

THE CRUCIFIXION

Mark 15

Review the institution of the Holy Supper and make your connection through the betrayal of the Lord by Judas. In all the classes make clear that it was the high priests who actually condemned the Lord, but that Pilate had to give his consent.

Doctrinal Points

The passion of the cross was only the last in a whole lifetime of temptations the Lord faced in order to redeem mankind.

Evil can have no power over us unless we allow it, by failing to call on the Lord to help us overcome it.

Notes for Parents

When we think about the crucifixion of the Lord, it is likely to seem to us a terrible crime which was committed long ago, in which we are glad that we had no part. We live in a nominally Christian nation after centuries of recognition of the Lord. And we live in an age which has learned—as a result of Christianity—to think of physical torture as barbarous. But the people in the Lord’s time took cruel punishments for granted, and to the chief priests the Lord was just a Nazarene who was stirring up the people and threatening their own authority. They did commit a cruel crime, but our thought should be about the motives which prompted them and about how far we may have those same motives in our own hearts.

Do we ever refuse to recognize the truth because it would interfere with what we want to do? Do we ever try to discredit and silence someone who presumes to criticize us? Do we ever try to ridicule other people into agreeing with us?

The Lord had power to save Himself from His enemies. He had proved it many times. He could have performed a great miracle which would have forced everyone to believe in Him. But this

would not have changed their hearts. Nothing really brings people happiness but love freely given, and the Lord wants us to be happy. So He leaves us free. He came into the world to show us the whole way of life, and that had to include the way through death. He had said to His disciples, “Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.” If we will learn this lesson from Him and try always to follow His example, evil will have no power over us, and we shall be what He wants us all to be, inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.

Primary

Stress the reason why the Lord did not save Himself from death on the cross. Tell the children very simply what crucifixion was, as they will be sure to see pictures of it, but do not let them think that the physical suffering was too important. The older children will also be interested in the other details of the story.

You remember that the Lord ate the Passover feast with His disciples, and after the feast He blessed the bread and wine and shared them among the disciples and told them to observe the new feast afterward in memory of Him. That is why we have the Holy Supper in the Christian Church instead of the Passover.

What did He tell them one of them would do?

What did they all say?

It was Judas Iscariot who betrayed the Lord.

He took money from the high priests for leading their servants to the Lord.

He told them that the one he would kiss would be the one for them to take.

Judas was the apostle who had charge of the money from which all their expenses were paid.

He had become more interested in adding money to the bag than in serving the Lord.

But he probably thought that the Lord would save Himself, as He had at other times.

After the Passover supper Judas led a company of people from the high priest out to the Garden of Gethsemane where the Lord had gone to pray. In order to show them the right person to capture, He went up to the Lord, as he had agreed to do, and kissed

Him. Then they took the Lord prisoner, and the chief priests condemned Him and sent Him to Pilate, the Roman governor, to be put to death.

Pilate, the governor, could find no fault in the Lord.

Read verses 6 and 7 of our chapter.

Pilate wanted to release the Lord.

What did the Jews say?

How was the Lord put to death?

Who carried His cross to Golgotha? [Cf., however, John 19:17.]

What was written over the cross?

Who were crucified with Him?

What do we call the day on which this happened? [“Good” in this context means “holy.”]

What happened the next Sunday?

What do we call that day?

Junior

Bring out the position of the Roman governor and his relation to the high priests. The children may like to discuss how far each was to blame for the Lord's death. They are also old enough to understand why the Lord did not save Himself. They should learn the details of the whole story.

For what feast did the Lord come to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday?

On what day did He celebrate it?

What new feast did He institute at that time?

Which of the apostles betrayed the Lord?

How did he show the high priest's servants which person to seize?

Before whom was the Lord first tried?

Of what did the high priest find Him guilty?

Why?

What did Peter do that he was sure he could not do?

At this time the Hebrew nation was under the rule of the Roman empire. The Romans had conquered most of the world. They kept each nation subject by sending out to it a Roman governor with trained troops to take control. The Hebrew priests could not condemn anyone to death. So the high priest sent the Lord to the Roman governor, whose name was Pontius Pilate, and asked him to have the Lord put to death.

What did Pilate ask the Lord?

What did the Lord say?

As we learn from verse 6, it was the custom for the Roman governor at the time of the Passover to free one prisoner—anyone the people chose.

What other prisoner did Pilate have at this time?

What crimes had he committed?

What did Pilate ask the people?

Which prisoner did they ask to have released?

What did they ask Pilate to do with the Lord?

Where was the Lord crucified?

What was written above the cross?

Who were crucified with the Lord?

What did His enemies who were watching tell the Lord to do?

The Lord could have saved Himself from the cross as He had saved Himself at other times. Read Luke 4:28-30, John 8:59, John 10:17-18, 39, and John 19:10-11. No doubt Judas expected Him to save Himself, for when he saw that the Lord was actually taken prisoner, he went to the high priest and tried to save Him by giving back the thirty pieces of silver which had been paid him, and when the high priest refused, Judas threw the money on the floor and went out and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3-5). But the Lord had come into the world to show us the whole way of life, and the life of every one of us in this world reaches its end in what we call death. The Lord had to die and rise again to show us that death is only one of the necessary steps in our life and that we need not be at all afraid of it. And He wanted to show us that if we are good, nothing that anyone can do to us will really hurt our souls. So He let His enemies do the very worst they possibly could to His body.

What happened in the temple when the Lord died?

What did the centurion (the soldier in charge of the Roman guard) say?

Who asked permission of Pilate to bury the Lord's body?

Where did he place it?

Who watched to see where it was laid?

You remember from the Easter account that it was these two

Marys who came to the sepulcher early on Sunday morning with spices, hoping to be able to anoint the body of the Lord, as was the custom, and so were the first to know that the Lord had risen.

The story of the crucifixion seems to all of us a very terrible story, but it is one we need to read and think about because it teaches us especially two things. One is that human beings—all men and women—are selfish by nature, and that if this selfishness in each of us is not recognized and checked, it can lead us to do very cruel and wicked things. The crimes that we read about in the newspapers today can for the most part be traced back to unchecked selfishness. Most of them no doubt began in little acts of dishonesty and cruelty in childhood. We must begin while we are young to hate such things in ourselves as well as in others, and to be honest and kind every day with everyone.

The other lesson is one of gratitude to the Lord for being willing to come into the world and live in a body like ours and suffer not only the physical pain which all material bodies are subject to but the hatred and scorn of the very people whom He was trying to save. Remember always that He could have saved Himself but that if He had, He would not have been able to save us. He won a great victory over all the power of evil by choosing as He did.

Intermediate

The correspondence of the chief priests and of Pilate and how this story applies to our everyday lives is important for his class. Emphasize what it means to condemn the Lord and free Barabbas. Be sure the young people understand what the temptation on the cross really was and how the Lord, by His victories over temptation, made salvation possible for us.

In the time of the Lord the chief priests did not have the power to pronounce a death sentence on anyone. That had to be done by the Roman governor. So the chief priests sent the Lord to Pilate, asking him to sentence the Lord to death. Pilate could find no fault in the Lord, but he soon gave in to the urging of the priests and agreed to sentence Him to be crucified. Let us see if we can understand what this means in our lives. We all know something of the

Lord's truth in the Word. If we are selfish, we want to put that truth away where it will not bother us. The high priests represent this selfishness in our hearts. But we are made in such a way that our thinking does not have to agree with our will. Our minds can tell us that we ought to do right even when we want to do wrong. Our minds, like Pilate, can see that the Lord is right. So we often, like the priests, try hard to make our thinking agree to what we want to do. And very often our minds give in just as Pilate did. Remember this when you find yourself trying to make up excuses for doing what you want instead of what you really know is right. Pilate could have released the Lord, but instead he was persuaded to release Barabbas, a rebel and murderer. When our reasoning ability gives in to our selfishness, evil things instead of good ones are given their freedom in our minds and hearts.

Crucifixion was considered the worst form in which death could be inflicted on anyone. The physical suffering was severe and prolonged, and the exposure to the ridicule of the crowd was an added torment. We can understand this latter suffering if we read verses 29 to 32 of our chapter. People have always talked a great deal about these aspects of the Lord's death on the cross, but they were actually the least of His suffering. The Lord, we know, could have saved Himself from the cross. Read Luke 4:28-30, John 8:59, John 10:17-18, 39, and John 19:10-11. He was afraid neither of the physical suffering nor of the ridicule of the people. But because He loved all men—even His enemies—He was tempted to use His divine power to keep them from committing so great a crime. If He had come down from the cross as His enemies dared Him to, they would have had to acknowledge Him as God, but it would not have changed their hearts. The Lord wants us to love Him, not fear Him. Love has to be given freely.

Now read verse 38. To know what the veil of the temple was, read Exodus 26:31-33. It hid the Holy of Holies, where the ark was kept, in an earlier day, from the sight even of the priests who ministered in the Holy Place. In the Word a veil always pictures the covering over the Divine itself which the Lord provides in order

that men can bear to look toward Him, just as we put on dark glasses when we need to look toward the sun. While the Lord was in the world, the human nature which He had taken on from Mary was such a “veil.” On the cross, when He overcame the last human temptation, He finally put off this veil. That was why, because of its correspondence, the veil of the temple was rent (torn) at that time, and you notice that immediately the centurion who was on guard at the cross—although he could not have known of the rending of the veil in the temple—was given to see that this was indeed God.

The last part of our chapter tells us how Joseph of Arimathea, “an honourable counsellor,” asked Pilate for the body of the Lord and placed it in a tomb hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone in front of the door. The ruling body of Judaism was the Sanhedrin, a council of about seventy of the leading men, including the high priests. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (John 3:1-13) were, so far as we know, the only members of the Sanhedrin who believed in the Lord. We learn from John 19:39 that Nicodemus assisted Joseph with the burial. As prominent men they could get the ear of Pilate as the other disciples could not. Joseph had bought fine linen in which to wrap the body and Nicodemus brought the spices used in burials. The linen and the spices correspond to different kinds of truth. Both of these leaders had recognized that the Lord’s teachings were the truth, and they wished to honor Him and to preserve the truth which they had found in Him even after the life had left His earthly body. Linen pictures truth from the divine and spices truth from love. These two men and the three women (verse 40) were the only ones of all His followers who did not desert the Lord when He seemed dead. They represent true faith and true love which serve the Lord for the sake of the truth and goodness which they have found in Him and not from any thought of their own future honor or gain.

Basic Correspondences

linen = truth from the divine
 in the natural plane of the mind
the veil = the Lord’s finite humanity

Senior

The difference between the New Church doctrine of salvation and that of other churches should be stressed. The nature of the Lord's temptation on the cross is important, and the reason why He did not save Himself. Show how every detail of the story has an application to our own temptations.

The symbol of the Christian Church is the cross, and the cross reminds all Christians that the Lord laid down His life to save mankind. But there is a wide difference of belief among Christians as to just why the Lord allowed Himself to be crucified and as to the nature of the salvation thus accomplished. Some churches believe that by His physical suffering on the cross the Lord paid the penalty for all the sins of man and so purchased from His Father forgiveness for all who would claim forgiveness in His name. The New Church does not believe this.

The Lord did voluntarily die on the cross to save mankind. That He could have saved Himself we know from several other incidents recorded in the Gospels. (See Luke 4:28-30, John 8:59, John 10:17-18, 39, and John 19:10-11.) But if He had, the work for which He came into the world would not have been completed. We believe that although the Lord, as He appeared during His life on earth, was called the Son of God, He was in Himself no other than our heavenly Father. He took on for a time a body and mind like ours on purpose to meet and conquer the power of the hells which were becoming too strong for any finite human being to resist, and with which He Himself could come in contact in no other way. In the body and mind which He assumed He felt all the weakness and temptation we feel, and from the power of the divine love within He was able to overcome them. The temptation on the cross was merely the last and deepest of the whole series of temptations He had been meeting and conquering throughout His life.

It was not the temptation to save Himself from physical suffering—this is a comparatively light temptation which brave men are constantly overcoming. The Lord on the cross was tempted to perform a miracle so great that all men would be forced to acknowledge

Him to be God, not for the sake of His own glory, but in the hope that through fear of Him they might be led to amend their lives and be saved. The thought of this possibility was the last remnant of His assumed human nature, for it was contrary to His divine wisdom which knew that salvation must be the result of the free choice of good. Love to the Lord is salvation, and love cannot be forced. So the Lord conquered this last temptation. He let His enemies do their worst and died on the cross. Then on the third day He rose again and in this way showed His followers—those who wanted to believe—that He had told them the truth when He said, “Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.” (Luke 12:4) The Lord saved us by making the hells subject to Him and by showing us that with His help it is possible to overcome every temptation we may meet from the cradle to the grave. This is the salvation of which the cross is the final symbol.

In addition to these general thoughts about the crucifixion, there are many interesting points in our chapter. One is in the correspondence of the chief priests and Pilate. At this time Rome ruled the world, sending out governors with Roman troops to keep the conquered nations in subjection. So, although Roman policy did not interfere with the religion of any nation, the chief priests had only religious power. They could not condemn the Lord to death but could only urge Pilate to pronounce that sentence. The chief priests represent evil in the heart and Pilate falsity in the understanding. Pilate could find no fault in the Lord, but he allowed himself to be persuaded. When we are selfishly bent on having our own way, we always manage to justify ourselves for going ahead with it, even when our arguments are contrary to reason. Then we are apt to bolster up our position by ridiculing the standards of right which we are transgressing, as the soldiers of Pilate mocked the Lord. The freeing of Barabbas instead of the Lord pictures the fact that when we reject the truth which the Lord shows us, we let loose in our minds and hearts the falsity and evil which we should be trying to destroy.

The parting of the Lord's garments among the soldiers pictures the way in which people treat the letter of the Word, taking what they like of it and leaving the rest. This action prefigured the origin of the many Christian sects today, each based on a particular interpretation of a few chosen statements in the Word.

The fact that the Lord was crucified between two thieves represents that His teachings were rated by the leaders as falsities, for thieves correspond to falsities. We shall take up this incident in more detail when we study the Gospel of Luke.

The rending of the veil of the temple—the curtain which hid the Holy of Holies—at the time of the Lord's death is a symbol of the removal of the final separation, thus the final complete union of the Lord's divine human with the Divine itself when the last of the finite humanity was put off. When this takes place in our thought about the Lord, the rational principle in our minds—represented by the centurion—immediately recognizes that Jesus is God.

In the Word burial corresponds to resurrection. We should note that it was not the apostles who buried the Lord's body. Although they had been His closest followers, they all deserted Him when He was taken prisoner. Their hopes were bound up in the person of Jesus. When He died, they felt that the end had come. But there were two men of a different position from the apostles, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (John 19:39). They were both "counsellors," members of the Sanhedrin, the high court of Judaism, and they had reached their conclusions about the Lord on the basis of rational consideration of what He said and did rather than through the influence of personal association with Him. They gave the Lord's body the burial necessary for the fulfillment of the spiritual requirements of the Word. And the women, who picture simple unselfish affection, remained with the Lord to the last and watched where He was laid. These women were the first to learn of the resurrection on Sunday morning.

Adult

Take up first the New Church doctrine of salvation and the nature of the

Lord's temptation on the cross. Then be guided by the interest of the class as to which details of the story you discuss. They may have questions as to one or another incident in the chapter.

In the New Church we are familiar with the thought that the passion of the cross was not a matter of physical suffering voluntarily endured by the Lord as a vicarious atonement for the sins of the world. But even today this idea is still frequently expressed, especially by revivalists, and converts are actually solicited through pity for the Lord's physical suffering. Crucifixion was indeed a painful form of death, a true expression of the cruelty in men's hearts at the end of that dispensation. But many others besides the Lord underwent crucifixion, some of them—probably including the apostle Peter—voluntarily. And we know that when the soul is under stress of emotion, men can suffer severe injuries without being conscious of the physical pain. The Lord on the cross was not thinking of His physical body.

The passion of the cross was the last and most severe of the Lord's temptations. See the passage from AC 1690 below. The Lord, from His earliest childhood up to the last hour of His life in the world, was assaulted by all the hells, against which He continually fought, and subjugated and overcame them, and this solely from love toward the whole human race. AC 1787 says: "Every temptation is attended with some kind of despair (otherwise it is not a temptation) . . . He who is tempted is brought into anxieties, which induce a state of despair as to what the end is to be . . . The Lord also, as He endured the most dire and cruel temptations of all, could not but be driven into states of despair." Since the Lord's love was the love of the whole human race, His deepest temptation was despair because they would not be saved. He might have performed a miracle and come down from the cross and so convinced their minds. That this was at least a part of His last temptation we know from verses 29 to 32 of our chapter, for the cry of His enemies was certainly inspired from hell. But such a miracle would not have changed their hearts. He could not interfere with their free choice without destroying them. Read Matthew 23:37.

We recently thought of what betrayal of the Lord means in our own lives. The first part of our chapter today shows us just how that betrayal leads us to crucify Him. The chief priests, we recall, condemned the Lord as a blasphemer because He said He was the Christ. The chief priests represent self-love in the heart. Self-love refuses to acknowledge that the Lord is divine and that the Word is divine truth, because it wishes to determine all things in the interests of self. But our will has to have the cooperation of our understanding. Pilate represents falsity ruling in the mind, and the mind has to consent before truth can be utterly rejected. Pilate could find no actual fault in the Lord—the reason has to admit that His teaching is harmless—but Pilate was “willing to content the people.” The people in this case represent all the considerations of self-interest which are stirred up by self-love. So Pilate condemned the Lord and released Barabbas, a rebel and murderer. Is not this a clear picture of the course we take when we are determined to have our own selfish way? We force our minds to justify what we wish to do and so we reject truth altogether and let loose in our souls the willful and evil things which we should be destroying. And we thus mock at the truth, as the Roman soldiers mocked the Lord, pretending to reverence it, but actually falsifying it at its very fountainhead. This falsification of divine truth is pictured by the crown of thorns.

We recognize that the parting of the Lord’s garments pictures the way in which the Christian Church was to treat the letter of the Word, each sect taking certain passages as the basis for its separate existence and discarding the rest.

In AE 519² Swedenborg gives us an interesting interpretation—based on Matthew 27:34, 48 rather than on Mark—of the two drinks offered to the Lord at the crucifixion: “Their giving the Lord ‘vinegar mingled with gall,’ which was also called ‘wine mingled with myrrh,’ signified the quality of the divine truth from the Word with the Jewish nation, namely, that it was mingled with the falsity from evil, and thus altogether falsified and adulterated, therefore He would not drink it. But that afterwards ‘they gave the Lord

vinegar in a sponge and placed it upon hyssop' signified the kind of falsity there was among the upright Gentiles, which was falsity from ignorance of the truth, in which there was something good and useful; because this falsity is accepted by the Lord He drank this vinegar. The 'hyssop' upon which they placed it signifies the purification of the falsity." The hyssop is mentioned in this incident as given in John 19:29-30.

When the Lord "gave up the ghost," He finally wholly separated Himself from the finite humanity. AE 220⁵ says: "That 'the veil of the temple was rent in two parts from the top to the bottom' . . . signified the union of the Lord's Divine Human with the Divine itself." The veil was the curtain which hid the Holy of Holies from the view even of the priests who ministered in the Holy Place. The Holy of Holies represented the Divine itself, which after the crucifixion was one with the divine human.

That the Scripture (Isaiah 53:9) might be fulfilled and the scene laid for the resurrection story, another person is active in our chapter. It was not the custom to bury the bodies of those who were crucified. In Europe and in England even up to a century or so ago criminals were hanged on gibbets set up to public view at crossroads, and their bodies were left hanging indefinitely as a warning to other would-be malefactors. So it was with the crucified in the Lord's day. Presumably the two thieves who were crucified with the Lord were left in this way. But the Lord had two disciples who were members of the Sanhedrin, the high court of Judaism, and one of them obtained permission from Pilate to bury Jesus' body. Only Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in Mark, but John (19:39) tells us that Nicodemus came to assist him with the burial. Nicodemus was the one who came to the Lord by night (John 3:1-21), and John tells us (19:38) that Joseph also was the Lord's disciple "secretly for fear of the Jews." But both of them were brave enough to show their reverence for Him openly when their associates had put Him to a shameful death.

The women who watched with the Lord after the disciples had left Him, and who waited to see where His body was laid represent

the simple affection for the Lord which cannot be alienated by adversity. It was to these women that the resurrection was first made known. The sepulcher or tomb in the rock with the great stone rolled in front of the entrance represents the Word as it appears to those who know only the letter, and especially to those who believe that letter to be the product of the minds of men only, and not divine wisdom.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 1690: “All temptation is an assault upon the love in which the man is, and the temptation is in the same degree as is the love. If the love is not assaulted, there is no temptation. To destroy anyone’s love is to destroy his very life; for the love is the life. The Lord’s life was love toward the whole human race, and was indeed so great, and of such a quality, as to be nothing but pure love. Against this His life, continual temptations were admitted, as before said, from His earliest childhood to His last hour in the world. . . . He fought against the love of the world, or all things that are of the love of the world . . . He fought against the love of self, and all things that are of the love of self . . . And because this love was not human but Divine, and because such as is the greatness of the love, such is that of the temptation, it may be seen how grievous the combats were.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What feast did the Lord celebrate during His last week on earth? *Passover*
J. What did this feast commemorate? *release from Egyptian slavery*
J. What new feast did He institute at that time? *Holy Supper*
J. What does this Christian feast commemorate? *redemption from slavery to evil*
P. Who betrayed the Lord? *Judas Iscariot*
J. Before whom was Jesus first tried? *the high priests*
J. Of what did the high priests declare Him guilty? *blasphemy*
P. To whom was He sent to be condemned? *Pontius Pilate*
J. What did Pilate think of Him? *found no fault in Him*
J. Why did he not release Him? *wanted to satisfy the crowd*
J. Whom did he release instead? *Barabbas*
P. What did Pilate’s soldiers do to the Lord? *mocked Him*
J. Where was the Lord crucified? *Golgotha*

- J. Who carried His cross to Golgotha? *Simon of Cyrene (but see John 19:17)*
- P. What did the soldiers do with the Lord's garments? *divided them among themselves*
- P. Who were crucified with the Lord? *two thieves*
- J. What did the Lord's enemies tempt Him to do? *come down from the cross*
- J. What happened in the temple at the time of His death? *curtain tore in two*
- J. What did the centurion say? *truly this man was son of God*
- J. Who asked Pilate for the Lord's body? *Joseph of Arimathea*
- J. What did he do with it? *laid it in new rock-hewn tomb*
- J. What women stayed near the Lord until His body was placed in the tomb? *the two Marys*
- I. Why did the Lord allow Himself to be put to death? *to show that evil is really powerless against good*
- S. What is pictured by the parting of the Lord's garments? *picking and choosing from the Word what we want to believe*