

The Death of the King

Matthew 27:32-50

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Steve DeWitt

We draw our attention as a church family today to this Passion Week and to one of the most sacred moments in history—the death of the Son of God. The verses before us are incredibly sobering as they recount the agonizing steps of a condemned Savior, the unfathomable injustice of a crucified Messiah, and the guttural death cry of the King. I come to this passage without any levity for there is none to be found here. It is anguish and sorrow and guilt-ridden pain.

But it is here that the gospel of Matthew takes us. Last week we saw the events leading up to his crucifixion. A kangaroo court of false witnesses. A political hit job manipulating an ambitious roman governor. A cohort of roman soldiers mocking, beating, crowning Jesus with a crown of thorns.

"As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it." (Matthew 27:32-34 ESV)

It was the practice of the Romans to make the condemned carry his own cross. We are all likely familiar with the image of Jesus carrying a T-shaped cross. Most likely he was carrying the crossbar only.

Jesus is in an incredibly emaciated condition before the walk to crucifixion. He had begun this journey the night before in the upper room with his disciples. Then a late-night journey to Gethsemane. There he was betrayed by Judas, abandoned by his disciples, arrested by the Roman legion, and hauled to Caiaphas' house where he was interrogated through the night. He had no protection from the blows of his captors. He endured the complete betrayal and denial by his right-hand man Peter. Very early in the morning he was delivered to Pilate, then taken to Herod, then taken back to Pilate. The trial was completely rigged leading Pilate to try an easy way out by flogging him. Many men died just from the flogging. They whipped him 39 times with a multi-strand whip embedded with sharp rocks and metal. His back was ripped to shreds.

But he survived it. After all this abuse, Pilate condemns him to death by crucifixion. The soldiers placed that crossbar of wood on his shoulders and they began the walk toward the wall of the city. With them were many people, estimates say up to 4,000 people. Soldiers. Pharisees. The masses watching the spectacle. He got somewhere near the gate and collapsed, physically unable to carry the cross any farther.

Let's pause for a moment and meditate on Jesus collapsing in weakness...

The soldiers didn't care; they had a job to do. To be a part of the execution cohort was highly desirable and a commission they didn't want to lose. Also, the Romans wanted him crucified, not to die along the road. If the soldiers allowed him to die, they would be punished. So they conscript a random guy. Simon the Cyrene or Simon from Cyrene. Cyrene was a city in North Africa. What is he doing there? It's Passover. He was like thousands of other Jews who came to Jerusalem for the biggest event of the year. Little did

he know how his life was going to change. The soldiers compel him with the edge of the sword to take the crossbar and carry it. So he lifts the crossbar with a grunt and begins to carry it with Jesus and the soldiers following behind.

Side note: We could ask what the effect of carrying this crossbar had on Simon. Did you know that Mark identifies this Simon as the father of Rufus and Alexander? They may be referred to in Acts 19 and Romans 16 and were apparently well known to Mark's readers and Christians in Rome.¹ It's very possible Simon the Cyrene was so affected by this that he became a follower of Jesus and his sons as well. You may very well meet him and his family someday in heaven.

"*And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull)...*" (Verse 33) The Romans preferred to crucify next to a main road so as to maximize the desired effect—the intimidation of anyone who thought of defying them. They come to what must have been a notorious spot, *Golgotha, place of a skull*. Ominous. Hints at a bald hill. No vegetation. Golgotha translates in Latin "Calva" which is where we get "Calvary."² Upon arriving they offer him wine mixed with gall to drink. He refused to drink it. I have generally read this to mean that Jesus didn't want to dull the pain at all. He wanted to experience the fullness of suffering.

Another explanation is more likely. Mark says it was wine mixed with myrrh, Matthew says wine mixed with gall. Apparently both of these are extremely bitter.³ This mixture would have been extremely unpleasant especially to a dehydrated man. If so, this wasn't mercy, it was more torment from the soldiers. What's crueller than to give vinegar to a man desperate for water? Jesus refused to drink it. The soldiers laughed.

Verse 35 is holy. "*And when they had crucified him.*" Matthew doesn't dwell on the physical sufferings. He is more interested in the theological meaning. Further, his audience would have known and probably seen crucifixions, so he didn't have to go into detail. Since we haven't witnessed one, let's make sure we understand why these moments are so holy.

Upon arriving, Simon of Cyrene would have dropped the crossbeam. His part in the story is over. Two of the soldiers would have dug the hole for the upright and when it was deep enough, they would have dropped the vertical piece into place and wedged it in with rocks around the base.

The whole goal of crucifixion is to degrade the victim. Part of the shame was the naked exposure of the victim. The only concession they made was when they crucified a woman—she was crucified facing the cross, but still completely naked.

Once the upright was in place, the soldiers would have assisted the executioner in attaching Jesus to the crossbeam. Jesus was ordered to lie on his back with his shoulders in the center of the crossbeam. They would have measured his arms out and made a mark on the beam where his wrists were. They made a hole to allow the nail to pass through more easily.

Then, feeling for the depression at the front of the wrist, the soldier drove a heavy, square, iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. He quickly moves to the other arm and does the same, making sure that he allows room for flexing and movement on the cross.

¹ D.A. Carson, *Matthew, Vol. 2 (Ch. 13-28), The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 575.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Jesus wasn't stretched tight, but loose so that he would push and pull and squirm on the cross.

I imagine silence at this point, even among his enemies. One soldier held him around the middle with one on each side of the beam and they brought him over to the vertical piece. This was the hardest part of the process, attaching the victim and the crossbeam to the cross. Jesus is now dead weight. So they lift Jesus onto his feet and put his back against the upright. Then with forked poles and with the soldier now holding him by the knees, they inched his body up several feet until the crossbar sets into a notch already cut into the vertical piece.

The knees were moderately flexed. The left foot is pressed backward against the right foot and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail is driven through them and into the wood. And that is what is summarized by, *"And when they had crucified him."* (Verse 35)

Let's take a moment of silence to meditate on Jesus being nailed to the cross.

"And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'" (Verses 35-37)

Whatever possessions the crucified had became the property of the executioners. The greedy soldiers immediately begin to gamble for his clothing. John notes this as fulfillment of Psalm 22. After dividing the spoils, they sat down to guard him. Why have guards? We tend to think of crucifixion like our modern firing squad or electric chair. A quick death. An event. Crucifixion was by design a slow agonizing death. It could take days. A prized victim like Jesus had to be guarded.

Nailed over his head was one of the greatest ironies in history. *"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."* (Verse 37) Pilate had designated this and meant it as a mockery of Jesus and the Jews. *Is this the best you Jews have? Is this your King? Look what mighty Rome has done to him.* The irony of course is that it was a billboard of truth. This was Jesus, the King of the Jews. And the King of the Romans and the King of every king. A poignant, ironic truth.

"Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left." (Verse 38) "Robbers" is an accurate translation. Yet they were more like revolutionaries or guerrilla-warfare types. We might use the word "terrorists." They were hard core rebels against Rome. There was one on his left and one on his right, with Jesus in the middle. It's 9:00 in the morning.

Now begins a parade of mockery and insults.

"And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way." (Verses 39-44)

Three groups are identified as heaping insults and rejection: The general public, the religious leaders, and those dying next to him. The general public picks up the accusation made against him at his trial, that Jesus had said he would rebuild the temple in three days.

Jesus was referring to his three days in the grave. It offended them. *It took Herod years to build the temple and you would rebuild it in three days? Now look at you, Mr. build-it-in-three-days, Mr. Son of God. Yeah, right! Loser!*

The scribes and Pharisees can't stop chortling. Their nemesis is finally writhing on a cross. Their place in society that Jesus threatened is once again safe and secure. They can't help but pile on the mocking. *You saved others but you can't save yourself.* Hear their acknowledgment of his miracles? *You brought Lazarus back from the dead and now you are going where he was! Let's see you come down from the cross now Mr. Miracle worker! Then we will believe in you.*

Even the criminals dying with him heap abuse on him. The picture is of complete rejection by men.

"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour." (Verse 45) The 6th hour by the Jewish clock was noon. A day began at 6:00 am. So around noon a phenomenon began of darkness. They don't have street lights. They don't have flashlights. It's like God took the house lights of the world and dimmed the whole place. Why? Darkness means judgment. Egypt was plagued with darkness. Hell is outer darkness. Likely this began Jesus' substitutionary atonement. *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Corinthians 5:21)

In these moments God did the guilt transfer. He placed upon the conscience and responsibility of Jesus your sin and mine. He treated Jesus as if he had done these wicked things. What's it feel like to be a rapist? A thief? A murderer? A this? A that? An everything immoral, wicked, and impure? *"[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin."* Jesus bears our sin-guilt. The Bible doesn't dwell on his physical sufferings, though they were great. It is his guilt-bearing and sin substitute that astonished the New Testament authors.

"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46) This is known as the cry of dereliction. The cry of the Son of God to God the Father. It is the only place in all of Scripture where Jesus doesn't refer to God as his Father. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

What is happening here goes beyond our ability to comprehend. Somehow within the Trinity and the dual humanity/deity of Jesus' personhood, God the Father rejects the now-made-sinful humanity of Jesus. He cannot forsake him as God or the Trinity is broken. But he can reject his sinful humanity. He can break fellowship with him. Jesus responds by quoting Psalm 22:1 and applying it to what he is feeling. *Forsaken.* This is the final and ultimate rejection. Not just the crowd or the Pharisees or those crucified next to him. A final rejection by God himself. This is the ultimate and devastating rejection.

"And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, 'This man is calling Elijah.' And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.'" (Matthew 27:48-49)

"Eli, Eli" sounds enough like Elijah that those watching thought he was crying out to the Old Testament prophet Elijah for help. They wait hoping Elijah shows up.

Here is the sacred moment: *"And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit."* (Verse 50) John records the words of the cry, *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30) Luke

records, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* (Luke 23:46) Hear that? Three hours earlier, *"My God, My God!"* But in this moment, with redemption accomplished, with his work finished, fellowship with God is restored. He is again, *"Father."*

Matthew tells us that he did this with a loud voice. He yielded his spirit. Why is that important? It reinforces the majestic truth that Jesus died *on* the cross but he didn't die *from* the cross. Those nails didn't take his life. He didn't die by suffocation. He didn't die by exposure. He didn't die by the piercing of his side. The Romans didn't kill him. Pilate didn't kill him. The Pharisees didn't kill him. The crowd didn't kill him. He gave up his life. He yielded his spirit. He willingly died.

What is this all about? Why all this record and drama? How does the singular death of one crucifixion among thousands the Romans killed make any difference or matter at all? It doesn't if he was just another man. Just another one condemned. Just another perceived threat to Rome like so many others.

But if the sign had it right, *"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews;"* (Matthew 27:37) if Gabriel had it right when telling Mary to name him Jesus which means Savior; if the angels had it right when they announced his birth; if Matthew had it right that he was the Messiah; if Paul had it right that God made him sin; if he was Jesus, the Son of God, this moment means God died for you—died in your place. His death was no waste and he was no victim. He loved you and suffered for you and gave his life for you so that you might be saved from that wrath of God against your sin. He experienced darkness so you would not experience eternal darkness. He felt God's wrath so you would feel God's love forever. He was forsaken by God so that you would be accepted. He died that you might live forever.

All this hinges on one condition—your personal trusting faith and belief in him. So much weighs in the balance for you and your eternity. Are you like the crowd, and his claims seemed unbelievable? Are you the Romans, and his authority over your life is a threat? Are you the religious leaders whose whole trust was in their own righteousness?

Or could you become like Matthew who wrote this? He knew him. He lived with him. He was personally called by Jesus from a life of greed and treachery as a tax collector to be a disciple. He witnessed all these things and writes to convince us that Jesus was the sin-bearer and Savior of all who believe in him. This isn't just history or biography; this is a gospel to convince you to believe in him. That is why Jesus went through all this to become a reality in your life and eternity. You can by pledging allegiance to Jesus as your King. By trusting in him as your Savior.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) So that there is way for sinners to be forgiven and accepted by a holy God.

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