

Christ Crucified

Matthew 27:32-56

How did an ancient instrument of execution become the most powerful symbol of salvation in world? We must never forget how the cross became what it is. Matthew reveals the pain, mockery, and God-forsakenness that Jesus endured for the salvation of the world.

Summary of the Text

Jesus hadn't slept the previous night. He was taken from the garden in Gethsemane to Caiaphas' courtyard and from there to Pilate's judgment seat. Twice condemned, scourged and beaten, Jesus is not able to bear the cross so Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry it (v. 32). If we read with fresh eyes, we wonder how He will deal with worst to come. He rejects sour wine and is crucified naked while the soldiers divvy up His garments (vv. 33-35). Criminals hang on either side, but a sign above Him says, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (vv. 37-38). Passersby blaspheme and mock His inability to save Himself given His claim to build the temple in three days. The Sanhedrin mocks Him for saying "I am the Son of God", and the robbers join in (vv. 39-44). From the sixth to the ninth hour darkness covers the land, and then Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (vv.45-46). They think He cries out for Elijah and offer Him sour wine to drink (vv. 47-48). He cries out again, yields up His Spirit, and then the veil in the temple tears in two from top to bottom. The earth quakes and graves open where people will rise from the dead with Jesus (vv. 50-53). The centurion and soldiers guarding Jesus witness these things and conclude "Truly this was the Son of God!" (v. 54). Many of the women from Galilee who ministered to Jesus, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the Zebedee brothers' mother, watch His crucifixion and death from afar (vv. 55-56).

Historical Gospel

If Matthew wanted only to communicate that Jesus could not carry the cross, he would not have mentioned Simon of Cyrene by name. Mark informs us that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mk. 15:21), and Paul tells the Christians in Rome to greet Rufus, "chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine" (Rom. 16:13). The reason these people are mentioned is because Matthew's audience either knows or had heard of them or knows people who knew them (cf. 1 Cor. 15:6). These are eyewitnesses to the crucifixion who are still around when the gospel is written to testify to the truth of what happened. The historical truth of Christianity sets it apart from the mystery religions popular at the time and world religions today that have no historical foundation. Buddhism wouldn't change is Siddhartha never lived. But the gospel is an historical confession, as the Apostles' Creed testifies: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into Hades. The third day He rose again from the dead." The gospel is not about what you do or about what happened to you when you believe. It's about what Jesus did when He was publicly crucified and rose from the dead three days later, appearing to people for forty days on the earth. "This thing was not done in a corner", Paul tells Festus and Agrippa (Acts 26:26). The disciples did not ask people to consider in their hearts if Jesus can help them. They proclaimed the truth about what God did in history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. If He didn't do these things, the gospel and our faith are pointless (1 Cor. 15:14). But look at the gospel and try to explain what happened to the apostles apart from the biblical account. People lie for personal gain, but the early Christians didn't gain anything by testifying to what happened. All they had to do to end their troubles was shut up about Jesus and His resurrection, but they wouldn't.

Mocking God

The ark of the covenant resided in the Holy of Holies surrounded on either side by cherubim. This was God's footstool, and He was enthroned above it in the glory cloud. Jesus is crucified in the middle of two thieves with

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a sign above: “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” This soldiers had mocked Him privately with the scarlet robe, crown of thorns, and scepter in the Praetorium (vv. 28-31). Now He stripped naked for everyone to view His shame and share in the mocking: those who pass by, the chief priests and elders, and even the robbers join in (vv. 39, 41, 44). The taunts are consistent with previous accusations about what Jesus said and did: He can’t build the temple in three days; if He is the Son of God, He ought to be able to get off that cross; He saved others but can’t save Himself; if He is the true King of Israel, come down and they’ll believe Him; He said He trusted in God, and if that’s true then let God deliver Him. Matthew says they blaspheme Him (v. 39), meaning they insult and disrespect God. We see a modern example of blasphemy in Andres Serrano’s “art” piece *Piss Christ* which consists of a plastic crucifix submerged in a glass container of the artist’s urine (funded by your tax dollars through the National Endowment for the Arts). Similarly, the new atheists argue acerbically that not only is Christianity wrong, it’s pure evil. Matthew includes these details as part of our redemption at the crucifixion to show not just that Jesus endured them but fulfilled God’s plan by doing so. It’s not just that Jesus saves blasphemers; He uses these hateful and violent acts to confirm His identity and reveal the glory of His grace. They cast lots for His clothing, fulfilling Psalm 22:18. Psalm 22 is about the Lord’s servant who is surrounded by dogs, the congregation of the wicked, and the bulls of Bashan who wag their tongues and pierce his hands and feet (vv. 12-13, 16). The things they mock Jesus for identify Him as this servant who will overcome and praise God in the great assembly (22:25). People can make ugly little pieces of art and write books with silly arguments against God, but who put Jesus naked, bloody, covered in urine and dying in public first? That would be God Himself. Blasphemy of course is a wicked sin, but Matthew reveals its futility. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, stripped of His robe of authority and glory, and sold into slavery. He then he rose to be keeper of the prison and Potiphar’s second in charge. When Potiphar’s wife tore that away, he trusted God again and rose to rule over all of Egypt next to Pharaoh. Jesus has been disrobed and robed to be scourged, mocked as a king, and now crucified. Every action taken against Him is turned on its head. He is the true prophet, high priest, king of Israel, and Son of God.

Foundations Shaken

At creation God interrupted the darkness, saying, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). The darkness here is broken by Jesus’ cry, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me” (v. 46; Ps. 22:1). The crowd thinks He calls for Elijah to deliver Him, but Elijah already came to “restore all things” before “the great and terrible day of Yahweh” (Matt. 17:11; Mal. 4:5). Jesus is about to raise the temple of His body and shake the old foundation so the new would be established: “whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, ‘Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.’ Now this, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain” (Heb. 12:26-27). The Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy and His Spirit will raise the graveyard of Israel (Ez. 37:1-14; Matt. 27:52-53). The crucifixion accomplishes all of this. Who understands? The last person we would expect, but the exact one the psalmist predicted: the centurion and those with him (v. 54): “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You” (v. 27). Jesus isn’t even in the grave, much less out of, and these Gentiles believe in the crucified Christ.