

A Gift To

From

Aweful Judgment— Awesome Grace

MARK 15

Preface

There is no neutral zone between the kingdoms of good and evil. We stand either under the shadow of the one or in the sunlight of the other.

We do not control these spiritual realms. We simply react to them. Like weather, these spiritual forces affect our everyday lives. As with weather, we might assume that we have significant power over these spiritual forces because we can do things to adjust how comfortable we feel. But just as our air-conditioning does nothing to stop a heat wave, the comfort settings of our souls do not change the dynamics of good and evil, of truth and falsehood, or of life and death.

Sometimes weather presents itself in such powerful and dramatic ways that we are forced to stop what we are doing and catch our breath in amazement.

This portion of the Word of God does that to our spirits. It shows us extraordinary powers in stark

contrast and conflict. It is as if we are watching a sky with the black tongues of killer tornadoes covering one half, and the beautiful brilliance of multiple rainbows filling the other.

We watch with mouths opened wide. We see just how puny our powers are. We realize how much our welfare, now and in eternity, depends upon the end result of what is taking place.

Our feeling is one of awe. The awe caused by horrible shock and shame we call awful, because it threatens us with death. The awe brought about by God's marvelous wonders and rescue work we call awesome, because it offers life.

The 15th chapter of the gospel of Mark shows us both sights at once.

Decision Made!

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. (Mark 15:1)

“Let God be damned!” Seldom does defiance against the Holy One shout out its feelings so crassly. Most of the time it hides under polite phrases and utters its curses under its breath. But once in a while, the sheet of respectability is pulled back and the

maggot-infested nature of rebellion is exposed.

At Jesus' trial, anger and jealousy made bold the spirit of discontent. The fear of their Creator and Judge was cast aside, and the Jewish leaders accepted hell's invitation to "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). But some of them did not fully comprehend their acts. Those who had not yet hardened their hearts were among those who "do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Their seething anger toward God grew not from ignorance but from knowledge. It wasn't the godless governor who raged against the Lord of glory. It was those who knew their Bibles, probably better than we do, those who were the appointed teachers of the Word and leaders of the faithful—they were the ones who decided they must take their stand against him who claimed to be Lord of their lives.

Ancient Elijah once challenged his people to choose whom they would serve. "If the Lord is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Good Friday morning was a time when the authorities of Israel had to make such a choice. Events had come to a head. The authorities had captured someone who claimed to be the pinnacle of God's plan of salvation. Ever since Eden, divine prophecies had been pointing to the person who stood passively bound before them. This

person claimed to have been sent from heaven. He claimed to be the rescuer of humankind. He claimed to possess divine power. He backed up his claims by actions that defied created laws. Some of what he did they might have been able to ignore. His miracles they could have tried to explain away. His teachings they could have tried to refute. But he had gone much farther. He claimed to be Immanuel—God in the flesh.

This they could not abide! Not because it was impossible but because in their minds it could not be true.

Their rejection of Jesus was only the end of a much earlier rejection of God's words and ways. Pagan rejection is always more honest. The heathen person asks, "Who is the Lord that I should listen to him?" These religious leaders, however, had always taken a different approach. They did not want to be seen as standing apart from the true God, surely not as pitted against him. They enjoyed the benefits that came from taking their stand *with* God. Glory and respect were found under the umbrella of the Lord's presence. The common people saw them working hand in hand with the Almighty. Truly, they were God's representatives.

The problem was that they didn't agree with

the Lord. In the first place, God never gave humans enough credit! A hero of faith once lamented that he was born steeped in sin and iniquity (Psalm 51:5). That matched what the Lord regularly pointed out in his Word. But the religious leaders bucked at that. Did humans have no strength of their own? Were they incapable of anything good?

Perhaps all this was true for Gentiles, who lived without a full knowledge of God's Holy Law. But these leaders—they were descendants of Abraham! They were scholars in the writings of Moses. Keeping the Law is what their lives revolved around. In fact, they even did God one better. They added to his divine laws. On the surface of the earth, none could be found who was more zealous in trying to live a righteous life. That should count for something, shouldn't it? That should earn a few blessings, right?

So they developed their own religion. They would be rewarded for their better-than-average level of living. Some ridiculed them. Some despised and persecuted them. But the day would come, they knew, when everyone would see their true status before God. One day the nation of Israel would rise above all other nations. And on that day they would receive the riches and respect they deserved.

One day a king would rise to lead them to glory.