

“INRI”

Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum

*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
(Mark 15:21).*

Mark 15:16-47; Romans 16:13 ¹

In the first century of the Common Era, Rome was the undisputed ruler of the Mediterranean Basin, as it had been for several hundred years. For Christians, focus on the Roman Empire tends to be limited to the arc from Israel northwest through modern Turkey and Greece to Rome. This was the missionary trajectory most clearly described in the New Testament, and it is certainly important; but there was more going on than merely this.

Rome was also interested in North Africa, but Rome’s interests were challenged by the Carthaginian Empire, whose capital was Carthage in what you know today as Tunisia. Carthage was in fact the only serious competitor to Rome for five hundred years, and Rome conquered Carthage in 146 B.C. during the Third Punic War.

After defeating Carthage, Rome created the province of “Africa Proconsularis” on the north African coast, completing its control of the entire shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea. This was one of the wealthiest provinces in the western part of the Roman Empire, second only to Italia.

Although it was not located in Africa Proconsularis, the city of Cyrene was another wealthy city on the North African coast, located in what you know today as eastern Libya. Cyrene was known as the birthplace of the philosopher Eratosthenes, and tradition has it that it was the home of Dr. Luke, who accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys. Cyrene was a large city, and it had a large Jewish population of 100,000 or more.

I have a particular interest in Cyrene, because Cyrene is my hometown. My name is Rufus Tanner. My great-great grandfather brought our family to Cyrene from Judea long ago, and our family prospered in our new home. My father, Simon, was a leather worker, as his father had been, and we had a happy life with Mom and Dad, my younger brother, Alexander, and I. We were faithful in synagogue, and our family kept all the prescribed festivals and feasts.

You probably know that in the first century, Jewish men who were able were supposed to come to Jerusalem for the three required feasts of Passover and Pentecost in the spring and Tabernacles in the fall. This was not obligatory for men who lived far away, as we did, but it was still desirable. You may even have heard some of your Jewish friends say “Next year, in Jerusalem,” around Passover time.

In the year that I had my Bar Mitzvah—it was the year 33 CE—Dad told Alexander and me that he had a very special treat for us. We were going to make the long journey to Judea for Passover, and we were going to stay with Uncle Levi’s family all the way through Pentecost! (He had moved to Israel some years before.) I was so excited that I could hardly stand it! Cyrene was

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 21, 2019. SonRise. Parallel passages are Matthew 27:27-61; Luke 23:26-56; John 19:2-3, 17-30, 38-42. Much of this account is fictional.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

a very cosmopolitan city, but I had never traveled outside the city, and of course, I had never been to the Holy Land. Wow!

When the time *finally* came, the four of us boarded a ship in Cyrene bound for Caesarea Maritima in Israel. I loved being at sea. I loved the rocking of the ship, the wind in the sails, the vastness of the horizon, the birds and the fish—I loved it all. Alexander had some trouble with being seasick, but I was spared that, thank goodness!

Once we got to Caesarea, we still had to travel several more days to get to Uncle Levi's home, near Bethlehem. Camping out beside the road wasn't so great, but it was surely wonderful to be in Israel! The roads were thick with pilgrims headed for Jerusalem, so we felt very safe. We got to Uncle Levi and Aunt Esther's house about a week before Passover, and Dad was very happy indeed to see his brother. This was all *so wonderful!*

On Friday, the Day of Preparation for Passover, Dad took Alexander and me to Jerusalem. We stopped at Migdal Eder, the Tower of the Flocks, to get a lamb for sacrifice. Dad told us that the lambs for the Temple sacrifice had been birthed and raised at Migdal Eder since the time of King David, a thousand years ago!

I wasn't so excited about sacrifice, but Dad explained the Law of Moses to us once more, and I had often watched him slaughter the animals our family was going to eat. I was curious about what would be different this time . . . and it surely was different.

I've prepared a short video to tell the story of what became a perfectly horrible afternoon. It's a reenactment, of course. There were no video cameras in our day. But this will give you a feel for what happened.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNT1AThOgME>

Dad was never the same after that day, and to tell the truth, neither were we. We had heard of Jesus. It seemed that people near Jerusalem could talk about nothing else than this amazing teacher and miracle worker, and Uncle Levi had actually heard Jesus teach a time or two. Many wondered whether Jesus of Nazareth might be God's promised Messiah.

Jesus' death on that awful Friday afternoon crushed those hopes, but not for very long. On Sunday, the day after Passover, we began to hear rumors that Jesus had been raised from the dead! Amazingly, the word on the street was that quite a few people had actually *seen* Him and talked with Him! Uncle Levi had connections, and he began to believe that this might, in fact, be true, as unbelievable as it was.

The rumors of Jesus' resurrection continued to circulate, growing more intense over the next several weeks. I've mentioned that we were staying with Uncle Levi through Pentecost, the second of the required feasts. On Pentecost morning, a violent wind swept through the city and a large crowd gathered to see what was happening.

We were late-comers to the crowd, but when we arrived, we saw men—men whom Uncle Levi said were Jesus' disciples—preaching in many different languages, including our own (Acts 2:10). One of them—Uncle Levi said his name was Peter—seemed to be the main speaker, with the others translating in various languages. Here's part of what he said:

*“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. **But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep***

its hold on him. . . . God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, who you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

The crowd was cut to the heart and asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call”

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:22-24, 32-33, 36-41).

Because of all we had seen and heard, Mom and Dad, together with Uncle Levi and Aunt Esther, were among those who confessed their faith in Jesus on that Pentecost morning. Alexander and I were still trying hard to understand what all this meant.

Mom and Dad talked with us about Jesus a lot on the trip back to Cyrene. Dad was amazed at the ways the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus fulfilled the Law of Moses, and especially the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

It wasn't long before Alexander and I also put our faith in Jesus, and Dad baptized us in a river near our home. Dad began to tell other Jewish folk in Cyrene about Jesus, and many of them believed. Eventually, Cyrene became an important early center for Christian faith in North Africa.

With our own experience of Jesus being so “up close and personal,” Dad began to spend less and less time on his previous business and more and more time traveling to tell others about Jesus. Dad was even among those who took the Gospel to the Greeks in Antioch, where believers were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:20).

As we got older, Alex and I took over most of the work of the shop while Mom and Dad traveled. While they were in Antioch, Mom and Dad got to work with Paul and Barnabas, and Mom became very close to Paul, especially—so much so that Paul later said she had “*become like a mother to me*” (Romans 16:13).

Eventually, Alex and I closed the shop entirely and became missionaries for Jesus ourselves. We traveled all over and had many adventures, mostly following the trail of new churches that Paul started and encouraging those believers. In the end, we made our way to the great city of Rome before Paul got there, and we got to help establish a number of churches in the capital city of the Empire.

That's partly why Paul sent greetings to me at the end of his letter of introduction to the Roman churches (Romans 16:13), and why Mark, in his account of Jesus' crucifixion, mentioned Dad and Alex and me by name (Mark 15:21). Mark wrote his Gospel mostly for the Church in Rome, where we were well known.

There are certainly many, many other tales I could tell about our adventures in following Jesus; but the most important thing this morning, is whether **you** are following Him. You have

never seen the risen Jesus . . . but then, neither had I (I certainly have now that I have Crossed Over!).

And if you have placed your faith in Jesus, our risen Lord, then it is true for you this morning, even as it was true for me long ago, that *“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls”* (1 Peter 1:8-9).

He is *Alive*, my friends. Let your hearts be glad!