

# The Via Dolorosa

[Mark 15:16-21](#)



**V**ia Dolorosa is Latin for "*Way of Grief*" or "*Way of Suffering.*" The modern Via Dolorosa was created in the 14th century by Franciscan monks when a name was sought for the stretch of road between the [fortress Antonia](#) and [Golgotha](#), along which Christ walked bowed under the weight of the Cross. It is a street in the old city of Jerusalem. Traditionally, it is held to be the path that Jesus walked on the way to His crucifixion. The modern tradition of the [Via Dolorosa](#) and the fourteen Stations of the Cross is mostly unbiblical.



The two incidents, according to Scripture, that actually happened on Jesus' way to the Cross are positioned at stations five and eight of the fourteen stations of the Cross—the beginning of the carrying of the Cross by Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21) and the pronouncement of Jesus upon the generation of Jews ([Luke 23:27-31](#)). That Jesus fell under the weight of the Cross, before Simon was compelled to carry the Cross, is a logical insertion into the procession, and the first occurrence is fixed at station three, but why second and third falls are recorded along the Via Dolorosa (stations seven and nine) does not make any sense.

Two entirely fictitious accounts of incidents occur at stations four and six. The former is the point at which Jesus is supposed to have met His mother, and there's now a sixth century mosaic which marks the site where she allegedly stood when she came face to face with her Son.

Station six is by far the most unbelievable. Here, Veronica (who was Veronica? Her name doesn't even appear in the Bible!) supposedly gave Jesus her handkerchief so that He could wipe His brow. Veronica was then given back the handkerchief and, miraculously, it retained the image of His face on it—now preserved in St Peter's Basilica in Rome where it's been kept since A.D.707.

Most of us are probably familiar with this term Via Dolorosa, thanks to Sandi Patti's song. I would like to read you a few of the lyrics from that song as a introduction to our text:



*Down the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem that day  
The soldiers tried to clear the narrow street  
But the crowd pressed in to see  
The Man condemned to die on Calvary  
He was bleeding from a beating, there were stripes upon His back  
And He wore a crown of thorns upon His head  
And He bore with every step  
The scorn of those who cried out for His death  
Down the Via Dolorosa called the way of suffering  
Like a lamb came the Messiah, Christ the King,  
But He chose to walk that road out of  
His love for you and me.*

*Down the Via Dolorosa, all the way to Calvary.*

This morning in our text we see that Jesus did walk a road of suffering from the [Praetorium](#) to the cross. As we have said in the past, **Jesus is not a helpless victim**, He is a willing Sacrificial Lamb who chose to die in our place.

Let's start this morning where we finished last week at:

***And wishing to satisfy the multitude, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified. (Mark 15:15 NASB)***

The New Testament writers do not dwell on the physical suffering of the [scourging](#) and the Cross, because that isn't the focal point. We tend to make it that, but it certainly is not the focal point of the Gospel writers. Look at Mark's reference to it: ***"having Jesus scourged."*** One word, and that's it! None of the Gospel writers went into any detail at all. Of course I realize that one of the reasons for that is that scourging was common in their time. People knew only too well its horrors; they didn't need to be told about the implications of a Roman executioner whipping a man, while we today don't necessarily have that information. So I do want to read you a brief description of the scourging, in order to better understand the paragraph to come:

*The heavy whip is brought down with full force again and again across Jesus' shoulders, back and legs. At first the heavy thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the blows continue, they cut deeper into the subcutaneous tissues, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and finally spurting arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscles... Finally the skin on the back is hanging in long ribbons and the entire area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue. (C. Truman Davis, "The Crucifixion of Jesus. The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View," Arizona Medicine 22, no. 3 [March 1965]: 185 as quoted in The Expositor's Bible Commentary Vol. 8, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [1984] p. 775).*

[Eusebius](#), in his *Ecclesiastical History*, tells us of martyrs who were beaten with this instrument. He says of them that they "were torn by scourges down to deep seated veins and arteries so that the hidden contents of the recesses of their bodies, their entrails and organs, were exposed to sight." This is how the Messiah is described in:

***Just as many were astonished at you, My people, So His appearance was marred more than any man, And His form more than the sons of men. (Isaiah 52:14 NASB)***

The reality is that many people died in the scourging; they didn't even make it to the cross. It was an absolutely horrid torture. Jesus had just endured this whipping, and now, in this bloody beaten state, He is taken into the palace:

***And the soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. (Mark 15:16 NASB)***

Jesus would have been just this mass of torn-up bleeding flesh. And yet, rather than having even the slightest degree of compassion and just moving on with the process, they feel it necessary to use Jesus as a form of entertainment, as a form of sport.

“*The Praetorium*” is the governor’s residence, probably in this case Herod’s palace. Now notice what our text says, “*They called together the whole Roman cohort*”—about 600 soldiers. This sounds like the soldiers got their buddies out of bed, some of those who were even off duty, in order to mock Jesus:

***And they dressed Him up in purple, and after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on Him;***  
**(Mark 15:17 NASB)**

The clothes that they put on Jesus are in mockery of His sovereignty and, perhaps, deity as well. The crown of thorns resembled the circlet worn by the [Roman Emperor Tiberius](#) and made famous by the coins of that day. It supposedly gave something of divine radiance of the emperor. But this one was intended not only to mock, but also to cause pain.

***and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"<sup>19</sup> And they kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting at Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.*** (Mark 15:18-19 NASB)

These Roman soldiers gathered around Jesus and all started spitting in His face. Then they took a reed and continually beat His head, driving the thorns into His head. Then they knelt and bowed in mock homage to Him.

The trial of Jesus began with the servant of Annas hitting Jesus on the face for speaking without respect to the chief priest. It ends with many other servants of Pilate hitting Him continually.

That Jesus submits to such abuse teaches us that power does not function in the Kingdom of God the way it does in the world. Jesus had taught His disciples:

***"Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.***  
**(Matthew 18:4 NASB)**

Now here stands Christ fleshing this teaching out. Jesus could have spoken a word and destroyed these men, but He humbly stands silent taking all they dish out.

***And after they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, and put His garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.*** (Mark 15:20 NASB)

After they ran out of ideas of how to humiliate Him more, they took the purple robe from Him and put His own clothes on Him again and took Him away to nail Him to a Cross. We’re going to come back to this verse after we look at verse 21:



***And they pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.***  
**(Mark 15:21 NASB)**

There are two major incidents that occurred on the way to Calvary. The first was the commandeering of

Simon of Cyrene, which we see here. The second, which only Luke mentions, was Jesus' response to the wailing "women of Jerusalem," with regard to the danger that lay ahead for them as a part of the generation which rejected Him.

It was normal that the condemned man, in the middle of a square of four soldiers, should carry the crosspiece on which he was to be crucified to the place of execution. The accusation against him was written on a board carried ahead by a soldier, and the longest route to the execution site was taken so as to act as a warning to as many people as possible. The Romans wanted everyone to be stirred by this dark sight and be afraid of law-breaking.



Today I want to be like these soldiers and get as many of you as I can to look at Jesus on His way to Calvary.

This verse contains the first reference to the Cross of Christ in Mark's Gospel. It may surprise you to hear that we're not certain as to the exact shape of the Cross. One opinion is that it was a **plain stake**. Another opinion is that it was a cross in the form of the **figure X**, the so-called [St Andrew's cross](#). Yet another suggests that it was in the **shape of a T**, known as [St Anthony's Cross](#), while the fourth, the so-called [Latin Cross](#), is the traditional idea we all have of a **cross-shaped** like this †. We think that the Latin Cross is the most likely shape.

Typically, the cross consisted of two parts: The cross-beam or horizontal member (Latin *patibulum*) on which the arms would be stretched out and attached, and the vertical post or stake which would be sunk in the earth and remain in place at the execution site. The Greek word for cross is *stauros*, originally "an upright pointed stake or pale." Later the word [stauros](#) came to refer to any part of the cross, whether the upright or cross-piece.

And so Jesus begins to carry or drag the Cross-beam from the Roman Praetorium, where he had been flogged, along the Via Dolorosa to His execution outside the walls. At a certain spot, as they walked along it, became obvious to the execution squad that Jesus wasn't strong enough to carry the Cross any further. Did He totter and collapse, lying in a deep faint on the road with the Cross on top of Him? Did the soldiers realize that beating Him with the flat of their swords wouldn't make any difference?

The Bible nowhere tells us that He fell or why it was necessary for someone else to carry Jesus' Cross, but the Gospel writers have described these hours of suffering that our Lord has endured. He agonized in the Garden and was soaked with sweat, and soon men were beating Him up, and then officially He had been whipped until His back was a pulpy mess. He had hardly slept, and then His head had been hit again and again with a rod so that Jesus knew extreme weakness and loss of blood. We can appreciate the fact that as a true man He was no longer strong enough to carry this heavy beam of wood as fast as they wanted Him to. Since it is already midmorning and the deed must be done before sundown, they grab [Simon the Cyrenian](#) to take up the burden of Christ.

*And they pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross. (Mark 15:21 NASB)*

Mark says that Simon was *“coming from the country.”* The statement implies that Simon, coming into the city, had only just got to the city gates when his service was required by the Roman soldiers or, perhaps, that he hadn’t yet reached the city and was met by the group as they were journeying towards the place of execution. But there is probably intended to be a hint here that there was no help for Jesus from Jerusalem. It required an outsider.

Mark tells us that Simon was *“pressed into service”*– which is from the Greek word *aggareuo*. This word is found only three times in the New Testament, and in all cases it means: *“coercion.”* The word actually comes from the Persian language; it is derived from the days of the Persian Empire and the primitive postal service that took orders from the emperor to his distant ambassadors. Horses, accommodation, and entertainment all would be requisitioned to serve the emperor’s wishes.

Who was this man? **Simon was an African.** Cyrene is one of the most prominent cities in what today is Libya. [Cyrene](#) was a center in North Africa where the Jewish faith had been established for centuries. So Simon might have been an African Jew who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Or, more likely, he could have been a pagan who had turned up quite unwittingly in Jerusalem.

What a day it was for Simon, a day never to be forgotten. Think of what he experienced that day. If he had been on his way in from the country an hour later, he would have missed it all. If he had walked a little faster or a little slower, or taken another gate into the city, he’d have seen nothing. If he’d pressed back into a doorway, the lieutenant in charge of the execution squad wouldn’t have spotted him. But none of that happened, and in God’s providence, he was there at that place and at that time, and so he carried Christ’s Cross. [“The Westminster Shorter Catechism”](#) describes it this way, *“God’s works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions”* (Westminster Shorter Catechism’s answer to question 11).

God had Simon right where He wanted him. So often our first thoughts of being in the wrong place at the wrong time are changed to an awareness that in fact we were in the right place at the right time. I think that Simon’s life was changed by that event. How can I say that? Because Mark adds that Simon was the father of **Rufus and Alexander**. Why would he add this? Mark doesn’t bother to give us the names of prominent people who met our Lord, we’re not told the names of centurions and men and women who were healed or raised from the dead, or prominent people who helped Jesus by giving Him a room in their homes. Yet Mark is telling us this, “This man—do you know who he was? He was Alexander and Rufus’ father!” When John Mark wrote this Gospel, Simon’s sons were still alive. This Gospel of Mark was probably written for the church at Rome, and if you turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans, you will read:

***Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. (Romans 16:13 NASB)***

This name “Rufus” is not a very common one, and of the hundreds of Christians in the Roman congregation, Paul especially greets those he was close to. Rufus had been chosen by the Lord.

When we read of the Gospel first being taken to Greeks in the city of Antioch, we read that the leaders of that church were:

***Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (Acts 13:1 NASB)***

***“Simeon called Niger”***; “Simeon” is the same name as “Simon.” “Niger” was the regular familiar name for a man with a dark skin, a man who came from Africa. Here then might be another appearance of Simon in the New Testament.

Since Mark wrote his Gospel for the Christian community at Rome, it is likely that the two sons of Rufus were well-known to the church there as fellow Christians. Perhaps Simon became a believer and passed on his faith to his family as well.

You see, Simon’s life was changed that day. What began as an inconvenient detour became his salvation. What started as an irritating chore forced upon him by a rude soldier became his entrance into eternal life.

The cross has a way of doing that. It bursts unexpectedly into our lives. It isn’t as though most of us spent our lives looking for God. I love the way C. S. Lewis described his conversion: *“I was looking for God the way a mouse looks for a cat.”* For many of us, the cross comes unexpectedly. But when it comes, it is compelling.

I said earlier that there are two major incidents that occurred on the way to Calvary. The first was the commandeering of Simon of Cyrene. The second incident is only mentioned by Luke:

***And there were following Him a great multitude of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. <sup>28</sup> But Jesus turning to them said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. <sup>29</sup> “For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ <sup>30</sup> “Then they will begin TO SAY TO THE MOUNTAINS, ‘FALL ON US,’ AND TO THE HILLS, ‘COVER US.’ <sup>31</sup> “For if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?” (Luke 23:27-31 NASB)***

Jesus turned to these mourning women with words that must have caught them off guard. He told them not to weep for Him, but for themselves and for their children. The tragedy to which Jesus was referring was that which had caused Him to weep as He had entered Jerusalem at His “triumphal entry”:

***And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, <sup>42</sup> saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> “For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, <sup>44</sup> and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41-44 NASB)***

The future [destruction of Jerusalem](#), which caused Jesus to weep as He entered that city, was the same destruction over which the women of Jerusalem were now told to weep. These women should not mourn so much over Jesus’ death (after all, it would be the cause of their salvation), but they should mourn over that destruction, which would take such a terrible toll on them and on their children. Looking back, we know that the destruction was brought on the city and its inhabitants by [Titus](#), the commander of the Roman army, which sacked the city and executed hundreds of thousands of Jews. Notice what Jesus says:

***“For if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?” (Luke 23:31 NASB)***

Jesus is here referring to the “green tree” and the “dry tree” mentioned in Ezekiel’s prophecy against Jerusalem and its temple ([Ezekiel 20:45-21:7](#)). Allegorically, “the green tree” is “*the righteous,*” and “the dry tree” is “*the wicked.*”

Perhaps the idea is: If God doesn't spare innocent Jesus, how much more severe will be the fate of guilty Jerusalem? Jesus is saying, in context, “If the Roman army will deal with me in this way now, what will they do to you, then?” That which the Roman army is doing is unjustly and cruelly killing an innocent (indeed, a righteous) man. If they will crucify a righteous man now, what will they do then?

“If, when the Messiah, the very Son of God is in your fair city, and the Roman army deals with Me as such, what do you think your destiny will be in My absence, when Jerusalem is abandoned by God, and fit only for the fire of destruction?”

Are they weeping because the Roman army had been persuaded to condemn the Christ and to crucify Him? This was nothing, comparatively speaking (from their point of view), to what the Roman army was going to do in the days to come. This army, fed up with the rebellion of this nation, was going to take out its frustration and vengeance on the people. In Jesus’ final hours of life, He again warns of the soon coming destruction of Jerusalem.

Now let’s back up and look more closely at a very startling verse:

***And after they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, and put His garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him. (Mark 15:20 NASB)***

They mock Him—Jesus Christ, the God-Man. They kneel before Him and hail Him as the King. That would be difficult for anyone to endure. Nobody likes to be mocked. But stop and think about this for a minute. This Jesus, who is subjecting Himself to that, is the God of the universe. This is the God who spoke the universe into place in Genesis:

***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1 NASB)***

The Fourth Gospel tells us that Jesus is this Creator God:

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. (John 1:1-3 NASB)***

Just in case there is any question, we are told that this Word is Jesus:

***And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14 NASB)***

This is the God who parted the Red Sea. This is the God who toppled the walls of Jericho. This is the God, who with His spoken voice, wiped out entire armies. How easy it would have been for the one who created heaven and earth to end everything right then and there; to call down the fire of judgment upon these persecutors, upon Pilate, upon the people, upon the priests. But our salvation was more important. Jesus

wasn't thinking about Himself, but about us.

*Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; <sup>4</sup> do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4 NASB)*

Jesus fleshed this out. I would have done like Elijah and called down fire to burn them all up:

*And Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. (2 Kings 1:10 NASB)*

Jesus could have done this, He is God. But He didn't because we were His priority, He wanted to provide for us the salvation that could come only through the Cross and if that meant being alone, being abused, being mocked, being alienated from friends and those He loved, then so be it.

*And after they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, and put His garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him. (Mark 15:20 NASB)*

In this verse we see man mocking the God who created them. Mockery comes quite naturally to the human mind. It begins with arrogance in one's world view or philosophy of life to the point that anyone in disagreement deserves verbal scorn, if not physical abuse. So the child on the playground, whose world view considers that he is the center of the universe, finds no difficulty in taunting and mocking other children. Likewise with the athlete, who thinks he is the greatest that has ever played the game, can talk trash about his opponent.

But the area that seems to meet with the most mockery is the Christian faith, particularly the Evangelical Gospel, which is regularly mocked in our society. What I want you to understand here is that as Christ was mocked, so also will be all that bear the name of Christ.

Pompeii was a city near Mount Vesuvius, buried under volcanic ash by an enormous eruption in the year 79. On one of those excavated walls is anti-Christian graffiti, which has been preserved for almost 2000 years. There is one particular drawing of a Christian kneeling before a donkey, and below it are scrawled the words, *"Anazimenes worships his god."*

As disciples of Christ, we will be mocked as our Lord and Savior was. Often it is the scornful looks and attitudes shown toward anyone that really believes:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1 NASB)*

The Christian faith maintains as a foundational belief from the Bible that the universe was created by the infinite God, simply by speaking it into existence. We are mocked for holding this belief by those who don't know God. Just this past week I read a blog where an atheist was mocking the idea of God creating. He wrote, *"Compare this: a flying man in limbo snaps his fingers and creates earth.. there is a man there whose rib falls out and creates a woman. Or the scientifically proven big bang and evolution. magic vs. logic?"*

The foundation of evolutionary thought is that there is no design or designer to our universe. All is

governed by time, chance, survival of the fittest, mutations, and natural selection that bring us to where we are today. The existence of a God establishes purpose and design, and most importantly dependence upon a God. You see, if God created the world, then man is accountable to Him. To escape this accountability, man has come up with the idea of evolution. If you do away with God, then you have no accountability, and you are free to do what you wish. That's why there is and always will be a fierce battle by evolutionists to keep any theory of intelligent design or creation out of the classrooms. Their philosophical and unproven presuppositions demand it.

A man attacking creation writes, *“The definition of theory is a repeatable, and testable occurrence which evolution certainly is. Do you acknowledge that some bacteria is now resistant to antibiotics? of course you do, it is fact. Now I ask you, how did that happen...intelligent design or evolution? I rest my case.”*

Science has tried to tell us that evolution is a process called mutation, that living organisms have the capacity to mutate. But you need to understand this; mutations do not change the **nature** or the kind of any living organism. They don't make it anything other than it is. What mutations involve, and this is important, is always a loss of existing information. There is never a gain of information. Mutations never add new genetic information. Mutations, therefore, do not work toward an upward evolutionary process. I rest my case!

Another area that continues to meet with the ridicule of so many is our belief that the Bible is the Word of God. It's okay to have a Bible on a desk or shelf; but to actually read it, study it, memorize it, believe, and apply it to all of life seems to be the most absurd thing imaginable for much of the world. And so they mock a belief in the fidelity and inerrancy of Scripture. They mock our quoting Scripture to affirm our beliefs and the direction of our lives. They mock our dependence upon the living God in the midst of catastrophes or personal suffering or terminal illnesses.

We can talk about Jesus' teaching on loving one's neighbor, and no one objects. We can speak of His teaching that we call the "Golden Rule," and again, no one objects. But speak of the necessity of Christ's death alone as the means of satisfying all of the righteous demands of God for eternal justice toward those that believe, and realize that many will laugh or mock or belittle. We have no hesitation in declaring that our view of Christianity focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in fulfillment of what the Father sent His Son to accomplish. And for this we are mocked.

[Jan Hus](#) was the great morning star of the Reformation. He was a preacher of the grace of God in what is now Czechoslovakia. He was influenced by [John Wycliffe](#), but when he was 42 they charged him with heresy and burned him at the stake. They put on his head a crown of paper on which they had crudely painted devils. Hus saw it and smiled and said, *“The Lord Jesus for my sake wore a crown of thorns. Why shouldn't I for His sake wear this light crown? I'll do it willingly.”*

Believers, when we stand upon the simple truth that Christ alone is the way to God, that there is no eternal life, but only eternal death apart from Christ, most of the world finds that insufferable and deserving the most vehement mockery.

Our Lord endured the mockery of men. Nations have developed considerably since the first century, but the scorn of men toward Christ and the Gospel has not changed. The great irony is that the One mocked is the only hope for sinful men.

Why are we ashamed of saying that we are a Christian and a follower of Jesus Christ when He was not

ashamed to be beaten and mocked for us? Have you been scourged with a whip? They whipped Christ in our place. Have men spat on you? They spat on Him when He stood in your place. Have they punched you in the head? They did not stop punching Him.

The next time you feel like you are really suffering for taking a stand for Jesus; the next time at school some of your classmates make fun of you a little bit; the next time in the work place somebody gives you a hard time for acting with integrity and representing Jesus; the next time in your neighborhood it becomes a little bit difficult to take a stand, you might want to remember this moment when God in the flesh endured this level of mockery and torture for you.

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