When you’re involved in a war on terror you have to always be vigilant, to be able to intercept potential violent acts of terrorism before they have the chance to undermine life as you know it.

During Jesus lifetime, the mood was much the same across the Roman Empire, but especially in the backwater province of Palestine. Palestine was a tiny province in a forgotten corner of the Empire but it was notorious in Rome for its steady determination to throw off the shackles of Roman rule and reassert its independence and freedom. It was a province notorious for its perpetual rebellion against the Empire and continual violent insurgency aimed at running the occupation forces out of the country.

For twelve years, Pilate, a Roman military commander, was stationed in the province of Palestine to keep the peace and suppress rebellion against Rome, which was the charge brought against Jesus by the chief priests. In his twelve years in office, his twelve years of ruthlessly squashing anything that faintly smelled like a political uprising or revolt, he had seen just about everything, which is why he was so unimpressed by the man who stood before him now.

***Mark 15:1-2 [TNIV] — Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. “Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate. “You have said so,” Jesus replied.***

This man named Jesus was accused by his own people of being the leader of a political rebellion, of trying to establish himself as a rival king to Caesar who would finally rescue Israel from the rule of the Romans and establish the kingdom of Israel as a global superpower. Pilate sensed that this man was not the threat to Rome’s political stability that they said he was. “You?” he laughed incredulously, “You’re the King of the Jews?”

From what Pilate had heard Jesus was the leader of no rebellion. He was little more than a popular teacher and prophet of the Jews. He taught people that God’s presence was breaking into the world, overthrowing the power of sin and reclaiming the world for good. He showed people a new way of relating to each other, as humble servants rather than as self-interested bullies. He offered people freedom from the rigidity of rules-based religious systems, to instead live lives of love for God and each other. He modeled inclusivity and supposedly welcomed the unlikeliest of people, the lowest, the lost and the least, into God’s inner circle. He apparently demonstrated God’s power at work in the world, miraculously reversing the ravages of disease and rescuing people from demonic control, restoring them to dignity and community. He even defeated the enemy’s his most powerful weapon, death, by raising people from the dead.

To Pilate’s knowledge, Jesus never hoisted a weapon and never broke a law. He never hurt anybody, never purchased ammonium nitrate, never rigged a detonator, never met with Al-Qaeda operatives. In fact, Pilate didn’t know of a single thing that Jesus had ever done wrong. Yet, for some reason, he was now standing before a Federal Judge, indicted on the charges of treason against the state. “You’re the king of the Jews?” he asked again.

“That’s not exactly how I would say it,” Jesus replied without flinching. Jesus never denied that being king was the goal of his life, even if he would never be king the way Pilate envisioned it. Jesus never intended to be a leader over some ancient nation state in conflict with Rome. According to Jesus, his kingdom was not a political reality, but an eternal one. He came to rule over God’s kingdom, to establish God’s authority over all of creation, to rule in people’s hearts and lives so that through them the world could be everything God envisioned.

He was not an insurrectionist. He was not a rebel leader or an military insurgent and Pilate knew it. Yet, Pilate was a political creature to the core. To Pilate, the only thing more important than justice was politics, the only thing more important than a fair trial was his agenda. Pilate was convinced of Jesus’ innocence and unconvinced about the motives of his accusers, but rather than handing down a verdict of “not guilty” and risk the political fallout of another unruly mob and another street riot in Jerusalem at festival time, he chose to leave that potentially messy decision to the mob. Like the finale of American Idol, it was politically more expedient to invite the crowd to vote on the fate of their Messiah by texting the word, “verdict” to 15568.

Every year it was the custom at the Passover Festival to pardon one prisoner of the state, whomever the crowds requested. This year, Pilate would offer them a choice, Jesus or Barabbas. Barabbas was a true political insurrectionist, a terrorist of the most violent stripe. Barabbas was the legitimate leader of a real Jewish political group stirring up trouble for Rome. He was a true Crusader, a committed Jihadist who had been convicted of several counts of first-degree murder of Roman officials and officers and had been sentenced to death. I don’t think Pilate particularly cared whom the crowd chose in the end, though he probably assumed they would chose amnesty for their popular teacher. I just think he didn’t want to make the choice himself.

***Mark 15:9-13 [TNIV] — “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them. “Crucify him!” they shouted.***

In unison, the crowd weighed in on their opinion of Jesus’ ministry and the difference he could make in their lives, on what they were looking for in a Messiah. They didn’t want the experience of God’s power that Jesus was

offering. They didn't want a new way of relating to each other. They didn't want freedom from the rigidity of rules-based religion. They didn't want God to reverse the ravages of disease, rescue them from the demonic control of evil, restore them to dignity and community. What they wanted was a free Israel. They wanted life the way they wanted it, so when it came time to choose, they chose Barabbas over Jesus.

For all that Jesus had done he could drop dead for all they cared, so they shouted to have him crucified.

Concerned with keeping the peace in Jerusalem, with preventing another outbreak of violence that would bring more negative press to his office, in one gigantic miscarriage of justice, Pilate sentenced Jesus to death as the rejected King of the Jews.

***Mark 15:15 [TNIV] — Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.***

To the chief priests and Jerusalem hordes, the idea that Jesus was king of the Jews was despicable. To Pilate, the very notion of Jesus as the king of the Jews was unthinkable. To the soldiers under Pilate's command, given charge to carry out Jesus' death sentence, the idea was downright laughable. Crucifixion Fridays were already their favourite days on the schedule, but that rare opportunity to humiliate a pretender to the throne was an especially delicious occasion.

First, they had Jesus scourged, tearing his back to ribbons with a leather cat-of-nine-tails tipped with nails, glass, lead and rocks. Then a full battalion of soldiers dragged him into the courtyard of Pilate's palace, where they ridiculed this ridiculous king in a mock coronation ceremony. They played dress-up with Jesus, decking him out in the royal regalia of the Roman Emperor, being enthroned by his people. A soldier's cape served nicely as a purple robe. A wreath of thorns jammed into his forehead replaced Caesar's ivy crown. With a soldier's staff in the place of the emperor's scepter, they struck repeatedly over the head. Then, bowing at the feet of this bloodied and bruised Messiah, they paid homage, crying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" By the time they had grown bored of torturing Jesus, he was too weak to carry his own cross.

At the place called "the skull", they drove long iron spikes through his hands and feet and strung him up

naked to die on the cross, as a failed insurrectionist leader. The men who were hung on either side were insurgents, likely men who had fought under the direction of their now-pardoned leader Barabbas, unhesitatingly murdering Roman soldiers, officers and officials in surprise attacks in the streets and marketplaces of Israel. Even these men, Mark says, spent their dying breaths heaping insults on him, the ridiculous king who wanted to rule in God's kingdom.

As was customary of Roman crucifixions, above his head was hung a sign written with piercing sarcasm announcing his crime for the world to see: "The King of the Jews". The Romans always crucified people along the main thoroughfares to serve as a public warning to all who would follow in his footsteps and to maximize the shame of it all. As Jesus hung on the cross, onlookers had ample opportunity to add insult to injury, literally. Mark says that those who were passing by didn't miss the chance to do so to Jesus. The very people, who had nodded approvingly at Jesus' teaching in the temple, now shook their heads and yelled at him on the cross. "So!" they shouted, "You think that you can destroy and rebuild the temple, do you? You think that you can just presumptuously march into Jerusalem as our Messiah, our king? If you want to save people, why don't you start by saving yourself?"

For three long hours, it never let up. For three long hours, Jesus endured the mocking scorn of every pair of eyes that passed by and an endless litany of insult and injury. Then, when the clock struck noon, Jesus experienced the darkest three hours of his life. Before then, Jesus had been alone in the world. At that moment, Jesus was alone in the cosmos.

***Mark 15:33-34 [TNIV] — At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").***

At the brightest time of day, when the sun was at its peak, darkness fell over the land for three uninterrupted hours. In the Old Testament, darkness is almost always a sign of God's displeasure and judgment. It is one of the ways in which God indicates his punishment on those who have failed to honour him. For those hours on the cross, God's displeasure and judgment, God's divine punishment fell on Jesus, the person Mark has called God's Son.

For the first time in his entire existence, Jesus, who was eternally one with God the Father, who had been forever united with him in love, experienced the agony of the penalty of sin, the sin of the entire world, resting on his shoulders. He felt God turn his back and look away. He felt God's cold shoulder. He felt what it was like to be left alone to struggle through on his own, to be deserted and left to his own devices. For the first time in his entire existence, Jesus felt abandoned by God. Jesus had not been abandoned by God, just as God has never abandoned any of us. He is still to Jesus, "My God!" But it is a relationship that, in that exact moment, feels like abandonment.

Some of those standing nearby misheard his cry and assumed that he was called out to Elijah. The Jews believed that Elijah was a heavenly messenger sent by God to help people in their time of need. Rabbi Eleazar, it is said, was rescued from a Roman trial by Elijah, who appeared in the disguise of a Roman soldier and intercepted an Imperial messenger from Rome, tossing him a distance of 1300 miles so that he could not return to the trial. When Jesus cried out, someone ran to fetch Jesus a sponge filled with wine vinegar to revive him, in an attempt to keep him alive until Elijah came. But Elijah never did. Heaven was silent. Jesus died alone, rejected by the Jews, mocked and humiliated by his enemies, abandoned by God.

The one who came as God's king had been executed like a common criminal, rejected, ridiculed and abandoned. The one who came to overthrow the forces of sin with the power of good had been killed by sinners. The one who came with a dream of renewing people's lives so that they finally reflected God's vision for humanity died at the hands of the people he came to save and the dream had died with this discarded Messiah. It was over, until Mark writes this.

***Mark 15:38-39 [TNIV] — The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"***

Suddenly, through the darkness of events that surrounded Jesus' death bursts two tiny rays of hope that not everything had been in vain. First, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The temple in Jerusalem was furnished with two immense curtains, each measuring more than 80 feet high and almost a foot thick, the outer one being magnificent work of Babylonian tapestry in rich colours, symbolizing the earth, sea and sky.

When Mark says that at the very moment of Jesus' death, one of these curtains was torn in two, from top to bottom, what he means to say is that the curtain was torn in two, from heaven to earth. Symbolic of Jesus' mission as the Messiah sent by God was this ongoing promise from the last days of his ministry, that as the Messiah he would destroy the Jerusalem temple and build a new one, one even more majestic and magnificent, to serve as a worship centre for the entire world as the first step in truly ushering in the kingdom of God. The tearing of the temple curtain was the symbolic fulfillment of that promise. God was affirming that the process had begun. At the moment of Jesus' death, the demolition of the temple had begun, the kingdom of God had become a reality on earth. From every outward appearance, Jesus had died as a miserable failure, a disgraced pretender to the throne of God's kingdom, but God had said otherwise. From God's perspective, Jesus had died as his king. In his death, he had completed the mission he had been sent to earth to accomplish: bringing God's vision for the world to earth.

Something else happened in that moment as well, a second confirmation of Jesus as king, not from heaven but from earth, not from God but from a man, the captain of Jesus' execution squad. This centurion was a low-ranking officer whose only role that day was to ensure that these enemy combatants died the disgraceful, torturous deaths to which they were condemned, to ensure that in their humiliation and agony served as a warning to others.

This centurion, Mark says, had been standing in front of Jesus watching the entire affair. He had witnessed Jesus dignified silence before the Roman governor. He had observed the nobility of how Jesus had carried himself through the disgrace of being publicly shamed for a crime he didn't commit. He saw the miraculous darkness that had fallen as he hung on the cross. He watched this man give up his life with a cry that was full of life, rather than the painful fading of life he had watched literally thousands of times. There was something different about this man, something that he had not seen before. "Surely," he said, "This man was the Son of God."

It was a title of allegiance, suitable only for Caesar himself; a phrase stamped on Roman coins for decades to honour of the greatest Roman emperors. It spoke of their divine authority over the entire world, their heavenly authorization to rule the earth as they saw fit. It spoke of their position as God's king. To the centurion, it was an

admission that this man, this man that had been rejected by his people, this man that had been disgraced by his enemies, this man that had been abandoned by his God, had died as everything that the sign above his head had alleged. He was God's king, more suited to rule in God's place on earth than any emperor of Rome. In Jesus' death, both heaven and earth, God and this man affirmed what everyone else had missed, that Jesus was God's king, sent to earth to initiate God's kingdom through his death.

The great paradox of the good news about Jesus is that in the moment of what apparently was his greatest failure, he accomplished his greatest success. In the moment of his apparent defeat, he won his greatest victory. In the moment that he was rejected as king he ushered in the kingdom of God. In the moment that he was ridiculed by his enemies he was being honoured by God. In the moment that he was being punished by God you and I were being forgiven by him. The truth is that it is only because Jesus died that we can experience God's power in our lives.

***Romans 3:23-25a [NLT] — For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us.***

When Jesus' died on the cross, he died as an innocent man, wrongly convicted of crimes he never committed, guilty of no sin against God or humanity. He died the death that you and I deserve because we are not innocent people. Unlike Jesus, we have sinned against God and wronged each other. Yet, by being willing to accept a death he did not deserve, Jesus graciously took on himself our guilt and shame. He graciously took the fall for sins we committed. When the darkness of God's judgment fell on him that day, God was judging Jesus for the sins that we've committed against God and each other. Jesus was doing the time for our crimes.

What that means is that our debt to God has been paid by Jesus. Because he took our spot on the cross we don't have to die for our own sins. Because he was punished instead of us, we can be forgiven and receive new life from God. We can live because Jesus chose to die. All we have to do to experience the forgiveness and new life that Jesus brings as part of God's kingdom in our lives, is to put our trust in Jesus. If we confess that we have

sinned against God and wronged each other and ask Jesus to forgive us and commit ourselves to living the kind of life he modeled and taught with his help, we can experience the power of God at work in our lives, if we embrace Jesus' sacrifice for ourselves.

Not only was Jesus' death the event that launched God's kingdom on earth, the first moment in God's cosmic his renovation project, restoring the world to the way he had always envisioned it, it was also the event that modeled what life in God's kingdom is all about. It is the paradigm for how things work in the kingdom, the prototype of a well-lived life in relationship with God and others, the supreme example of the life that God asks from each of one of us: that we would serve others, giving up everything to lay our lives down for each other's sake. ***Philippians 2:3-8 [TNIV] — Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!***

Jesus gave up everything that he had in heaven to come to earth for one reason. Jesus gave up everything he had on earth to die on the cross for one reason. The reason is to give us the chance to experience God's power at work in us, forgiving and renewing our lives. Now, he asks of us just what he has done for us: to give up everything so that others can have the chance to experience God's power at work in them, forgiving and renewing their lives.

We called this sermon series, *Descending into Greatness* because that is exactly what Jesus did. Jesus became God's king by willingly sinking to the darkest depths imaginable, rejected by the people he loved, disgraced by his enemies and feeling abandoned by God. Yet, it was by giving up everything he had for us that he became God's king, ushering in a new era of God's grace, love and forgiveness in the world. We called the series, *Descending into Greatness* because that is exactly what Jesus asks of us. This new era of grace, love and forgiveness begun by Jesus is still growing today. God has charged those who follow Jesus with the responsibility to give to others what they have received themselves, to spread God's power around the world so that as many as

possible experience the forgiveness and new life that Jesus brings. Here's the catch: God's kingdom spreads when regular people like us give up our lives to see others experience God's power at work in their lives. We do what Jesus did when we love others so much that there is no price we'd be unwilling to pay to see them experience the forgiveness and new life that comes from God because of Jesus' death. To experience the power of God at work in your life you need to emulate his sacrifice for others, like Jesus you too have to die.

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