

The Crucifixion of the King

Mt 27:1-56

Key verse: Mt 27:46

“About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)”

What comes to your mind when you hear about the cross? Do you feel your heart beating when you hear about it? Or is it just an old story that you’ve heard so many times? Often, the cross seems like a mere symbol for church people. It is such a common symbol that many people don’t give serious thoughts about it.

In ancient times, the cross was a horrible execution tool, symbolizing the most humiliating death. But why did such a symbol of suffering and death come to represent the Christian faith? For centuries, the enemies of the church ridiculed believers for worshipping “a criminal and his cross.” How can a sane person worship a man who had been condemned as a criminal and died the most humiliating death? This was well illustrated by a Roman graffiti from the second century (Alexamenos Graffito). Christ crucified is **“foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to Jews.”**

Still today, the cross is a scandal that people try to remove or soften in any way possible. They want to skip over the topic of sin, suffering, and death and jump straight into topics they are comfortable with. In this way, the gospel often becomes a “cheap grace” that doesn’t require repentance. But the true cross challenges us all to radically change our mind about God and ourselves. The cross of Jesus reveals how serious our sin really is. It reveals how crazy God’s love is for sinners. The cross of Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So, let’s go to the place of the cross, following the guidance of Matthew 27. May the Holy Spirit lead us to the cross of Jesus!

I. We All Participated in Condemning Jesus (27:1-26)

It was early in the morning on Friday of the passion week. The Jewish authorities (all the chief priests and the elders of the people) plotted to kill Jesus (27:1). Jesus was all night tried and condemned by the Jewish religious court. They were driven by their jealousy and greed. Now at daybreak, they formalized their sentence to kill Jesus. Then they handed him over to Pilate the governor (2).

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Then, Judas who betrayed him realized that Jesus was condemned to death. Overcome with shock and remorse, he gave back the thirty pieces of silver to the high priests and said, “I have sinned. For I have betrayed innocent blood” (4). But how did they reply? They said, “What is that to us? That’s your responsibility.” Judas confessed to the wrong people and then simply gave up on life. Though Judas used to be one of the Twelve, he followed his own agenda rather than Jesus.

The chief priests also followed their own agenda, betraying truth. They picked up the money and didn’t put it into the temple treasury to keep their purity law. They valued petty regulations regarding ritual purity more than their responsibility to human life. How could such respected people become so heartless and wicked? But actually, we often act in the same way. We can easily become self-deceptive, thinking that we are serving God when we are actually following our hidden agenda. God looks into our hearts. When our hearts are controlled by jealousy, pride and hypocrisy, we participate in killing Jesus. It is the chain of our sins of self-interest that condemned Jesus. But still, God is in control. Matthew testifies that what was spoken in Scripture was fulfilled (9-10). God never fails despite sinners’ evil schemes.

Let’s move on to the Roman world-class court. How did it handle the case of Jesus? Pilate the governor asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (11) Pilate’s concern was whether Jesus broke the Roman law. If Jesus claimed to be a king, it would be a blatant challenge to Caesar, which would be considered a capital crime. To Pilate’s question, Jesus answered, “You have said so.” Jesus was saying that he is the King of the Jews, but not a worldly king that Pilate feared (cf. Jn 18:36-37).

Then, the accusations rained down hot and heavy from the high priests and religious leaders (12; MSG). Everybody knows what it feels like to be accused wrongly. When people blame us for what we haven’t done, we immediately enter a defensive mode and want to lash out on the false accuser. But Jesus said nothing. In Pilate’s job career, all accused people did their best to defend themselves. But Jesus was silent. By Roman law, a defendant who didn’t defend himself was regarded guilty. Still, Pilate was convinced that the charges against Jesus were not objective.

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Yet, Pilate didn't release Jesus because he feared people. Instead, he resorted to the governor's custom. He chose compromise over justice. It was a blatant act of injustice that condemned Jesus. Sitting on the judge's seat, Pilate left the decision up to the crowd. It was like playing a hot potato game. He asked, **"Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"** (17) (The choice was simple. He was basically asking, would you like your neighbor to be a mass terrorist or a respected celebrity?) Pilate expected them to choose the popular Jesus. But to his surprise, Barabbas was their choice. How can you expect people to choose justice while you betray it? The crowd was not concerned about justice or truth. Rather, they were swayed by others' opinions. In our culture, it is easy to make choices based on popular opinion to gain the approval of others. As we want to do so, we are actually no different from the crowd that condemned Jesus. When Pilate asked about Jesus, they all shouted, **"Crucify him!"** (23) When Pilate saw that a riot was about to start, he gave in to the crowd. A riot would have cost Pilate his career. So, he washed his hands and said, **"I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility!"** (24) Then, all the people shouted, **"His blood is on us and on our children!"** (25) They were asserting that they were innocent. They were so blind and bloodthirsty. So, Jesus was condemned to be crucified. Jesus took the place of Barabbas.

Now, who is responsible for condemning Jesus to death? In the trial of Jesus, Jewish and Roman leaders alike said, "It is your responsibility, not mine." All of them wanted to throw off the responsibility against their own conscience. So, should we blame them? In fact, they reveal our fallen mentality, to pass the buck to others. How often do we say, *"It's your responsibility!"* when things go wrong in the family or in the church? How often do we blame others saying, *"It's their problem!"* when things go badly around us? This is commonplace in our lives. We may call it a defense mechanism, but it is our sin that condemned Jesus. Everybody wants to say, "I'm innocent!" but our conscience shouts, "Guilty!" In one way or another, we all share in this guilt. (Because of this sin of mine, I blamed and hurt others many times. God have mercy on me, a selfish, cowardly sinner!)

During the trial, Jesus was silent. Why? It's because Jesus was determined to bear opposition from sinners. When "he was led like a lamb to the slaughter ... he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7). In part, Jesus was condemned because he didn't defend himself. Whereas he was in control, Jesus chose to submit himself to

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the unjust conviction of sinners. Jesus took responsibility upon himself for our sake. In this way, Jesus perfectly fulfilled prophecy to the end (Mt 12:17-21).

II. The King Was Crucified in Our Place (27-44)

After the sentence, Jesus was flogged (26). Roman flogging was horribly cruel and serious. It employed a metal-tipped whip. It tore through the skin and tissues of Jesus. Since flogging often exposed bones and intestines, many prisoners died from such flogging.

Matthew describes what Jesus went through after flogging (Mt 27:27-31). The governor's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's palace and got the entire company of soldiers (about 150 men) together. Then they started playing cruel games, ridiculing Jesus' kingship. They put a scarlet robe on Jesus. They twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head, as a mock crown. They put a stick in his right hand to look like a king's scepter. Then, kneeling before him, the soldiers mockingly shouted, "**Hail, king of the Jews!**" Then they directly insulted him: They spit in his face and beat him on the head with the stick again and again. What a cruel and merciless game! They were indulging in sadistic pleasure. What they admired was a powerful conqueror, not a defeated king. They were blind to see what kind of king Jesus was.

Do we have eyes to see this humble King Jesus? Jesus "**had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him**" (Isa 53:2). Our pride and self-centered view despises and rejects him when we aspire for power and worldly success. Why did Jesus endure all of this? Jesus was willing to endure this mockery because of his love for us. Isaiah says, "**Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering**" (Isa 53:4).

After mocking Jesus, the soldiers led him away to crucify him. Along the way, they met a man from Cyrene named Simon and forced him carry Jesus' cross (32). Jesus was too injured and weak from his flogging to bear the cross all the way.

The execution place was beside a well-traveled road by Golgotha, where people going in and out of Jerusalem could see the execution of criminals. Matthew briefly writes, "**they crucified him.**" Crucifixion was certainly one of the most horrifying forms of torture and execution that people have ever invented. It

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stood for torture, shame, death, and defeat. Jesus' hands were nailed at the wrists to either end of the crossbeam; his feet were nailed together at his ankles to the vertical beam. Jesus had to lift his head far enough off his chest to gasp for air. Every breath he took caused excruciating pain.

Verse 37 says, **“Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”** From a Roman perspective, Jesus was a political rebel, worthy of a capital crime. Matthew both in his opening (Mt 1-4) and closing (Mt 26-28) chapters emphasized that Jesus is the King of the Jews, which is the Messianic title. It is the greatest irony that the King of kings was crucified. Jesus deserved the worship of all creation, but he hung on the shameful cross, naked and beaten. What an injustice in the cruelest form! This was happening publicly in daylight. Jesus was crucified between two criminals (38); one on his right and one on his left, looking like a king with his advisors on both sides. As Prophet Isaiah prophesied, **“his [Jesus'] appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness”** (Isa 52:14).

People who passed by hurled insults at him, **“Save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”** (39) The religious leaders also mocked Jesus, **“He saved others, but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”** (42). Even the two criminals next to Jesus joined in the mocking (44). The insults came from every side. The whole world was shouting the same message to Jesus: **“Save yourself if you are the Son of God.”**

This was Satan's greatest temptation for Jesus to save himself and come down from the cross (cf. Mt 4:3). It is the way of our fallen world. The world only wants a king for self-serving purposes — a worldly king who builds a kingdom by destroying all his enemies. As people try to save their own lives, they desire to build their own glorious kingdom. Fundamentally, the whole world rejected and crucified Jesus, their king. This was done not by barbarians, but by pinnacles of human civilization. The scandal is that the Son of God was executed in shame and powerlessness. After all, who would choose to stay on the cross despite excruciating suffering and shame? But Jesus chose to do so. Jesus, the Son of God, didn't exercise his power to save himself. Why? He did this for the sake of our

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eternal salvation. Jesus is a king who died for his rebellious enemies like me. As a commentator says, “It was the power of love, not nails, that kept him there” (Mounce). How can it be that the King of creation died for me? How great is God’s amazing love!

The crucified Christ challenges every human being to tear down our wrong ideas about God and ourselves. Jesus challenges us to turn away from the idols of this world and to radically turn to the living God.

III. The King Was Forsaken in Our Place (45-56)

Look at verse 45. **“From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land.”** Unusual darkness appeared. In the Bible, “darkness” symbolizes mainly the time of God’s judgment. Here, darkness indicates God’s wrath and judgment on the sins of the world. Look at verse 46: **“About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’).”** This cry shows the extent of Jesus’ suffering that he endured in our place. We would never fully grasp it. This cry is the quote of Psalm 22:1 that foreshadowed the suffering of the Messiah. Jesus lived a perfect life and never sinned. When he cried, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** Jesus was experiencing the darkness of being forsaken on the cross. It was much more than physical suffering. It was more than emotional suffering. He had to be separated from the Father. Why? It was for you and me. It’s about God’s holy love for you and me.

Jesus’ cross reveals that God is infinitely holy. Scripture teaches that God takes our sins seriously. God is provoked to holy anger over his people by their sin. Though God loves all sinners, he is a burning and consuming fire against our sins. Think about people’s heinous sins involved in Jesus’ cross. Sinners deserve condemnation and death. At the same time, Jesus’ cross reveals that God is infinitely compassionate and loving. How then did God express his holiness without consuming us and express his love without condoning our sins? In his infinite mercy and justice, God in Christ took our place. At the cross, Jesus bore our sins (Mt 1:21; 20:28; 26:28). He drank the cup of God’s wrath on our sins. Jesus took our deserved separation from God upon himself.

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2 Corinthians 5:21 says, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** Jesus became sin for us. In the cross, God’s holy love came down into the world of our sin and suffering. What kind of sinner are you? Are you proud, rebellious, cowardly, selfish, or adulterous? In fact, we are all of the above. Jesus became sin for you to make you the righteousness of God. The Reformers called this a “marvelous exchange,” in which Christ assumes our debts as we inherit his riches. In this way, Christ became our righteousness by becoming our sin.

Who is God to you? Before I met Jesus personally, God appeared to be demanding and controlling. I was rebellious in my sin. Deep in darkness, I suffered to prove my worth. But looking at Jesus’s cross, I could see that the Son of God didn’t save himself but gave his life for sinners like me. Heaven came down to me as I experienced the forgiveness of all my sins. And my view of God has been radically transformed. **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins”** (1Jn 4:10). From the cross, God says yes to us before we say yes to him! Praise Jesus! Will your good performance make you more acceptable to God? No. Are you struggling to prove your worth? Look at the cross. In Jesus, you are accepted because he was forsaken! In Jesus, you are forgiven because he was condemned!

The death of Jesus is not the end of the story. Several events testify about the impact of Jesus’ death. Above all, the separation from God is removed forever. Look at verse 51. **“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”** The temple curtain split “from top to bottom.” The curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was 60 feet high and 30 feet wide. By the tearing of this curtain, God himself abolished the separation. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, the new and living way is open for all people to enter into God’s presence (Heb 10:20). Jesus who sacrificed his life is now the new temple. In Jesus, we can come into God’s holy and gracious presence (Heb 4:16). Are you struggling with your sins and weaknesses? Come to Jesus, our merciful high priest. He accepts you as you are, so you can surrender to him as you are.

Furthermore, Matthew records the raising of bodies after the earthquake (51b-53). This emphasizes the victory over death that Jesus completed by his sacrifice on the cross. This is the preview of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection

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clearly confirms that he is truly the Son of God who died for us. The crucified and risen Jesus is Lord of all. Also, the Roman centurion and the death squad testified about Jesus. They were accustomed to crucifixions. But as they watched the events unfold, they confessed that Jesus was the Son of God (54). Finally, the women who faithfully followed Jesus became witnesses about Jesus' death on the cross as well as his resurrection later (55-56).

The cross is the cross of the Risen Lord! In him, we are forgiven and accepted. This is the beauty of the Kingdom of God. This is God's infinite and unconditional love for you. So, what kind of life do you want to live? Is your Christian life dull and complacent, or is your heart on fire? Do you need a spiritual revival? Are you doubting the love of God because of your sins? Look at the cross where your King died for you. Jesus gave it all for you! What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? Nothing. Nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). May we never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ! May we ever praise our Savior and go deeper in our love relationship with him day by day! Amen.