

And God stepped in

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to Mark's Gospel, Mark chapter 15 and verse 21. Mark chapter 15, verse 21.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

I'm sure you are like myself, and you often wonder why something is happening to you, or why something has happened to you.

We can't make sense of it. We can't understand why it should be us that this is happening to, or why this particular thing should be happening to us.

Now many people would just say, well, it's just luck, or it's fate. These words used by many people. But that doesn't really explain anything.

[1 : 13] Because to say it's just luck, or it's just fate, is really saying there is no explanation. There's no rational explanation. You can't understand it. Now the message of the Bible is that there is a rational explanation of what takes place.

On the grand scale of the history of the universe. And on the very small scale of the details of our own lives.

And that is because God is rational. God is personal. God is a God who has purposes and plans.

And God is absolutely sovereign. He is in control of what happens in the world. And he is working out his purposes. And these purposes, we are persuaded, are rational.

They are sensible. Now we may not be able in any particular instance to discern what are God's purposes or plans. But the Christian has a deep conviction that life ultimately makes sense.

[2 : 27] Sometimes we may see how these things outwork in our own personal history. We may be able to look back and say, God did things that way. Other times we may have to say, I don't know.

I still don't know what God is doing. But I'm persuaded he is doing something. I would like to look with you at this incident recorded here in Mark's Gospel and in Matthew and Luke as well.

The incident concerning this man, Simon of Cyrene. He's famous because he was the man who was press-ganged by the Roman soldiers to carry the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'd like to look with you at him and this incident and see what we can learn about this great question of why me? Why has this happened to me?

And I want to do that and at the same time look at the incident in another two people's lives. Not this time in the Bible.

[3 : 41] But people that I think as we go on we'll discover are quite well known. First then I want to look with you at what we might call the self-contained life that we see illustrated by Simon of Cyrene that day.

We're told that he was passing by on his way in from the country. Now there may be a whole lot of background to this.

We're not given very much details but we're told he's from Cyrene. Whether that meant that he was still living in Cyrene or that's where he originally came from. That was a part of North Africa which today is Libya.

But it would appear that he was Jewish with the name Simon and that he was there at that time because it was the time of the Passover.

Possibly he was staying out in one of the outlying villages out in the country and he was coming in to the city of Jerusalem. But whatever the details are what I think is interesting is this.

[4 : 50] Here was a man who was going about his own business whatever it was. We're told at first he was on his way. He was on his way in from the country.

There he was whatever his purpose was whether it was going to some religious service or something to do with business we don't know. He had his own plans he had his own purposes as he was going along that day.

We don't know anything much about his life but we can perhaps imagine that he was quite happy with the way things were going with his life. He knew what he was doing he knew where he was going and then that day something happened that changed his life forever.

We're also told that he was passing by. It wasn't just that he was on his way his own way whatever it was but he was passing by at this particular point.

Now that may imply that he was just one of the passers by but it may also suggest to us that here as this procession of criminals was being led out he was passing by he wasn't stopping to look or get involved he was a bit like the priest and the Levite on that road to Jericho passing by on the other side he didn't want to become involved he had his own life that he was getting on with and he didn't want to get involved with anything that might cause any trouble or might upset him and how often are we like that?

[6 : 22] we've got our self-contained lives we've worked things out we know or at least we think we know where we're going and what our plans are and we just keep other things at arm's length we don't want to get involved with anything that might upset the nice equilibrium that we've established in our own lives well I want to look with you at the lives of two other people and some of the incidents in them that will maybe help you to identify with what I'm talking about here about Simon it was a hot summer evening in 1967 a young attractive blonde teenage girl was on the beach in America she was someone who had everything going for her all of life in front of her she was good at sport popular she loved horse riding loved swimming everything to live for but something happened that evening that changed her life forever she had her own purposes and plans she thought she knew what she was doing with her life but something happened that radically altered her life from that point on so that it was never the same again someone else this time a young handsome army captain living life to the full he had been in all different parts of the world with the army this particular time he was stationed in North Africa he loved skiing he loved playing polo and again someone who seemed to be living life to the full he had his own purposes and plans as to what he was doing and where he was going in life and he met and fell in love with a beautiful girl and you might think what a great life we'd all like to have that kind of life so many of us like these two people whom we're going to come back to as we think through this thing this morning so many of us may be able to identify with what we've just said living our self-contained life where everything seems to be going quite well you know sometimes we as preachers we preach about things that are wrong in life and the problems and the trouble trying to show that there is a great need for you to come to the Lord Jesus

Christ and you may say well everything's going quite well for me thank you very much these were two people like that perhaps also like Simon of Cyrene who was on his way passing by wonder are you like that this morning you're on your way you think you know where you're going in life you think everything's plain sailing but there may be something that has come along something that is coming along or something that will come along that will upset that that will maybe change your perspective whatever maybe it's already happened maybe it's upset you and you don't know what on earth to do about it but so many of us are in that kind of condition this self-contained life I want to look with you secondly at what I've called the disturbing event because here something happened to Simon that meant that he was never the same again

Simon of course as we know just happened we may say to be passing that day that Jesus was being led out to crucifixion perhaps Simon didn't know anything about it or perhaps he had heard some of the rumours and stories about this Jesus we don't know but he happened to be there at that particular time and he was forced to carry Jesus cross now the details of it we can find out if we look at the various accounts in the gospels we can see that to begin with Jesus set out carrying his own cross that was the regular pattern that the condemned man carried his own cross out to the place of execution and for some reason at this point someone else was looked for to carry the cross it's possible that Jesus due to the severe treatment that he had had collapsed under the weight of the cross and the soldiers in the hurry to get on simply grabbed someone out of the crowd as it was their right to do and compelled him to carry the cross we don't know the exact reason but whatever it was what happened that day radically altered the course of Simon's life he was first of all forced off course he had his own course he had his own way that he was going that day and suddenly something happened that forced him off course that made him completely change what he was going to be doing that day and it was something that perhaps was very very unwelcome to him he would be in the position that many of us would be saying why me can you take somebody else

I'm busy I'm on my way I'm going somewhere but of course there was no reasoning with a Roman soldier in that position but we can imagine how he felt why me I don't want to get involved these criminals this person who's all bleeding who's been beaten I don't want to get involved why me forced off course I wonder can you identify with that maybe something has happened in your life that has disturbed a nice orderly life you'd set out for yourself perhaps it's been there for a very very long time but before you've just pushed it down tried to make it keep quiet not bothering maybe it's something that's just happened recently it's something that's knocked you off course and you're thinking why me could be some particular suffering physical or psychological could be some kind of disappointment could be some kind of trouble could be some kind of sin many many different things and you may ask why me why is this happening what's the sense in it all and it's completely knocked your life sideways but the second part of this disturbing event that we need to notice is that of course

Simon by being forced off course was confronted with Jesus Christ Simon was on his way that day passing by Jesus was there in the same street as him but Simon was passing by Simon wasn't interested maybe Simon had heard about him maybe he heard of people talking and gossip and all the rest of it but he wasn't interested he was on his way passing by you've maybe heard a lot about the Lord Jesus Christ you've maybe heard many sermons maybe even remember things you were taught in Sunday school and at home and so on but you've kind of pushed that to one side and you're hurrying on with your life you've got it set out before you the things that you think are important and then suddenly you get knocked sideways suddenly something happens that makes you begin to think what on earth is going on why is this happening to me and you may begin to realise also with Simon that you are being confronted with something you don't want to think about you've been confronted with the

[15 : 20] Lord Jesus Christ you see Simon had to carry Jesus cross and we're told in one of the gospels that he had to carry it behind Jesus and there he was this man probably by the inferences that we can make probably quite a wealthy man after all he had travelled all the way from Cyrene to be there in all probability someone who was able to come up to visit Jerusalem at the time of these religious festivals and he was there being compelled to follow behind this condemned criminal and probably to himself as a Jew it would have been very distasteful that this criminally was being led behind he was being led out to be crucified to be hung on a tree and perhaps if he had heard about Jesus that this was some blasphemer and yet that staggering behind Jesus under the weight of this cross that Jesus was to die had a profound effect upon him we know some of the things that took place there that Simon must have witnessed we know that on the way up there to Calvary the women were weeping the women of Jerusalem were weeping at the sight of Jesus they were moved by the sight of this man who had never done anybody any harm who had done nothing but good and yet there he was he had been beaten he was half dead he was staggering up to Calvary and they were weeping and Jesus in the midst of all of this he has time and he takes the effort to say to them don't weep for me weep for yourselves and for your children because Jesus could see the judgment coming upon Jerusalem because of their rejection of himself and so he in his compassion for them was warning them lovingly about these things

Simon witnessed that that must have made him pause and wonder what kind of man is this and then perhaps there as he was relieved of the cross he perhaps stayed to see Jesus actually being nailed to that cross perhaps by this stage his curiosity had been aroused what kind of man is this and when the soldiers drove the nails into Jesus' hands he was to hear Jesus say father forgive them they don't know what they're doing and again surely in Simon there must have grown this wonderment what kind of man is this who forgives his enemies there was something about the Lord Jesus that fascinated him and there perhaps he hung around we don't know to see what became of this man and perhaps like the centurion he was to come to a surprising conclusion concerning him but at any rate the point was that he was confronted with Jesus and as we'll see in a few minutes this had a profound effect not only on him but on his family now we may wonder why things happen to us why things may happen to upset our equilibrium why we may be confronted every so often by this question of what am I going to do with Jesus

God has some purpose in it that young teenage girl I mentioned at the beginning on that American beach she got up ran down to the sea and dived in the place she dived in was far shallower than she thought and her head hit the bottom and she suddenly found that she was lying there on the bottom and she couldn't move she couldn't move her arms she couldn't move her legs and she wondered what on earth was happening she thought it was some sort of nightmare what had happened was that she had broken her neck and from that moment she was paralysed from the shoulders down she actually was saved by the quick thinking of her sister and some friends that were there but from that moment on she's been paralysed confined to a wheelchair and of course like any one of us she asked why me why has this happened to me all of life in front of me all these tremendous good things to be enjoyed and suddenly it's totally broken it's all gone why me why has this happened to me and she wrestled with that great question as to why

God should allow something like that to happen to her and again she was confronted by Jesus she was knocked off course and she was confronted with what kind of person Jesus is and what he really wanted and that's a great thing that she had to wrestle with what about that young army captain that I mentioned lovely girl whom he met fell in love with turned out to be a Christian now that fact cut across his self contained life and he might have asked why has this happened why is this the person that I fallen in love with who's a Christian and has got these weird religious ideas that cuts across things in my life why me again he was confronted by Jesus so we see there are many different things that can cut across our path upset our course and make us start thinking and wondering and asking why me and also realizing that we're confronted by Jesus

Christ I wonder do you know anything of that experience I'm talking about the experience of Simon that young girl and of that young army captain well I want to look with you finally at the dramatic outcome in the case of each one Simon I believe was never the same again now why can I say that perhaps that's been the question going through your mind as we're going along what's he driving at here it just simply records that Simon carried his cross so how do we know anything more well we know something more because of this thing mentioned by Mark he says not just that Simon was from Cyrene but that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus you think who are they well the great point is why does Mark say that he has no need to say who Simon's sons were who's going to be interested the point is people were interested why were they interested because of course Alexander and Rufus were Christians they were well known in the early church probably in all probability in Rome where Mark was writing this gospel and it was particularly with a Roman background in mind so something tremendous had happened in the family of Simon his two sons were well known

[23 : 16] Christians in the early church and I think it's not too much to death all that stemmed back to that day when Simon was compelled to carry the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ you see God acts in most surprising ways there was a reason for that disturbing event in the life of Simon Simon didn't know it at the time Simon didn't want it he would have wished to be anywhere but there carrying a cross being made a public spectacle of God works in mysterious ways see it's not always that God comes along and says he can do something for us sometimes in the circumstances we may be actually compelled to do something for him not just Simon here who was doing something for Jesus but think of Simon Peter too that Jesus asked him to lend him his boat so that he could preach from and that had a tremendously profound effect upon

Peter Peter felt so unworthy when Jesus then showed him where a large catch of fish was and so on you see something happened through in this case Peter doing something for Jesus that radically changed his life here again something happened in Simon's life that he was compelled to do something for Jesus he was never the same again God works in mysterious ways but God cuts across our lives and he causes things to happen that we may think why me why is this happening to me and yet God has a purpose for good in it as he had in the case of Simon God was at work and when God begins to work then we can look out because God's work is never unfinished never incomplete God brings his work to conclusion the young girl I mentioned earlier so paralyzed and having to move around in a wheelchair came to know

Jesus far better than she had ever done before and came to accept that he had had a purpose in it in fact she has gone so far as to say that God broke her neck that day for a tremendous belief in the sovereign power of God she has come to depend utterly upon him and she's become well known artist singer author she is of course Johnny Erickson who will be speaking in Aberdeen later on this summer but that incident was something that seemed at the time to totally devastate her life it was incomprehensible what was God doing but as it turned out God had a tremendous purpose in it that has touched not only her life but the lives of thousands maybe millions and what about that young army captain well we left him when he had fallen in love with this girl who turned out to be a

Christian he married that girl I might say that raises all kinds of questions because the Bible teaches that someone who's a committed Christian should not marry someone who's not but they did and you see God sometimes overrules such things that's not to say that we should do evil so that good may come but God sometimes has his own purposes in things God definitely had his own purpose in this this army captain retired from the army he was running a hill sheep farm in Perthshire and he was still following the old same self-contained lifestyle he was even cheating on his wife he was persuaded by his wife to come and hear an evangelist who was going to be speaking at her mother's home and he says that really that might have seemed the most unlikely circumstances for anything good to happen he felt most uncomfortable in his mother-in-law this evangelist there and yet the evangelist asked him to do one thing afterward to read

John's gospel and so he thought well he would do it and he read through John's gospel chapter or two a night and a few nights later he came to chapter 15 verse 22 where it says now they have no cloak for their sin no excuse for their sin and those words rang home to his heart and that night after great struggling he committed his life to the Lord Jesus Christ that man is Captain Stephen Anderson who's a well-known evangelist with the Church of Scotland and has been a means of blessing many people throughout the land especially amongst university students how was he to know that that day when he met that girl and fell in love with her and the thing that was really bothering him was that she was a

[29 : 03] Christian how was he to know that all of this tremendous good would eventually come of that things may cut across our path things may seem to be wrong to us and if we had the choice we would choose them otherwise but God has a purpose in it and once God begins to work in your life then he brings it to his conclusion well I don't know what cross you're asked to bear Simon that day was called upon to carry the real wooden heavy cross that Jesus was crucified on and we use that expression carrying a cross meaning having to deal with something having to put up with something that's difficult or hard in life and all of us have these kind of problems there's not one person who really is able to live a self-contained life where everything is fine because we live in a world that is rough textured

God has made it that way and it will penetrate our self-contained world it will prick the balloon of our own world that we have created to our own dimension God will not allow us off with pretending that the world is different from what it is thanks be to God have you discovered yet that God is really interfering in your life that God is pushing you off course that God is forcing you to face up to Jesus Christ he may do it in all different circumstances it's not the same for any one person think how different those three cases I've been talking about this morning really were but there are similarities do you know that God is working in your life you may not have recognized it up until now but through perhaps sometimes difficult circumstances God is at work and God is saying you must look to me you must look to the Lord

Jesus Christ you must give in that's what God is asking us to do are you still fighting that are you still saying why me why is this happening to me why does God allow this kind of thing or are you saying well God must have some purpose in it God is driving me to think about things seriously that I would never have thought about otherwise God is making me face up to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ well if you begin to think like that then you're on the right lines indeed today with these words we're challenged to face up to the Lord Jesus Christ and to come to know him and we can do so in a life altering way in the same way in which Simon came to know him so that his not only his own life but his family's life was never the same again from that moment on these were people who are going to be dedicated to the

Lord Jesus Christ God is able to do the same kind of thing today in the lives of people here as he did for Simon so long ago as he did for Johnny Erickson as he did for Stephen Anderson he's able to do the same in the lives of sinful people here because the Lord Jesus came to be the saviour of sinners let us pray our loving heavenly father we thank you for your kindness to us in wrestling with us by your word pleading with us in your word working with us in your providence oh Lord open our eyes to see your hand at work and not to wrestle against your sovereign power for such as utter foolishness enable us today to yield to that drawing power of the

Lord Jesus Christ that we might today know his love and acceptance and that life altering work which he begins in every person who yields to him gracious Lord we ask that you would bless the preaching of your word everywhere it is proclaimed today and we pray for those who know they are confronted with the claims of Christ we pray that they may indeed be brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ remember those still far off still contempt in their own self-contained world gracious Lord we pray that you would show to them their desperate need also and we pray that you would help all those who know the Lord Jesus Christ to live for him and to work for him and to speak for him so that others may know of this saviour whom we have come to know we ask these things in

[34 : 25] Jesus name Amen Now we close by singing in Psalm 65 verses 1 to 4 Praise wait for thee in Zion Lord to thee thou's page shall be O thou that hear art of prayer all flesh shall come to thee verses 1 to 4 to God's praise praise which for thee in my Lord to thee those fish shall be O thou that and he leaveoland as

The Lord has confessed, prepare against me, Lord, But as all our transgressions, them her joy shall flow.

Blessed the man whom Abbas chose, And makes the courts to thee, That he within thy courts, O Lord, May serve our battle with thee.

We surely shall be satisfied, With thy abundant grace, And with the goodness of thy house, In love thy holy place.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Be with each one of you now and forever.

[37 : 21] Amen.