

Matthew's Gospel – Chapter 27: The Crucifixion

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

If I was to talk to someone from Australia who was interested in the Lake District, I could give them a dictionary definition of a mountain or a river for example. I would be far better just showing them a picture of Derwentwater or Windermere. As my dad, being from Cumbria, used to say, "Some things are better felt than told." Matthew chapter 27 is just such a chapter. It should lead the believer to humble worship and quiet wonder, as the Divine plan for the ages reached its dramatic climax. In this penultimate study in the series on the Gospel of Matthew we should take time to ponder on "the son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

There is a symmetry to the chapter. In the first two verses we see the King of the Jews bound as He is brought before the secular authorities. At the end of the chapter, we see the secular authorities binding the tomb in their vain attempt to put an end to His Kingdom. Throughout this chapter we see the religious leaders display the most monstrous disregard for the civic law whilst going to great lengths to keep the minutia of their religious law. Surely, in this, we have a clear example of the Lord's own words against those who try to remove specks whilst ignoring logs (Matthew 7:3).

Early in the morning on the day of crucifixion, the full meeting of a Sanhedrin took place to ratify their decision taken during the previous night to put Jesus to death. It was probably close to 6 o'clock in the morning and the Lord had been awake all night. It is likely that the religious leaders had been in contact with Pilate throughout the night – disturbing him and his wife, but more of her later. Essentially, they will have wanted the assurance that if they brought before him a prisoner who was guilty of treason, would Pilate rubber stamp their guilty verdict and pass the death sentence. They would not have wanted to try to put Jesus to death by stoning, as, due to His popularity, this would likely lead to a riot. Without knowing the facts of the case, but having been given a swift outline, Pilate had probably given his assent and then gone back to bed. Now he is awoken by the arrival of the prisoner with charges that have been drafted to tend towards the secular charge of rebellion and lack of respect to Caesar, and less to do with blasphemy that the previous hearing had focussed on.

Before recounting the trial, however, Matthew recalls the fate of Judas Iscariot in verses 3 - 10. In Greek, two similar words can be used to describe a sorrow for the way things have happened. One indicates a regret for the way things have turned out the other a repentance for the part played. It is the former that is used in the case of Judas. Undoubtedly, he was seduced by the promise of easy money. Perhaps Judas had hoped that by betraying Jesus it might force His hand to begin a rebellion or at least force Him into a miraculous escape. Whatever Judas' thoughts the outcome was not what he had expected, and he returned to the chief priests full of regret. Seeking forgiveness from other sinful men is never the sign of genuine repentance. He should, had he been truly convicted, repented before God. Yes, he admits his fault, only for it to be met with a stone cold "so what." Unable to live with the consequences of what he had done, Judas threw

down the betrayer's 30 pieces of silver into the inner court of the Temple. This was ground that he was forbidden to enter, and yet such was his frenzy of remorse, he would follow the chief priest anywhere. Judas then left and went away and hanged himself. You can read about his botched attempt and gruesome end in Acts chapter 1. It is probable that previous to his betrayal, Judas had bought himself some land with money he had stolen from the common purse. It was here that he committed suicide.

The chief priest could not use the returned pieces of silver in the upkeep of the Temple – it was blood money. So, a different field - the field of blood - was bought for the burying of foreigners. What a neat solution so even in death these religious hypocrites would not be contaminated by the presence of foreigners in the same cemetery. All this happened as had been prophesied centuries beforehand by Zechariah (see chapter 11:12,13).

In verses 11 – 26 Matthew recounts the show trial of Jesus before Pilate. Although not mentioned here, between Pilate's first and second questioning of Jesus, Luke states Pilate had Jesus sent to Herod. It is clear that the open-and-shut case that he thought he was to hear was nothing of the sort. Pilate looked for any opportunity to be rid of this problem but found himself increasingly boxed in by the unfolding events. Due to the chief priests not wanting to ceremonially contaminate themselves they would not enter the house of a gentile on the purification day – not even that of the governor. So, Pilate would have heard the charges laid against Jesus outside of the Governor's residence before going indoors to question Jesus for himself.

Faced with a barrage of false accusation and bitter hatred, Pilate was amazed at the calm dignity of this most unusual prisoner. Jesus spoke only to confirm His identity and His words in verse 11 are a clear answer in the positive. Jesus' quiet authority made Pilate realise that Jesus was no ordinary prisoner. In fact, time and again, Pilate declared "I find no fault in this man."

To add to Pilate's unease and desire to be rid of this troublesome mess, a message had come from his wife,

"Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him" (v.19).

Perhaps she had been disturbed by the arrival of the chief priests in the night seeking audience with Pilate. On getting back to sleep, having half overheard the muttering voices, her sleep was wholly disturbed by a dream of impending doom that led her to message her husband. Pilate looked for an opening to escape the choice he was being forced to make.

It was customary to release a significant prisoner on Jewish High days. This demonstrated the power of Rome and the magnanimity of the authority of Caesar. So, Pilate gives the chief priests and the mob they had drummed up the choice of Barabbas – a violent man and one who had been found guilty of actually engaging in rebellion, or Jesus, for whom they were unable to find any evidence of rebellion. Here the choice was between the son of a father (the meaning of the name Barabbas) and the Son of the Father. It says all that we need to know about the depravity of the human heart that the voices of the crowd were raised in favour of Barabbas.

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:9,10).

John, in his Gospel and chapter 1:11 wrote

"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him."

Surely there can be no more solemn words than those used by the chief priests and the crowd they incited in obscene and blind hatred: "His blood be on us and on our children." Nearly two thousand years of history have given us the clear and damning evidence of how seriously God viewed the rejection of His Son. Nor has God changed – He still views the rejection of His Son as requiring solemn and eternal judgement. Pilate had utterly failed in his duty to do justice and so he scourged Jesus and washed his hands of the case. Both actions only compounded his guilt. What will he say when, at the end of time, he is raised to stand before the Judgement Throne? What will those chief priests say when they look upon Jesus and recognise Him as the One for whose death they called? What will those whose voices were raised in the crowd say, when they fall before Him, knowing they face certain judgement?

Verses 27 – 32 detail the mocking of the Lord Jesus by the soldiers in the hour or so before He was led to the place of crucifixion. At that time, the Roman garrison would have numbered about 200 or so hardened soldiers. They gathered together to mock the condemned prisoner. Imagine for a moment being surrounded by a hostile crowd numbering in the hundreds whose sole purpose to inflict pain. And yet in these verses we see the beginnings of a great reversal.

On the cross, Jesus fully met the curse that had fallen upon creation because of the sin of Adam and Eve. If we go back to Genesis chapter 3:16,18,19 we read that a part of the curse was sorrow and pain, thorns and sweat:

"I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you...cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread 'till you return to the ground."

In expectation of the cross, and during His crucifixion, Jesus experienced these aspects of the curse in full measure. In Matthew 26:38 we read

"My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me."

He knew the depths of heartfelt sorrow – the kind that would make others long for death as a way out. He knew too what it was to be in pain as Isaiah records in chapter 50, verse 6:

"I gave My back to those who struck Me, And My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting."

In verse 29 of this chapter, we read that;

"When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head"

and in Luke chapter 22, verse 44 we read:

"And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground."

These words really should make us pause. Were the Lord's prayers ever anything but wholly in earnest, and yet here He prays more earnestly! Jesus fully experienced the total effect of the curse so that He might shatter its power and bring salvation.

Mankind, in these verses, sought to make nothing of the Lord Jesus. But God will always do what is right and so we see in each of the mockeries His wonderful answer. They gave Him a crown of thorns but in Revelation 19:12 we read of Him with many crowns upon His head. Man gave Him a scarlet robe, but in Revelation 19:13 we read of Him dressed in a robe dipped in blood – the blood of His enemies as He executes judgement. The soldiers put a reed in His hand before they used it to beat His blessed head, but in Hebrews 1:8 we read:

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Your kingdom.”

They bowed the knee to Him in mockery but Philippians 2:10 wonderfully tells us that:

“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth.”

In that day, I do not believe that physical force will compel any to bow such will be His glorious Majesty.

The soldiers mocked His claim to kingship as they cried out “Hail, King of the Jews!” but God has said:

“Yet have I set My King upon My holy hill of Zion” (Psalm 2:6).

They spat on Him, but verse 12 in Psalm 2 speaks of men “kissing the Son, lest He be angry, and they perish in the way.” The soldiers in their cruelty struck Him on the head, driving the thorns deep into His flesh. Verse 9 of Psalm 2 reads:

“You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

As they mocked Him little did they realise that in a day to come:

“He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold them in derision” (Psalm 2:4).

In a final insult they took the scarlet robe from Him – His kingship was over so far as they were concerned. However, Luke 1:33 tells us that

“He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

[Elizabeth Thompson](#), in her excellent hymn [Gazing on Thee Lord in Glory](#) (Hymn number 98, [Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs](#), Scripture Truth Publications, Crewe) got it exactly right in verse 2:

“Every mark of dark dishonour
Heaped upon Thy thorn-crowned brow,
All the depths of Thy heart's sorrow
Told in answering glory now.”

One can only wonder whether the physical effects of the torture Jesus was subjected to made carrying His cross almost impossible and so one from Cyrene in North Africa, was compelled to carry the cross. There may be a link in verse 32 to Romans 16:13 – did this eventful day have a life-changing effect upon at least one family?

Verses 33 – 44 give us the human side of Christ's sufferings upon the cross. It is striking that for the most momentous of days in history we know very little of the actual crucifixion. We know that it took place at Golgotha, Calvary – the place of a skull, although we cannot with certainty identify its precise location. We do not know the shape of the cross upon which the Lord died – was it a vertical stake or a modified Tau? The important thing to realise is not how He died – the Holy Spirit through the Gospel writers would jealously guard the honour of the Lord Jesus, but rather that He most certainly did die. In these verses we read far more about the other people surrounding the cross than about the Man dying upon that middle cross.

Jesus was offered sour wine mingled with gall to help deaden the pain he was experiencing. However, He would not drink this ensuring that He was wholly in control of all His faculties for the work that He was to undertake. Around the cross, the soldiers gambled for His clothes but even in this they fulfilled what had been prophesied centuries before hand – see Psalm 22:18. If ever we needed proof for the inspiration of Scripture, we find it in plenty during His death.

Two others, who were criminals (Luke 23:32) were crucified with Jesus. It is important to note with care the language used. Greek has two words for other or another. "Allos" means of the same sort - so cox, granny smith, and pippin all are other sorts of apples. "Heteros" means of a different sort – so apples, bananas, and oranges are different sorts of fruit. It is the word "heteros" that is used of the criminals. They were criminals indeed, but Christ was making His death with the wicked (Isaiah 53:9) though He has no sin of His own. (For those who like to study words, see Galatians 1:6,7 and 1 Corinthians 12:8 – 10 where both words are used, and the sense can only be understood when it is realised which is being used and where!)

As Jesus hung upon the cross, he was the subject of everyone's mockery. Those who sat down to watch His death as sport, those who passed by shaking their heads at Him, even the two thieves who were dying alongside Him made little of Him. As David prophetically wrote in Psalm 69:20:

"Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of heaviness; I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none."

Verses 45 – 50 reveal something of the suffering of Christ on the cross from the hand of God. Jesus was crucified at around 9:00 a.m. and for the first three hours his dying was visible to all. However, from midday until three in the afternoon there was darkness over the land. It is as if God could allow no prying, curious eyes to witness the awful events of his atoning, substitutionary death. In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, C. Ernest Tatham writes:

"During these terrible three hours our Lord agonized in silence. Not a word broke the ominous quietness. Something dreadful was happening. His holy soul was "made sin for us.""

The all-righteous God dealt with Him in unrelieved condemnation, meting out to Him all that the penalty for sin demanded. It was here that true atonement was made, and only here. No suffering from human hands could effect this. Sin is an affront to an infinite God and is therefore an infinite offense demanding infinite punishment. Only One who was Himself infinite could bear this and only the Infinite Himself could inflict it. The outward darkness merely illustrated on the physical level the inward darkness that seized the soul of the Saviour as

"He bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24)."

(Emmaus Worldwide, a free copy of which is available from E.B.S. U.K.)

At the end of this time, Matthew records one of the Saviour's seven sayings on the cross:

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (quoting from Psalm 22:1)

Only the You and the Me will ever understand the depths of this heart wrenching cry and the cost to both that caused it. We do well to bow our hearts and heads and weep.

This cry was followed in swift succession by three further statements from the cross, the first of which caused someone to offer Jesus a drink so that Psalm 69:21 was fulfilled. Then with a loud and clear voice He proclaimed the work finished! Having, at the last, commended His Spirit to His Father, he laid down His life:

“No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father” (John 10:18).

His death was unique in that he remained in full control of His life. We do not – death is something that happens to us. It was something that He entered into so that we might receive life. Verses 51 – 66 give us five events that happened following the death of the Lord upon the cross.

First, the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies was an ornate curtain. It barred the way for everyone to enter into the very presence of God. Only once a year could the High Priest enter on the Day of Atonement and only if carrying the blood to be sprinkled on the Mercy seat. However, now God would come out to Mankind in salvation. If man had torn the curtain, it would have been from bottom to top as it was about 20 metres high and usually took 300 men to manipulate it. The fact that God was doing the tearing is illustrated by it being torn from top to bottom. There was no longer a barrier between God and men as our sins had forever been dealt with. It ought to have shown that the old system of approach to God was now over. Sadly, when in A.D.70 the Temple was finally destroyed a description of the Temple includes that of a massive complete curtain – the Jews had repaired the curtain and thus cut themselves off from God!

Second, there was a great earthquake that opened many graves. Following the Lord’s own resurrection many dead bodies of the saints were also raised to life and these individuals appeared to those in Jerusalem. What a glorious proof of resurrection – but Christ was and must be the firstborn (Colossians 1:18). It is of note that an earthquake preceded the introduction of the first covenant in Exodus 19:18. Here, at the beginning of the new covenant there is another earthquake. At the end of time, there will be a final earthquake when all that is temporary will be removed leaving only that which is eternal (Hebrews 12:26,27). God really does want to grab our attention for some things of tremendous import!

Third, the events surrounding the death of the Lord Jesus were so dramatic that they had a marked impression upon the centurion in charge of the execution:

“Truly this was the Son of God.”

There was something so different about this death, beyond what he had become familiar with, that whether in faith or just mere superstition, the centurion is forced to make comment upon what had happened.

Fourth, though in Jesus’ life wicked hands had touched Him, in death God ensured that only loving hands touched the precious body of the dead Saviour. From afar, a group of women who had remained true to Him, observed the events of this climactic day. Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple now boldly came and petitioned Pilate for the body of the Lord. His death had come so quickly that Pilate had to check that He was truly dead. Only after being satisfied of this, did he

allow Jesus' body to be removed from the cross. The idea that Jesus had only swooned does not fit the evidence of the Gospel's narrative. Together with Nicodemus, Joseph buried the body of Jesus in a grave that had been carved out of the rock ready for when Joseph died (Isaiah 53:9). Jesus' body was wrapped in a clean linen cloth together with about 100 pounds weight of spices to delay His body from decaying. This crushing weight of spices and the stone that was rolled across the entrance to the tomb clearly indicated that there was no expectation amongst the disciples that Jesus was not dead, or even that He would rise again imminently.

Fifth, the only ones who feared such a thing were the chief priests, who petitioned Pilate for a guard to make the tomb secure. Worried that the disciples might steal the body, they posted a guard and bound the gravestone in place. The chapter began with bound hands, it ends with a bound stone, but Christ's glorious resurrection shattered the latter, whilst in marvellous grace He submitted to the former. And so, this most momentous of days drew to a close. It was all over! How glad I am that there is chapter 28 to study next week, God Willing!

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