

The Crucifixion

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Date: 06 September 2020

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[0 : 00] Turn with me this morning to Matthew chapter 27 and verses 32 through 37.

They crucified him. They crucified him. Let me begin with what to some may seem like a very strange comment.

The Bible was not written in old Entish. In old Entish. In J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, there are these strange characters called Ents.

Ents do nothing in a hurry. They take their time over everything. Ents have names which take many hours to say. On one occasion, a leading Ent says, You must understand, young Hobbit.

It takes a long time to say anything in old Entish. And we never say anything unless it's worth taking a long time to say.

[1 : 11] But as I say, the Bible was not written in old Entish. Sometimes those things worth saying most in the Bible, the Bible doesn't take long to say them at all.

For example, it doesn't take a long time to say that which is of primary importance. Like, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

All the work of cosmic physicists and scientific mathematicians compressed into ten words. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

But let me give you what is perhaps the most powerful example of them all. In Matthew 27, verse 35, The greatest and most monumentous event in universal history is described in five words.

When they had crucified him. When they had crucified him. The king of kings and the lord of lords.

[2 : 20] God the son, eternal and infinitely blessed. And in these five words we read. When they had crucified him.

Like a bullet from a gun. It hits us straight between the eyes. When they had crucified him. They nailed the lord of glory to a Roman cross.

They lifted him up from the ground. And killed the creator of the universe. Now I had initially thought of dealing with the whole of Matthew 27, 32 through 56.

And the account of the crucifixion of Jesus in just one sermon. But as I reflected upon it. I just simply could not do justice to the greatest and most monumentous event in universal history in 28 minutes.

So I'm going to divide it into sections. Today we're going to consider verses 32 through 37 under three headings. Under the cross.

[3 : 27] On the cross. And around the cross. Remember. Here we're at the very heart of the gospel. The sacred presence of God himself.

The burning bush of his glorious love for us. One might almost take off one's shoes. For where we stand today is holy ground.

Under the cross. On the cross. Around the cross. Under the cross. First of all. Under the cross. Our passage begins in verse 32 with an exhausted Jesus.

He is unable to bear the weight of the cross. He's been led out from the praetorium. Through the streets of Jerusalem. Outside to the hill they call Golgotha. He has been beaten and spat upon.

He's been flogged and he's been tortured. Now he's just a man. He's not a superhero. He's not bulging with muscles. Some kind of first century AD Arnold Schwarzenegger.

[4 : 35] He's just a man. And he's exhausted. And he's so exhausted that he is unable to bear the weight of the cross he must carry. And so these Roman soldiers pluck a random stranger from the crowd.

A man called Simon from Cyrene. Present day Libya. Back in the fourth century BC. Tens of thousands of Jews had been forcibly resettled there.

So presumably Simon. A righteous Jew would have traveled to Jerusalem. To observe the feast of the Passover. So he's a bystander. Until the soldiers force him to carry the cross of Jesus.

For a Jew. A cross on which a man was to die was ceremonially unclean. So Simon would never have volunteered to carry this cross. He had to be forced to carry it.

But bare it he did. This unfortunate tourist from North Africa. Now unlike what is portrayed by the great Renaissance painters.

[5 : 41] The cross was not massive. It was probably around nine feet high. Eight or nine feet high. With a cross beam or patibulum as it was called.

Being about six feet wide. So a total of roughly 15 feet of wood. By my calculations it would have weighed around 100 kilograms.

That is if Jesus was carrying the whole cross. If it was just the patibulum or the cross beam. Which Jesus was being forced to carry. We're still looking at a weight of about 35 to 40 kilograms.

A normal man would struggle to carry such a weight. Never mind a man exhausted by the torture to which Jesus had been subjected. And it was just too much for him.

He couldn't do it. And so an unwilling tourist to Jerusalem was forced to carry it for him instead. Simon of Cyrene.

[6 : 44] This unsung and unsought hero of the Christian faith. In Mark 15. In Mark 15.21 he is portrayed. He's presented rather as the father of two men.

Alexander and Rufus. Both of whom are mentioned in Romans 16. As being prominent Christians in the church in Rome. So it seems likely that the reason Simon of Cyrene is mentioned by name.

In Matthew's gospel. Is because this man became a Christian. He became a follower of the Jesus whose cross he bore up the Via Dolorosa.

The way of sorrows. Up to Golgotha's Hill. See with just a few pictures. A few words here.

Matthew's painting such an evocative picture of a man under a cross.

Simon of Cyrene. This unsuspecting North African religious pilgrim. Who through being forced to carry the cross of Jesus. Became a follower of Jesus.

[7 : 49] He carried the cross on which our Savior died. Earlier in Matthew's gospel. Jesus said. If anyone would come after me.

He must deny himself. He must take up his cross. And he must follow me. Simon does them all. He goes after Jesus.

Denying himself. By carrying Jesus' cross. It's a picture really. It's just so pregnant with meaning. That Jesus the Messiah.

Will hang on the cross. Simon bore for him. Under the cross. Is a man bearing it.

Because Jesus is so weakened. By the torture. That he cannot bear it himself. But Simon. Perhaps initially. Resentful I suppose.

[8 : 45] Of having to bear the cross. Came to realize. That the cross is the means of his salvation. That the Jesus whose cross he was bearing.

Was bearing his sins on his shoulders. That was Simon's exchange. He carried the cross. For Jesus.

For Jesus. And Jesus carried. His sins for Simon. Now we can apply this in a couple of ways.

First of all. Surely. We're filled with wonder. Filled with wonder. That the son of God. Through whom the world was created. Who in his public ministry. Stilled the wind and the waves. On the sea of Galilee.

Was so exhausted. And so weakened. That he couldn't even lift. The equivalent of a bag of cement. He exposed himself. To such.

[9 : 41] Humiliating weakness. For you. And for me. If his weakness. For us. Was so great. Then our worship of him.

Must like. Likewise be great. Our songs. Loud. In our hearts. At the moment. And filled with. Thankfulness. But our.

Second application. Is that. As it would seem. If Simon of Cyrene. Did become a Christian. Think of how. The cross. Far from keeping him.

From believing in Jesus. As the Christ. Helped him. To understand. The way of salvation. More clearly. For many. In Jesus day. And still today. The weakness.

Of Jesus. On the cross. Is a great stumbling block. To faith. They. They want to follow. A superhero. Savior. Bulging with muscles. They don't want.

[10:37] An exhausted. Bleeding man. Who can't. Even carry. A large plank. Of wood. So the cross. Is a stumbling block.

To many. Because it seems like. Foolishness. And. And almost. Blasphemy. To them. But God's wisdom. Is greater still. Salvation. Salvation. Comes.

Only as we believe. That Jesus. Was sacrificing himself. On the cross. As the sacrifice. For. Our sin. That he's.

Enduring that. Weakness. And suffering. That to use the words. Of the hymn. We. We sang last. Sunday. Bearing shame. And scoffing rude. In my place.

Condemned. He stood. Have you believed. Are you trusting. In the cross. Of Jesus. Under the cross.

[11:33] Then second. We have. On the cross. On the cross. Golgotha. Is one of these words. Which struck terror. Into the people.

Of Jerusalem. The word itself. Is very unsettling. Literally. The place. Of the skull. The place. Of the cranium. That hill itself.

Or perhaps. A rocky outcrop. On that hill. Resembled a human skull. Think of when you're going up. The A9. To Inverness. And just before you get. To Matin. You look to the right.

And there's a quarry. And there's a German soldiers helmet. And everyone looks for it. That's the German soldiers helmets quarry. Golgotha. Has got a skull. Rocky outcrop. On it. Everyone knew. That it was the place. Of execution. And death. A place where wicked men breathed their last. And Roman justice was mercilessly executed. It was dark and foreboding.

[12:33] And there it was. Jesus was led. The holiness of the Savior. Led to the hill of the skull. And it was there in that place of terror.

They crucified him. It would seem, however, from our passage. If you look very carefully. That before they nailed him to the cross. And lifted the cross into its upright position.

The Roman soldiers offered him wine to drink. Mixed with gall. A bitter concoction designed to dull the senses. Something of an anesthetic, perhaps.

Now, you might suppose the soldiers did this out of some sense of compassion. So that Jesus would not feel the pain quite so keenly.

Au contraire. The reason these soldiers offered all the victims of crucifixion. Wine mixed with gall. Was because it made it easier for them to hammer the nails into their hands and feet.

[13:33] It made their victims more compliant. It doped them up. It made their victims easier to manage. There is no compassionate work here. Just military efficiency.

And the know-how of gruesome execution. And having taken a wee taste of that wine mixed with gall. Jesus refused to drink it.

Why? Because he needed to have his wits about him. While hanging on the cross. The greatest challenge of Jesus' life.

And the entire reason he had come down from heaven. Lies before him now. He had not merely come to die in the flesh. Not at all.

Or he would have gladly accepted that dull and drink. He needed to be mentally and emotionally alert. For the ordeal that lay before him.

[14:31] Of course, yes, he is exhausted in body. But by refusing the drink, we are learning that he is intentionally alert in mind. Alert and in control of himself right to the very end.

Now in weeks to come, as we learn more about what Jesus was doing and achieving on that cross. We are going to understand more of why he needed to be alert and on guard.

But the point is that we are not to think of Jesus on the cross as some kind of stupefied crash test dummy. Again, the great Renaissance painters picture Jesus with his head down.

Blood pouring from his wounds. Suffering with exhausted passivity. Matthew 27 verse 34 with its insistence that Jesus refused to drink the dulling anesthetic.

Teaches us that although Jesus was physically exhausted. He was not suffering with exhausted passivity.

[15:40] But that rather to the very end, he was actively and consciously choosing to suffer. In other words, he heard every mocking taunt directed against him.

And he meant every word he prayed on the cross. Yes, even that God would forgive those crucifying him because they didn't know what they were doing. And he felt those nails being driven into his hands and his feet.

His mind was active and every nerve center in his body was in overdrive. He was in such control of himself that he could think.

Because he had to be a willing, intelligent, active sacrifice. Lest he should be of no more value than a mindless animal.

A bull or a goat. A lump of meat offered on an Old Testament altar. On the cross there's a man whose mind is active.

[16 : 45] Who is suffering intensely every second of those hours on the cross. You may know that theologians talk about the active and passive obedience of Jesus.

The distinction really is very important. But we discover here that the suffering of Jesus was very far from passive. It was entirely active.

Rather than run from it, even at this stage, he actively embraces it in full knowledge that unless he endures it actively, intelligently, and willingly, the cross will save no one.

Not even himself. In other words, it was for you Jesus refused to drink that wine mixed with gall.

It was for you he refused to take the paracetamol. Even though by this stage he could see the nails, he knew the pain which lay before him.

[17 : 54] For you he actively, intelligently, and willingly embraced the suffering and the pain.

Yes, as we said at the beginning, just a few words. He refused to drink it.

But a universe of redemptive suffering lies behind these words. The intense, furious longing of God to save you.

There was no other way that the Son of God should, other than that the Son of God should willingly, actively, and intelligently offer himself upon the cross.

bearing the sins of a rebellious world on his shoulders, suffering and dying for them. Now there may be some of us, even here, who have been brought up in the church, and when you think of Christianity, you think of wooden pews, boring sermons, and traditional conservatism.

[19 : 18] That's what you think. You've got it wrong. And I'm sorry if the church, or I, have ever left you with that impression of its gospel.

Here is the heart of the gospel. Not the sanitized boredom of a building, but the suffering of the Son of God on your behalf.

The heart of the gospel isn't on a hill on top of St. Vincent Street. It's on a hill outside Jerusalem, where 2,000 years ago, the Son of God had you in his mind and his heart, as he actively, willingly, and intelligently gave his life for you.

Say to yourself, right now, whatever you are, either here in St. Vincent Street or at home, for me, insert your name here, for me, he refused to drink it.

If he willingly embraced such suffering on the cross for you, then surely you can willingly embrace faith in him today, that you'll turn your sins over to him, and ask him to be Lord and Master of your life.

[20 : 39] Under the cross, on the cross, and then finally this morning, around the cross, around the cross. I think we'd all agree that those who passed away in hospital with COVID-19 had it particularly hard.

They died without their family around them. They died often alone, surrounded by medical equipment and the sound of electronic devices. Think of what it was like for Jesus that day.

For around the cross, as we learn from verses 35 through 37, were gathered the Roman guard, whose job it was to execute him. They stripped him.

They played a game of dice for his clothes. They sat down, and they waited for him to die. And then, when ordered, they placed above his head a sign on which was written the charge against him.

This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. Around this cross weren't a group of concerned, caring medics, but a squad of careless, crude executioners.

[21 : 55] Look for love on Golgotha's Hill. You won't find it sitting around the cross. You'll only find it hanging on the cross. We read, first of all, that they stripped him.

The victim of a crucifixion was left with no dignity, nor any possessions. The clothes, whose back, were stolen. They became the property of those guarding him.

It was, shall we say, one of the perks of being a member of this execution crew. Because even the clothes of a criminal were worth something in that society. For all that Jesus was poor, he had been well dressed, and his clothes would have been valuable.

So they played dice for them. Roll a six, you get his tunic. Roll two sixes, you get his cloak. Roll three sixes, you get everything. Son of God hangs on the cross above them, nothing to protect his dignity.

Soldiers sit beneath the cross, playing dice for his clothes. Amazing humility, is it not?

[23 : 17] The humility of God himself as his son hangs in shame, left with nothing, not even his clothes, nothing at all.

This Jesus owns the planets and the stars in Psalm 24, verse 1. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. And on the cross, this Lord owned nothing, not even the clothes in his back. that's how deep into the darkness he descended, emptying himself of all things so that even for his clothes they played dice, gambling over his glory, playing over his passion.

And there they sat, these soldiers, waiting for the victims of crucifixion to die. It was such a tortuous means of execution that sometimes depending upon the vitality and fitness of the victims, it could take up to three days for them to die.

So these soldiers are getting themselves comfortable for the long haul. They're getting paid.

They've got their skins of wine, they've got their perks, they've got their dice. They're quite happy even as the light of the world goes out.

[24 : 43] And then to crown it all, they place above Jesus' head the written charge, this is Jesus, the King of the Jews.

Above the head of crucifixion victims, the soldiers would sometimes write that for which they are being executed. This one was a robber, this one was a murderer, this one was a terrorist.

But Jesus could be accused of no crime because the man on the cross is not a criminal. He's a king. The man on the cross is no sinner.

He's a sovereign. The man on the cross is no renegade, he's a royal. Kings don't hang on crosses but this one did. Sovereigns don't suffer such indignity but this one did.

Royals don't agonize and bleed but this one did. And not only is he king, he's king of the Jews. The very Jews for whom such a thing as a cross was a damnable piece of Gentile uncleanness.

[25 : 53] They hate everything to do with Rome and yet here they are using the Romans on their crosses and their political power games of putting to death their own God-appointed king. Who is this upon the tree?

The ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to their forefather Abraham. The prophet who is greater than Moses. The king greater than their own precious king David.

Imagine that this should happen to her majesty the queen. We and the whole world would be up in arms but on Golgotha the only arms that were up were Jesus nailed to the cross.

Jesus. But as often happens in scripture not only are a few words used for the most major events when they had crucified him he refused to drink it these words come from the mouths of those who do not believe in Jesus.

So they wrote that name Jesus that name which means God saves. On the cross hangs the king of the Jews betrayed tortured and exhausted and above his head is written the words God saves.

[27 : 24] High over the landscape surrounding Jerusalem lifted high above the soldiers seated below him God is announcing to the world that the means of his salvation consists in the death of Jesus Christ his only son on the cross.

This is what it's all been leading since the first curse of man that God himself in the person of his son Jesus Christ should be lifted up on a Roman cross to take away the sins and the suffering of a rebellious world.

divine wisdom and love and grace are at work here in this sign above Jesus' head for here on Golgotha's hill hanging on a cross born there by Simon of Cyrene a North African is God's salvation.

The Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world. You won't find salvation today in the absolution of a priest. You will not find it in praying five times toward the east.

You won't find it in pilgrimages and vows of silence. You won't find it in burning yourself upon a road to make some kind of political point.

[28 : 49] You won't find it in your moral efforts or in your religious ceremonies. You'll find it only here on a Roman cross on Golgotha's hill 2,000 years ago. There they crucified him.

Who did they crucify we ask? They crucified Jesus the king of the Jews we answer in whose death we have life and in whose active intelligent and willing sacrifice we have forgiveness for all our sins.

Now I ask you all do you believe that what I've said this morning is true? Not only the facts of the case is presented to us by Matthew but that the Jesus who was dying there that day was dying for you.

Jesus exhausted for you. Jesus alert for you. Jesus suffering for you.

Yes he was. And now scripture says to you this one final thing. If you should confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and you should believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead then you shall be saved.

[30 : 22] Amen. let us pray. When we read the Greek tragedies and the Roman histories we're reading of events which yes oh Lord may have their replicants today but they are documents of yesterday and they relate almost wholly to the events of yesterday.

but when we read your word and when we read of the dying of the son of God upon the cross we're reading about something which is as real to us today as it was to those first Christians who read these words in AD 55.

we're reading about a Jesus who is exhausted for us. A Jesus who willingly stayed alert for us.

A Jesus who willingly suffered for us that we might be saved from all our sins. Thank you Lord Jesus how can we repay you other than confessing with our mouth that you are Lord and believing in our hearts that you have been raised from the dead.

In your name we pray. Amen.