

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Crucifixion of Jesus**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 27:27-50

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It is my intention to preach over the next four Sundays on the last four events of Passion Week—the crucifixion of Jesus, His death, His burial, and His resurrection. The Apostle Paul regarded these truths as “first in importance” (1 Cor. 15:3), and they remain every bit as important today. They form the very foundation of the Christian message. No loftier theme can occupy a believer’s time than the Life of Christ.

This morning, however, our topic is a gruesome one. The Crucifixion of Christ is where the wickedness of man reached its absolute zenith. It was the vilest expression of evil ever perpetrated, the utter depth of human depravity. Of course Jesus was not the first person crucified, nor the last. Crucifixion was quite a common method of execution in the first century, used by the Romans on some 30,000 people in Palestine alone. It seems probable, if not certain, given Rome’s human rights track record, that among those crucified were a number of innocent victims, i.e. innocent of the crimes of which they were accused. So why does history remember the name of only one of those crucified?

We’ll have to wait for next Sunday to get the full answer to that question, for as we study the death of Christ next week we will learn that His death was absolutely unique—not in terms of the method of execution but in respect to its meaning and its accomplishments. But undoubtedly the issue that makes Jesus’ crucifixion so memorable is that He was the only one of those 30,000 victims who was absolutely innocent (of all sin), and the only one who went to the cross willingly.

Let’s begin our service this morning by reading the story of the crucifixion of Christ from Matthew 27:27-44:

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed

by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' " In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

I find it a curious thing that while crucifixion was undoubtedly the most painful method of execution known to man, the Gospel writers do not give much attention to the physical trauma Jesus suffered. Recent movies and books have gone out of their way to emphasize the incredible pain and torture involved. I think of the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, or Dr. Truman Davis's article in the Arizona Medical Journal entitled, "*The Crucifixion of Jesus: The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View.*"¹ If we were to show just a few scenes from the movie or read a few paragraphs from that article, it would be enough to traumatize all of us and set our emotions on edge.

But the Gospel writers choose not to do that. While they do not ignore the physical pain and abuse of crucifixion, the Scriptures direct our attention more to the spiritual and emotional pain, and especially the humiliation Jesus endured, as well, of course, pointing out the monumental evil perpetrated on Him by His enemies.

Our Scripture passage today opens with a scene at the Roman Praetorium, the administrative headquarters of the Roman governor Pilate.

Jesus is humiliated at the Roman Praetorium. (Matthew 27:27-31)

Matthew tells us that a whole company of Roman soldiers was involved. A company consisted of 600 soldiers. The whole group, according to verse 27, took part in the humiliation of their notorious prisoner, either by direct action or through enjoying the entertainment. There were no "Geneva conventions" in those days, and soldiers frequently dealt with their boredom by making sport of their prisoners

He is stripped and clothed with a scarlet robe. Scarlet is the color of royalty, so this is their way of mocking Jesus' claim to be King of the Jews. If he calls Himself a King, He should wear kingly attire.

He is flogged and a crown of thorns is thrust on His head. Matthew mentions the flogging back in verse 26, but is John who connects it with the crown. John 19:1 tells us, "Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head." When the Romans scourged a prisoner they tied him to a whipping post in such a way that his back was fully exposed. The lash was a long, leather thong, studded at intervals with pellets of lead and sharpened pieces of bone. It literally tore a man's back into strips. Few

victims remained conscious through the ordeal; some died; many went stark raving mad.

As if that weren't enough, they shove a crown of thorns upon Jesus' head. After all, a king has to have a crown. You've surely seen pictures of the Roman Emperor with a laurel wreath on his head; he was frequently pictured that way on Roman coins. This crown was no doubt intended to replicate Caesar's, only with thorns instead of leaves. Blood no doubt flowed down his face and on to His clothes, for any kind of a head wound usually causes severe bleeding.

He is mocked, spat upon, and beaten by the soldiers. They mock Him by placing a staff in his right hand. Like the robe and the crown, a staff is meant to represent royalty, mimicking a monarch's scepter, the symbol of his authority and power. Then they kneel down in front of Him and feign homage as they call out, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

As is often the case with an unruly crowd, they soon grow bolder and more obnoxious. They spit on Him, and beat Him. Spitting on a person is a universal sign of disgust and hatred. Then they take the staff and beat him with it on the head, already lacerated and bruised, again and again. In effect they are saying, "We're beating you with your own scepter, King! Where is your power?" The Apostle John adds that they also beat Him with their fists.

One day, the Scriptures tell us, Christ will wield a true scepter, a rod of iron with which He will rule the world, including His subdued enemies. The tables will be turned, and He who sits in the heavens will laugh at them. Listen to Psalm 2:

*Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD
and against his Anointed One.
"Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters."
The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.
Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
"I have installed my King
on Zion, my holy hill."
I will proclaim the decree of the LORD : He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your
possession.
You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery."
Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare
up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

When the soldiers realize it is time to take Jesus to the place of execution, they remove the crimson robe, but the humiliation doesn't stop.

Jesus is further humiliated as He is taken to Golgotha. (Matthew 27:32-44)

By the way, Golgotha is the Hebrew/Aramaic term for “skull.” Our word “Calvary” comes from the Latin equivalent of the same term. It could refer to a place where skulls are stored, i.e. a cemetery, but it more likely refers to a site that had the appearance of a skull.

A foreigner is pressed into service to carry His cross. The brief account of Simon of Cyrene is fascinating. More than likely Jesus is so weak and wounded by this time that He is simply unable to carry His own cross, as was the custom for those crucified. The last thing the soldiers want is for their prisoner to die before they can execute Him properly, so a bystander is pressed into duty—a man from Cyrene. Cyrene is in present day Libya, thus it is possible Simon was of very dark skin—all the more reason in the eyes of the racist Romans to force him into service. I imagine they thought that having this dark-skinned foreigner carry His cross would add to His humiliation.

As it turned out, however, it seems that God turned the tables on them and may have actually used this incident to spread the Gospel to the heart of Rome. Mark identifies this Simon as the father of two sons named Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). Rufus is mentioned again in the last chapter of the book of Romans. Paul writes in 16:13, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.” While we cannot be certain, the mother mentioned there might well have been Simon’s wife. John MacArthur writes,

It may have been the carrying of Jesus’ cross that led Simon to faith in Him. What began as a forced and probably resented act of physical servitude became the opportunity for spiritual life. Not only Simon himself but his entire family came to salvation, and his wife became like a mother to the Apostle Paul.ⁱⁱ

A second humiliating aspect at Golgotha is seen when His clothes become souvenirs.ⁱⁱⁱ

His clothes become souvenirs. Four soldiers are apparently involved in the actual crucifixion, the lifting of the cross and dropping it into the hole. They want keepsakes to remind them of another gruesome day’s work. The Apostle John gives us more information about this than the other Gospel writers. Listen to John 19:23-24:

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

"Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."

So this is what the soldiers did.

This humiliation was predicted a millennium before it happened—by David in Psalm 22. The soldiers, of course, do not know they are fulfilling Scripture—they are simply looking for trophies to take home to their families.

A sign above His head mocks His claim to be a King. Verse 27: “Above his head they placed the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” Skeptics have delighted to point out to us that each of the four Gospels reports a different sign:

Matthew: *This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.*

Mark: *The King of the Jews.*

Luke: *This is the King of the Jews.*

John: *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.*

So, which was it, they ask?

It doesn't take a genius to see that the actual word-for-word rendering was probably, “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” If so, then each of the writers is giving us the words that stuck out in his own mind. Besides, John tells us the sign was written in three languages—Hebrews, Greek and Latin. It could easily have been worded slightly differently in each language. The alleged contradiction is totally bogus. The important point is that the soldiers have put up the sign with no other intention than to mock Him and humiliate Him.

By the way, when the chief priests see the sign the Romans put on the Cross, they demand of Pilate that he change the wording to “He *said*, ‘I am the King of the Jews.’” They want to make sure everyone understands that this is Jesus' claim, not a fact. But Pilate finally shows some backbone, refusing to concede anything further to them, “What I have written, I have written” (John 19:21-22).

Two notorious criminals are crucified next to Him. The term translated “robber” denotes not petty thieves but cruel bandits who took pleasure in tormenting, abusing, and often killing their victims.^{iv} Crucifying Jesus between two known criminals is His enemies' way of saying that Jesus is someone like them.

But God turns this intention, too, on its head, as Isaiah 53:12 speaks prophetically that “he was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Yes, Jesus is identified with sinners—not as a sinner Himself, but rather as their Savior!

There is huge significance in this, for identifying with sinners is nothing new for Jesus. It has always been the hallmark of his ministry. When the Jewish ruling council took exception to Him spending time with the irreligious people of the day, Jesus told them (Matthew 9:13), “I have come not to call the righteous but sinners.” The crucifixion simply continues this emphasis in Jesus' life. His mission is to seek and save those separated from God. In order to do that He was born among them, lived with them, ate with them, and now He dies with them. Jesus doesn't love the lifestyle of those He identifies with, but He loves *them*. Though they have made mistakes—terrible mistakes—they are valuable to God, His Father. So they are valuable also to Jesus.

Friends, to this day Jesus identifies Himself with us not because we are successful or influential, witty or kind, or because we are attending church this morning. He identifies himself with us

today because we are sinners in desperate need of a Savior.

He continues to suffer multiple insults.

1. From the passersby. Crucifixions were always held where they could get maximum exposure, for the whole point was to serve as a warning to others not to mess with Rome. And because it is now Passover there is much heavier traffic in and out of Jerusalem than usual. Matthew tells us in verse 39-40, “Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’” This too was predicted—in the Messianic Psalm 22:6-8:

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads:

“He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since (if) he delights in him.”

But the crowds are not the only ones who mock Him. So do the religious leaders.

2. From the religious leaders. The chief priests, the teachers of the law, the elders of the people all join in: “He saved others, but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. (They say they will believe in Him is he comes down from the Cross; we believe in Him because He stayed there!) He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” Try to grasp the level of blasphemy here! Imagine having to stand before God at the Great White Throne judgment with such words on your lips!

And then verse 44 tells us that such mocking comes even from the criminals crucified with Him.

3. From the criminals crucified with Him. “In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.” That’s hard to understand. Perhaps they had heard about Jesus’ miracles and they wonder why such a miracle-worker couldn’t save Himself—and them! In fact, that is exactly what Luke tells us one of them said (Luke 23:39).

Jesus shows incredible restraint while all this mockery is going on. As the unholy heckle the Holy, the Holy remains silent. Peter tells us why:

“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:23-24)

This is incredible. Put yourself in His situation. All you have to do is say the word and twelve legions of angels would swarm in and these guys would become toast. That is why we are not the Savior and Jesus is.

Jesus commits a final act of grace. (Luke 23:39-43)

Apparently one of the robbers has second thoughts in the middle of his mocking. As a man facing his own mortality, he begins to consider what he will say to God in few hours when he dies. Fortunately for him, God is close by. He's hanging on a cross right next to him. In Luke 23:39-43 we read this exchange:

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

This dying criminal, who hours before mocked Jesus, has now come to believe the sign over Jesus' head. He recognizes that Jesus is a king, that He has a kingdom and that His kingdom is not of this earth. And, he believes Jesus can save him.

Confidently, calmly, compassionately, Jesus tells him that despite how desperate things look, despite what people are saying, He will wake up in a few hours in Paradise. It is Jesus' last healing ministry before His death.

I have often thought this may be the most amazing conversion in all of history. There have been many, of course, that boggle the mind. Paul's was amazing, as the leading persecutor of Christianity becomes its leading evangelist and theologian. John Newton's was amazing, as revealed in his great hymn *Amazing Grace*, but Newton lived 59 years following his conversion, and during that time he was able to redeem his past as a slave trader by preaching thousands of sermons, writing books and hymns, and leading countless souls into eternity. Chuck Colson's is amazing, as Nixon's hatchet man becomes a theologian and activist for prison reform. But Colson also has had decades to redeem himself.

But the thief on the cross lived only hours after Jesus saved him. He had no opportunity to be baptized or to serve Christ or even to witness of his new faith. But Jesus bore witness for him of the grace that is available to anyone, no matter how sinful, no matter how desperate, no matter how close to death.

Response to the crucifixion

These two criminals who are crucified next to Jesus model two possible responses to what Jesus did on the cross.

1. You can follow the first criminal and become a mocker. There are many today who have taken this route. I have read books by Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, or Richard Dawkins, the militant new atheists that are flooding the bookstalls with mocking appraisals of Christ and His followers. These men are not content just to be unbelievers; they are committed to destroy the Christian faith. You know something—Jesus died to be their Savior, too, but He never forces anyone to accept Him. He offers his love as a gift, but gifts must be received and opened before they will do any good.

The first criminal could have asked Jesus to remember him and Jesus would have said the same thing He said to the second one. But instead of asking, he taunted. He died with his gift unopened. When he stood before a holy God a few hours later, he stood alone, with no substitute, no one taking his place, no advocate before a holy God.

But there is another option.

2. You can follow the second criminal in repentance and faith. The second thief opened the gift of love and relationship offered by Jesus. You can follow his example by admitting to yourself that you are a sinner, and receiving the crucified Savior as your substitute. Jesus' death will cover you and provide forgiveness of your sins. All that He accomplished at the Cross will be yours.

i. Truman Davis, "*The Crucifixion of Jesus: The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View*," *Arizona Medicine*, Vol. 22, March 1965, 183-87.

ii. John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, 253.

iii. In the interest of time we are skipping Matthew 27:34, where we read that they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, He refused to drink it. It has sometimes been thought that this was offered to Jesus as an act of mercy to dull the pain, but that makes little sense. The whole point of crucifixion was to inflict maximum pain. It was probably offered to him as a temporary narcotic to keep him from struggling violently as the nails were driven into His hands and feet. But Jesus did not want His senses dulled at all. He was determined to drink deeply from the cup the Father had given Him. He would endure the full measure of pain—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

iv. MacArthur, 257.