

Matthew 27:27-54

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[0 : 0 0] So we turn to Matthew 27, verses 27 to 54, which is Matthew's record of the crucifixion of Jesus.

And it is ravaging and ravishing. It is awful and awesome. It is like the ring in the Lord of the Rings.

One level is just a little ring. At the other, it has great and awesome power. It's the great ring of power. And it eats the people who use it. It consumes their lives.

At one level, this is just a crucifixion. It's just the execution of a man. But it does the opposite of the ring. Instead of eating our lives, it gives us life. It brings us back to God.

And it gives us hope. And I hope you noticed, as it was read through earlier, that the way Matthew speaks about it is so restrained.

[0 : 5 8] It's almost as though it's too sacred and significant to be narrated. As we come to the crucifixion, we're at the central, most important event in history.

There is no event more important in the history of the Bible and in the history of God with his people. It's the greatest revelation of God. Here is our only hope in life and death.

And it shows us and tells us who God is and who we are and how the two of us can love one another. It shows us how much he loves us and what it means to love him.

And it takes all of creation and sin and violence and the promises of God and all the threads of Old Testament history and brings them together in this one event.

And then out of this, all the new creation and the promises of God for the hope of the world. So let's look at it together. How does Matthew do this?

[1 : 5 9] He does it in three ways. He tells us, he shows us. So we see and hear the people around Jesus. Secondly, we see Jesus himself. And thirdly, we see what God is doing as well.

So let's look at those three things. Firstly, we see and hear those around Jesus. So the focus of the first half of the passage is not really Jesus at all, but all the vicious mockery.

And even the most savage and sadistic mockery comes to us in irony. And it comes to us in irony because nobody really gets it.

What God is doing here is so great. It's so much deeper and more wonderful than anything that we could imagine. As the soldiers and as the guards and as the Jewish authorities and as the crowd look at Jesus and what is happening, they see nothing.

The more they speak, the more they demonstrate their own spiritual blindness. It's impossible for them to think that this might really be the son of God. This might be God's chosen king.

[3 : 1 1] That this silent, suffering, beaten man might be their hope of glory. That they might see in him the face of God. They can't see.

They can't see that God would have anything to do with this man. It's a contradiction to the way we think. And it's this irony that exposes our darkness and our ignorance and our arrogance.

Because irony always involves a contradiction, a paradox. It's saying one thing and meaning another. So let me give you a couple of illustrations.

Do you know what the book that's most often shoplifted in the United States today is? It is the Bible. That's an irony. In the same way, the famous atheist French philosopher Voltaire, who said his writings would outlast the Bible, his house in Paris became a book depository for a Christian bookstore.

That's irony. But here, the more cruel and callous the mocking of Jesus, the more clueless it shows we are. The very words and actions that are thrown and hurled at Jesus, meant as insult and hurt, are infinitely and majestically more wonderful and true than they can imagine.

[4 : 35] There are four groups around Jesus at the time. The first group is the execution squad in verse 27 and onwards. This is an entire guard of 600 soldiers.

And Jesus has just been flogged. And now these non-Jewish soldiers have the safety of numbers and they want to have some fun. So they strip Jesus of his clothing.

They put a fake royal robe on him. They make a crown of painful thorns. They spit on him. They punch him. They mock him. They say, hail, king of the Jews, the same phrase the Magi used.

They are trying their best to humiliate and bring this one down. And as they do, they don't realise that this is the one who humbled himself, who came down from heaven to take our nature upon himself, to clothe himself in human flesh so that he might reveal the love of God and suffer for our sins.

They can't imagine the truth of what they're saying. But this is why it's coming. The second group of the crowd in verses 39 to 40. Jesus has now been crucified.

[5 : 50] And he's crucified at about nine o'clock in the morning under the sign, this is Jesus, the king of the Jews. And again, it's very interesting. Matthew is restrained. There's no attempt to manipulate our feelings.

But in verse 39, the crowd are there for a sort of ghoulish entertainment. It says they revile him. They jeer at him.

They wag their heads. And the word in the original is that they blaspheme him. They throw up anything they possibly can to discredit him and to malign him.

They even misquote him. In verse 40, you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Jesus never said that. Save yourself, they say, if you are the son of God.

Come down from the cross. The thing about these words is that they have the smell of Satan all over them. It's exactly what Satan said to Jesus in the wilderness.

[6 : 50] If you are the son of God, use your power for yourself. Use your power over others. It's a venomous temptation for Jesus to stop trusting his father in the middle of suffering.

And that is exactly what Satan throws at us. And again, the point is that because he is the son of God, he won't come down so that he can save us. The third group of a whole raft of religious dignitaries in verse 41, they step up and knock him.

It's very interesting that they so despise Jesus and look down on him that they won't address him directly. They talk about him in the third person. You see verse 42.

Actually, of course, Jesus could quite easily have come down from the cross along with 144,000 angels if he wanted to.

But if he's going to save others, he cannot save himself. The only way to free us from the burden of our sin is to take it on himself.

[8 : 08] The only way for him to bear our griefs and to bear our sorrows is to bear the sins of the world. And it's precisely because he is the son of God. So precious to God the father that he is dying for us.

And we believe that he is the son of God precisely because he stayed on the cross. And finally, in verse 44, even the two criminals on either side mock Jesus.

And they say the same kinds of things. They're not really robbers, which is the translation here. They're bandits. They're mercenaries. They were part of Barabbas gang of mercenaries.

And Jesus is crucified between these two guys because there's a spare cross going. Because Barabbas has gone free and Jesus is now taking his place.

And this is the irony, you see. It's the irony through the whole story. It expresses with piercing truth that here is God's chosen king. The divine son of God has come to save us by dying.

[9 : 12] It exposes how profoundly broken we are and how broken the world is and how deeply we cannot see and how deeply we need Jesus to die in our place. That's the first way Matthew brings this out, by what people see and do around him.

Secondly, Matthew shows us Jesus himself and what he says and does. And of course, for most of this, Jesus is acted upon. He's not the one taking action.

And that himself is very important. We don't have time to do this. But the way Matthew draws us into this is through a series of Old Testament references woven into the text.

There are about a dozen of them in this text. And what they do is they show Jesus as the suffering servant who has come to suffer and bear the sins of his people.

He opened not his mouth. Like a lamb he was led to the slaughter. Well, we like sheep have gone astray. We've turned everyone to our own way. But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[10 : 17] But there are three times that Jesus does take action in this passage. And the first is in verse 34. If you have a Bible open, you can look down at it. He is offered wine to drink as they are about to nail him to the cross.

Evidently, at the time, godly women would bring some wine mixed with a narcotic to reduce and lower pain for those who are being crucified.

It's an act of kindness that the Old Testament prescribes. But we read in verse 34 that Jesus would not drink it. It doesn't mean we should never take medication.

The point is that Jesus was not there to avoid suffering, but to fully enter into the human experience and the human depths of suffering for us.

He wanted to be fully conscious as he suffered for our sin. He was choosing to make himself vulnerable. And as he faces the cross right there, as he suffers for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, by choosing this, so choosing to keep his mind clear, I think it shows something of his love, that he's doing this for us.

[11 : 35] And in the end, what keeps him on the cross is not the nails, but it's his pure love for us. The second time we hear from Jesus is in verse 46, with the very famous cry of desolation.

In the verse before, darkness has covered the land for three hours. In those three hours, as Jesus bears our sin, God the Father somehow turns his face away.

And at three, three o'clock in the afternoon, Jesus cries out in a massive voice, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This is a cry of utter desolation. And Jesus means what he says. God the Heavenly Father has in some way forsaken him, abandoned him.

It's the only time in all the gospel Jesus doesn't call God Father, but instead he calls him my God, my God. Because even as he is bearing the punishment that we deserve for our sins, he is truly abandoned by God, but he still trusts in God.

[12 : 47] We know later that God made him to be sin whom you know sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And what these words tell us is the costliness of the crucifixion for Jesus.

He's not bearing our sins externally like a backpack or a bag. He's bearing the pain internally. And this is at the heart of what the Lord Jesus is for us.

It's not the physical pain of the nails as he dies. It's the abandonment of God, his eternal Father. And as he chooses to be engulfed in our sin, somehow, and I don't understand how, the fellowship of God the Father and God the Son is separated and broken.

Old Bishop J.C. Ryle says this.

And then the third thing we hear from Jesus is in verse 50.

[14 : 22] Matthew doesn't tell us what he says. But in verse 50, we read these words. Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. Which means he doesn't just die.

Death doesn't creep up on him and steal his life away. He chooses to die. He actively gives up his spirit. So when he said back in chapter 20, I give my life as a ransom for many, this is what he's talking about.

He chooses to give his life. And then finally, Matthew tells us as well what God does. What's God doing in this?

This is very important for us right now. The first thing to say is that none of us took God by surprise. No suffering, no disaster, no difficulty, no catastrophe ever does.

In fact, one of the earliest prayers in the early church we have from the pages of the New Testament in the book of Acts is after being threatened by the Jewish council to stop openly, happily speaking about Jesus and the resurrection.

[15 : 29] The Jewish Christians get together and they say this. They pray this to God. Lord, in this city, they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles, the people of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

It was the will of the Lord to bruise him. Now, this is so important for us to grasp the sovereignty of God in the suffering of Christ. And I think it's particularly important for us right now in the midst of COVID-19 crisis.

Because you can take any circumstances in the world, whether they are worldwide or personal, and we should place the cross of Jesus on it and trace the hand of the sovereign God over all those circumstances.

You see, here in Matthew 27, in the deeds of cruelty and criminality and savagery and mockery, God is working salvation for us.

It is the same with all our suffering. None of it's outside God's loving control. He is working in all of it for his glory and for the good of his people. It doesn't mean we understand it all.

[16 : 49] Nor should we stop trying to help and alleviate suffering. Nor can we always see exactly what God is doing in certain specific circumstances. But since the death of Jesus, what is really going on in our world is shaped by the cross.

And part of what it is to belong to God is to take the cross of Jesus and trace it on our lives and trace it on the circumstances around us. God does three things in Matthew's account.

The first is the darkness in verse 45, which is a great big Old Testament object lesson. The judgment of God has begun to fall now.

As God turns his face away from Jesus, Jesus bears our sin. It doesn't matter about all these empty, vacuous words. God blocks out the light of the sun and gives us some indication of the darkness Jesus faces apart from him.

The second thing that God does is at the moment of Jesus' death, in verse 51, God tears the curtain of the temple from top to bottom.

[18 : 03] It was God who told his people to put that curtain in place in the first time as a form of protection. During the Old Testament, he made his glory and his holiness dwell inside the temple.

But as we are, we can't come into his presence. It's much too much for us because of his glory and his holiness. It would consume us. And so he put a curtain there for our protection.

But now that Jesus has died in our place to take our sin, there is no more use for that curtain. And God takes the curtain and from the top tears it in half to say, come in, come into my place.

Come into my life. Share my glory. Share my presence. Or if you like, he comes out and says, I'm going to share my life and my presence with you. There is nothing like this in any other world religion.

And all the sacrifices and priesthood and temple worship, they're all now done away with. Because it's impossible for all the blood of all the bulls and all the goats in all the world to take away sin.

[19 : 09] But by this one single sacrifice of himself, Christ has made us pure and perfect forever. God makes dark. God tears the curtain.

And the third thing God does is that when Jesus dies, he gives us a little taster of the resurrection in verses 52 to 53.

I think the way we should read this is that after Jesus' resurrection, a number of God's people who had died were raised from the tomb back to life, went into Jerusalem and completely freaked everyone out there.

And I think it's here for us because Jesus doesn't just die for us, for his own sins. He does not die for his own sins.

He dies for ours. And he doesn't, he's not raised again from the dead just for his own sake. He's raised for us to bring a great company of brothers and sisters to his heavenly father.

[20 : 08] And I think it may be that as he escaped death, he just grabbed a handful of people on the way out as a picture of the fact that death no more has dominion over us.

And then the passage finishes with opened mouth amazement from the execution squad in verse 54. They've been there all along.

They've been part of the group that oppressed the crown of thorns in the headquarters. They had marched Jesus up to be crucified. They'd nailed him there.

They had heard the mockery of the crowds of the religious leaders and the bandits. They had seen the darkness. They'd experienced the earthquake. They'd heard the cry of Jesus.

And they had seen the temple curtain tear in two from top to bottom. And in verse 54, the last verse, we read, Everyone had been against Jesus.

[21 : 22] And now they see that Jesus and God were on the same side. God was on Jesus' side, if you will. And now they say what God has said already about Jesus Christ at his baptism.

This is my son. They say what God said about Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration. This is my son. They say what the disciples confessed at their best moment.

You are the son of God. And it's a completely new moment in the history of the world. These Gentile Roman soldiers become the first and most unlikely converts.

And the mission of Jesus begins with all its magnetism. It's fantastic for us. This criminal action that they were very much part of, this person that they were very much blind to, now opens to them the door of salvation.

And they see. They see the love of God in Jesus Christ. They see the face of God in Jesus Christ. And they join their futures to the person of Jesus Christ in this statement of faith.

[22 : 31] Amen.