

The Wickedness of the Crucifixion, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 27:27-37

Code: 2395

We turn in our Bibles this morning to the twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew. We come to a section from verse 27 through 44, a section we'll deal with this week and next as we examine the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many years ago, Fredrick Ferrare (?) wrote *The Life of Christ*. And in his writing of *The Life of Christ*, he has a section that I would like to read to you as a setting for our understanding of the passage before us.

A death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of the horrible and ghastly. Dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, tetanus, shame, publicity of shame, long continuous of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of untended wounds, all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness. The unnatural position made every movement painful. The lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish. The wounds inflamed by exposure gradually gangrened. The arteries, especially at the head and stomach, became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of a burning and raging thirst. And all these physical complications caused and internal excitement and anxiety which made the prospect of death itself, of death, the unknown enemy at whose approach man usually shudders most, bear the aspect of a delicious and exquisite release.

One thing is clear from what Ferrare said and what we know about crucifixion and it is this: that in crucifying someone, no one was concerned with a quick and painless death. No one was concerned with the preservation of any measure of human dignity. Quite the opposite. Crucifiers sought an agonizing torture of complete humiliation that exceeds any other design for death that man has ever invented. And such was the torture that our Lord Jesus Christ endured for us...for us.

The crucifixion of Christ, we know, is the climax of redemptive history. We know that. It is the focal point of God's purpose for salvation. Everything culminates in the cross where the Lord bears the sins of the world and therefore provides salvation to all who believe.

And in a sense, the cross then is the climax of the plan of God and it demonstrates the grace and the mercy and the goodness and the kindness and the love of God like no other event in history ever can.

The single greatest manifestation of God's love and grace is seen on the cross. And so we could go to a text about the cross and spend an entire focus on God's self-revelation of love and grace in the cross. It seems to me that that is, for the most part, the intention of the gospel of John. As John writes about the cross, it is always from the viewpoint of God. He shows that it is a fulfillment of prophecy, that it is God's plan on track, and God's plan on schedule. And we look at the gospel of John and we read the record of the crucifixion and we are in awe of the wonder of God's glory and grace and love in the death of Jesus Christ.

But that is not Matthew's purpose. Matthew approaches the cross from the very opposite viewpoint. Matthew describes the crucifixion not from the standpoint of the goodness of God but from the standpoint of the wickedness of men. And the focus of Matthew is on how evil men are and how much the death of Jesus Christ demonstrates the wickedness of the human heart. And I would say that as the death of Jesus Christ on the one hand is the single greatest revelation of the love and grace of God, on the other hand it is the single greatest and supreme revelation of the defilement and wickedness of the human heart. So you have two actually opposite truths monumentally revealed in this one event. And so it is that in Acts chapter 2 when Peter preaches at Pentecost, he says God has ordained this but you by wicked hands have brought it to pass.

And as we look then at Matthew's gospel we will see not so much the crucifixion from the side of God's grace and love as we see it from the side of man's defilement and wickedness. It is wickedness unmatched. And if ever there is a place where the prophecy and the statement of Jeremiah 17:9 is seen where he said, "The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked," it is here at this place, that is the single greatest proof of the truth of that statement.

Now, it is not as if wickedness has not appeared in the life of Christ before this, for it has. Wickedness tried to kill Him at birth. It tried to discredit His teaching. It tried to stop His miracles. Finally, wickedness secured His condemnation to death by violating every standard of justice in the Jewish and Gentile world. Wickedness has already betrayed Him. Wickedness has already put the hypocrites kiss on His cheek. Wickedness has arrested Him, it has framed Him, it has slapped Him and punched Him and spit on Him and mocked Him and beaten Him. Wickedness has done all of that and it is not yet done with what it is intent to do to Christ. Before it is over, wickedness will kill Him. And that is the master work of wickedness. At one and the same time, the fulfillment of the plan of a gracious God. On the other hand, the supreme effort of wickedness.

Now as we shall see in the text before us, wickedness did not just kill Jesus Christ. That was not enough to satiate its evil desire. All the while that He was dying it had to torment Him as well. It wasn't enough to just let Jesus die the un noble and unbelievably painful death of the cross, that in itself would have been enough. But wickedness wouldn't settle for that and so all the while until Jesus breathed His last breath, it mocked and scorned and reproached Him. His enemies were so filled with wickedness that even His death seemed to be a disappointment to them for they would have wished

to prolong it longer so that they could spew their venom upon Him. The heartless intensity of the words and deeds of all who surrounded the cross absolutely beg language to describe. And you ought to go away from the service this morning if you've listened with a hearing heart as if you've seen the worse accident in your whole life, left with such impressions of horror.

Now Matthew's intent, then, is to present to us the wickedness of man in the scene of the cross. And to do that, from verses 27 through 44, we see four groups of the wicked around the cross. The ignorant wicked, the knowing wicked, the fickle wicked and the religious wicked. This morning, we want to look at group one because it occupies the longer part of the text and next Lord's Day, the final three.

The ignorant wicked are illustrated to us by the callous soldiers in verses 27 through 37. Notice verse 27. "Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the praetorium and gathered unto Him the whole band." We'll stop at that point.

Pilate is the governor. Pilate has already sinned against justice. He has sinned against conscience. He has sinned against conviction. He has sinned against truth. He has sinned against integrity. He has sinned against character. He has sold his soul for popularity and security. He is a miserable man. He is cornered by the Jewish population. He is threatened as to the security of his position, fearful that another insurrection, uprising, another troublesome time with the Jews there will result in the loss of his job and reputation. He is forced to do things to Jesus he knows justice do not require.

Rather than releasing Jesus whom he has pronounced repeatedly as innocent, he desires to try to satisfy the Jews, or satiate their thirst for blood by scourging Jesus, mocking Jesus, bringing Him back out, showing Him to the Jews as a helpless man, a pathetic individual who is no threat to Rome or Israel, for that matter, and hopefully that will satisfy their thirst for blood and they will stop short of forcing him to execute an innocent man.

So, as our passage opens, Jesus has already endured the scourging mentioned in verse 26. He has been tied to a post by His hands, His feet suspended off the ground so that His body, is taut. Two men, one on each side, Romans soldiers, have wooden handles in their hand to which are attached leather thongs, the end of which are filled with bits of rock and bone and metal filed down to a knife edge. And they proceed to lacerate the body of Jesus Christ extensively until blood is oozing out all over His body and His inner parts are made visible. This is the first effort to satisfy the blood-thirsty mob. This is carried on by the soldiers.

Following the scourging and before the crucifixion, which is mentioned just in a summary form in verse 26, but following the scourging, the scene then takes place in verse 27. "And the soldiers take Jesus to the common hall and gather around the, whole band," *speira* in the Greek, cohort--which is to say a group of 600 soldiers. Now we don't know that all 600 were there, but all that were there of

the band in that place came to attend this particular gathering. The soldiers are Roman legionnaires. They belong to the legions of Caesar.

They are not, for the most part, Italian, although it is mentioned in Acts chapter 10 that Cornelius was of the Italian band, that would be the abnormal. For the most part, Rome conscripted soldiers out of the countries it occupied and frequently in the land of Israel they had brought in soldiers that they had taken from Syria. They used Syrian soldiers who were working for the Roman military power there because the Syrians could speak Aramaic which was the common conversational language of Israel. And so you have soldiers that aren't necessarily Roman in the sense of coming from Rome or Italy, but they are Roman in the sense of reflecting the Roman military power and presence and they have made their allegiance to Rome. They were not Jews because Jews were exempted from any service in the Roman military and would not at all desire to do that.

Furthermore, this particular band, or speira or cohort probably was associated with Pilate whose headquarters was at Caesarea on the seacoast, about 60 miles to the west from Jerusalem. Because of that they were not really familiar with Jerusalem and all of its theology and all of its issues and didn't understand much about Jesus at all. In fact, we have no reason to believe they understood anything about Jesus. He was just a prisoner to them and a very curious one at that because they didn't often meet prisoners who claimed to be king, not so pathetic as this particular man anyway. And since they had been brought, no doubt, with Pilate from Caesarea, they were not really in the know as to all of the things that were true about Jesus and that He claimed. So what they did they did in ignorance. They then represent the ignorant wicked who are seen around the cross.

They see Jesus, no doubt, as a strange and pathetic figure. By the time He gets to this moment, He is a tragedy to look at. His face has been slapped repeatedly. It has been punched until it is swollen and bruised. It has been spit on till His face is covered with spit. His body now is lacerated and He bleeds profusely from the shoulders down. They know that He is supposedly a king because the people are screaming about His claim to be that. They know the people want Him dead. They see Him as a rather pathetic fake and fraud, perhaps mentally deranged and worthy only of their mockery. And when all through this entire encounter with them, He never says a single thing; they no doubt questioned His intelligence and perhaps even His sanity. They play Him like a clown as they would with an idiot boy in the street. They are cold. They are they indifferent. And they are ignorant. And this mentally deficient faker is nothing more than the butt of their jokes.

And so, under the tutelage of Pilate, they mock Jesus' claim to be a king because that is part of Pilate's plan. Now the soldiers, I do not believe, did this independent of Pilate. I think they did it under his watchful eye. For when John's gospel tells us that Jesus later was brought out to the crowd after scouring and in this garb of the king with which they dress Him, it says that when they brought Jesus out, Pilate came out also. So Pilate must have been back in the praetorium aware at least of what was going on and looking on it with some favor and wanting Jesus under the conditions of appearing

as mock king to be brought before the Jews so that they would see how foolish, how stupid, how silly their claim was that this man was a threat either to Rome or Israel.

Already bleeding from the scouring which opened up His flesh, blood flowing out all over His body, agony in every nerve, His whole body quivering in tortuous pain, He becomes the object of the soldiers' ridicule as they all gather around Him and begin their little game. The first thing they did was strip Him, they stripped Him. They love to do this. They don't do this reluctantly. They don't like the Jews. In fact they hate the Jews. They've had a lot of problems with them. And anyway they can mock them, they can enjoy thoroughly. And so there's a certain kind of glee in what they do. And there are, by the way, no Jews in the praetorium. The Bible tells us they wouldn't come in there lest they would be defiled and thus be unable to celebrate the Passover by entering into a defiling Gentile place.

So, here all these soldiers are. They don't have anybody around to whom they're accountable of a Jewish nature. They do just exactly what they want to this individual. They don't really know Him; they don't know who He is. He has never been cross purposes with theirs. He has never violated their goals or objectives or motives. He has never demonstrated prejudice against them. They have no idea who He is. And yet there is no interest in alleviating His agony. There is none of the quote/unquote "milk of human kindness." There is no concern for His suffering. There is no interest in healing His wounds. There is no sense of justice. They are bent only on the fun of aggravating His agony. They have been trained to torture. They have been trained to kill. They are thirsty for blood, for evil. And they express the wickedness of the human heart in a definitive portrait of wickedness that is ignorant. They really reflect their father--the devil--who is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. They find their great joy in increasing the pain that Jesus Christ endures. They are without kindness and without sympathy.

Now when Jesus was scourged, obviously He was naked. And after the scourging was over, they put back on His inner-seamless garment, His inner robe. And only can be imagined the pain that that would cause Him, a rough cloth put over open wounds. And that has remained on Him for a time as He is brought back into the praetorium. And now it's time for their little game, so no doubt heartlessly they rip that robe off over His head, exposing again His wounds. They make Him naked. Ekduo means to undress.

And then it says in verse 27, "They put on Him a scarlet robe." Somewhere lying around on the pavement, the gabitha (?) in Pilate's praetorium is a discarded scarlet robe, a robe that one of the soldier's would wear as an outer garment, a rough cloth, a heavy cloth that would be used to keep him warm. Matthew says it was a scarlet color. John tells us it was purple. The difference between scarlet and purple isn't great and a robe like that in the sun and very old would maybe fade in certain places, maybe overall so that it sort of lost its ... its true color. But on the other hand, it was scarlet at least to Matthew, but it was purple to John. There must be a reason for that. It may have been just in

the perception of the color. It may further have been that in the mind of John he knew it was intended to represent a purple robe because purple was the color of majesty and they were mocking Him as a king. Matthew, to him it's just a scarlet robe. But to John it becomes a purple robe for that is its intent to be used as that, to represent Him as some kind of king. And so they place upon Him the scarlet robe that is intended to represent the purple robe, to mock Him as if He were some king.

I don't know if you've ever thought about it but it tells us in Isaiah 1:18 that "Though your sins be as scarlet..." and it seems to me that I can see in the scarlet robe draped over the flesh of Jesus, the symbol of the bearing of our scarlet sins. Can you see that? He bore our sins. He became sin for us who knew no sin. A mock imitation of His royalty.

Then in verse 29 it says, "When they had braided a crown, a stephanos, of thorns, akantha, " we don't know what plant that is, we just know they were thorns and there are many, many possible plants in Palestine at that time, and even today, that would have great thorns on them. This was intended to be a cheap and painful imitation of the royal wreath that was on every coin with the image of Tiberius Caesar...on every one of his coins where his face was, he had that wreath on. And here was their way to mock Jesus, to put on Him a royal wreath. But it was not a wreath like the one Caesar wore, it was a wreath of thorns. We have really no idea what kind of bush they used but we do know it had those thorns. And it says they put it, epithithemi, around His head and crushed it down, no doubt, wrapping it around His head. The thorns piercing His brow and little streams of blood running down to mingle with the rest of the blood on His body.

And, of course, I am reminded of Genesis 3:18 where after the sin of Adam and Eve, God curses the earth and says thorns and thistles shall you bring forth. And as much as I see the purple robe symbolic of His bearing sin, I see the crown symbolic of His bearing the curse of the world. For on the cross, Jesus not only took away sin but He removed the curse of the whole earth, did He not? And is it not true that Romans 8 says the whole creation waits for the glorious manifestation of the sons of God when it too shall be liberated from the curse? And here is Jesus in symbol bearing the sins of the world as scarlet, and the curse of the earth as thorns which He Himself in His glorious death and resurrection will reverse.

But all of this makes Jesus look ridiculous. He is a joke. He is bloody from head to foot. His face is now unrecognizable. He is hardly human. His face is distorted by the pain of emotion. It is distorted by spiritual anguish. It is distorted by the feeling of sin bearing and the very bearing of sin. It is distorted by bruises and swollenness and spittle mixed with blood and the dust and dirt of the day. And He is a scene of ugliness of which the prophet Isaiah says there is no beauty that we should desire Him.

And they're not through. Verse 29 says they put a reed in His right hand. The right hand was the hand of authority. And the reed was the symbol of a scepter and in those days the kings would hold a

scepter of ten of ivory and gold. And this was to be His scepter. It was made out of a reed, just a common stalk. They put it in His hand to depict His authority, His sovereignty for Tiberius on his coins also was shown with the ... with a scepter in his hand. And if this was going to be a king, He had to have a scepter.

And there He is with a crown of thorns and a robe of scarlet and a scepter of a reed. And they carry on their little mockery. They bowed the knee before Him as if He were king, they gave Him homage. And they mocked Him saying, "Hail, king of the Jews." There was no sincerity in that; it was just mockery, sarcasm, cynicism, ridicule, scorn.

You remember in chapter 26, verse 68; the Jews mocked Him for being a prophet. And here they mock Him for claiming to be a king. And so, they bow the knee, all this great band of ignorant wicked Roman soldiers, they bow the knee. And as they rise from their knees, verse 30, they spit on Him. Down on the knees, "Hail, king of the Jews," and on the way up they spit in His face. The ultimate human indignity, to spit on someone. The Jews had done it in chapter 26 verse 67, and now the Romans are doing it as well. The whole world, it seems, is gathered to spit on the Son of God. If they only knew who they were spitting on. If they only knew who they were mocking. If they only had known who it was upon whom they placed a crown of thorns and a scarlet robe. If they had any idea, oh, can you imagine what hell is like today for those people who that day spit on Jesus? Can you imagine what must be their thoughts as they remember that one day when it all seemed like so much fun in the judgment hall of Pilate?

And so, they carried on their little game further in Verse 30 by taking the reed out of His right hand and ... the Greek text says... repeatedly struck Him on the head. More blows, slaps already, punches with the fist already, spit and now hitting Him repeatedly in the head with this reed.

Why were they doing that? Not particularly to crush the thorns deeper into His brow, although it certainly had that effect. They did this primarily to show what a joke His authority was. What kind of a king are you, we can rip the very scepter out of your hand and beat on your head with it? Your sovereignty is a laugh. Your kingliness is a joke. Anybody who can spit on a king and hit him in the head with his own scepter and have nothing happen in retaliation is some kind of king. You're a farce.

In John chapter 19 verse 3, John adds in the same scene, "They kept punching Him." It's an unbelievable scene of human evil. And it isn't that they have anything against Him. They don't even know Him. It is the depravity of the human heart, given the opportunity to do whatever it wants it does this. Inconceivable. It is a brutal amusement.

And though He endures it all, He says nothing. He offers no resistance. He says nothing. He is willing to suffer for sinners, TO suffer not only the death on the cross but everything that came along with it. He will fulfill His calling. He endured such contradiction of sinners, it says in Hebrews 12:3. He

endured it all and He knew it was going to come. In chapter 20, do you remember what He said? In chapter 20 He told His disciples in verse 18, we go to Jerusalem, the Son of Man will be betrayed. The chief priests and the scribes, and they'll condemn Him to death. And in verse 19, "And they'll deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify, and the third day He'll rise again." He was right on schedule. He had been to the Jews, now He was with the Gentiles and they would mock Him and then they would crucify Him. He was right on schedule. Silently He endured it all ... humiliation, agony, pain beyond belief.

And you know what happened, don't you, after the scourging and after this mockery? Matthew doesn't tell us. Matthew breaks off the scene at verse 30 and doesn't say anymore. We need to go to John chapter 19; I'll just do it by way of memory. You remember it from last time we talked about this. After Jesus is decked out like this king, Pilate then comes out with Him before the Jewish crowd. John 19:5 through 16 describes the whole scene. And he says, "Behold the man." As if to say, "Isn't that enough?" "And they all began to scream, Crucify Him, Crucify Him, Crucify Him."

And Pilate doesn't want to do this so he says you take Him and crucify Him. And they won't do it. They want this thing done legally. And they force Pilate. And they say to him if you don't do it you're no friend of Caesar. As if to say we'll report you to Caesar again if you do this and you're going to be in trouble with him for not being able to control the people you're put in power over.

And then Pilate says, "Shall I crucify your king?" And they say, "We have no king but Caesar." And in that one statement we find the culmination of the apostasy of the nation Israel. They had no God. Their king was Caesar. They said it; it's in their own mouth ... the apostasy of the nation Israel.

So, Pilate was stuck with Jesus and he determined then that he had no choice but to crucify Him. So, verse 31 says, "After they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him," and remember now, Matthew skips over the portion that John covers. Matthew's just summarizing. They took the robe off, took all that off, that robe, that scarlet heavy robe, took the reed out of His hands. We don't know whether they left the crown on or not. The Scripture doesn't say. And they put His own raiment back on Him again. And now they led Him out of the praetorium to be crucified--the most terrible way to die.

Crucifixion originated in Persia and it originated from the strangest circumstance. The Persians had a deity by the name of Ormuzd, O-r-m-u-z-d. And Ormuzd was the god who considered the earth to be sacred. And so anyone who was executed had to be lifted up above the earth lest that person being executed by virtue of his evil would defile the sacredness of the earth. And so the Persians devised a crucifixion as a way to suspend a person above the earth in execution.

It passed from the Persians to the Carthaginians and somehow the Romans took it from those in Carthage and used it ... and I mean the Romans used it extensively. From the best we could

ascertain at the time of Christ and around the era of Roman occupation of Israel, the Romans crucified at least 30,000 Jews. And they did it all over the highways in order to warn people what happens to someone who violates Roman law. Vivid illustrations of the foolishness of going against Rome.

And so, they were going to lead another victim to crucifixion. They followed the normal procedure. Verse 32 just says, "And as they came out ..." And again, Matthew sort of skips over some things. When Matthew says, "As they came out..." he's referring to out of the city because execution always had to be out of the city. The Jews would never tolerate it in their city. That was a part of Levitical Law. Execution always had to be outside the city. And that's, of course, why it says in Hebrews 13:12 and 13 that Jesus suffered the reproach and died outside the gate. Because execution took place outside the city.

And so, He went forth out of the city. And they found a man...and we stop there a minute. That man, Simon of Cyrene then took His cross. Matthew doesn't tell us what went on before they went out of the city. He just skips the part from leaving the praetorium to leaving the city. We want to understand that. And to understand that, we compare some of the other texts of the gospel writers. John 19:16, "Then delivered he Him therefore unto them to be crucified." And they took Jesus and led Him away. 'And He bearing His cross went forth."

So, we know from John 19:17 that to begin with Jesus carried His cross. And we know from how the Romans crucified people that Jesus would leave the praetorium and bearing His own cross--and by the way, there's nothing in the Scripture to suggest that He carried a part of His cross. Some have suggested He carried only the crosspiece. Some, the long center piece. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that He carried anything less than the whole thing. And I have no reason to believe other than that. And so, Jesus would be carrying wood that would weigh in excess of 200 pounds on His back in the condition that He was in ... absolutely inconceivable weight on someone in His circumstance. He went forth carrying His cross.

And He would go in this fashion. The prisoner would be surrounded by a quaternion, four Roman soldiers, one at each corner, moving Him through with other soldiers before and behind. And with the city of Jerusalem swollen with the populace of immigrants who had come in for the time of the Passover, pilgrims who had come to worship at this special time. And now this being the very Passover day, and everything in motion, the place would be crawling with people. And they would parade the prisoner down the main streets. And hanging around the prisoner's neck was a placard, or being held by someone walking in front of him, on which was the indictment for which the prisoner was to be executed so that everybody would know the price of the crime.

And so, Jesus carrying His own cross is paraded before the populace before He ever is able to leave the city so that everyone is warned about how it is to violate Roman law, to be brought to execution

by the Romans. So, the procession moves through the streets.

And by the way, it was during that procession that Jesus gave His last public message. The last public sermon He ever gave was a very brief one. It's recorded in Luke 23 as He was walking in that procession. It says in Luke 23 verse 27, "There followed Him a great company of people and of women who also bewailed and lamented," they wept and cried at what was happening. "But Jesus turning unto them said," and here came His last message, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children for behold, the days are coming in which they shall say, Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts which never nursed."

Now that is something that no Jewish mother could ever imagine being said. Jesus says you better weep for yourselves and your children because the day is coming when you will wish you had no children. In fact, verse 30, 'You'll begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us. And unto the hills, Cover us.' You're going to have such terrifying judgment; you'll wish you had no children to be slaughtered before your very eyes.

And then He gives a little proverb in verse 31, "For if they do these things in a green tree, what will be done in the dry?" What does He mean by that? He is the green tree and the populace of Jerusalem is the dry tree. If the Romans will do this to Him who is innocent, what will they do to the Jews who are guilty? He is a green tree. He doesn't even fit the burning process. You don't even use Him to burn. The Jews are a dry tree, they should be burned. That's His implication. You burn dry wood, not green wood.

What He is saying is if the Romans will burn a green tree, that is an innocent one, one not fit to be burned, what will do to you who are guilty, who have been having insurrections after insurrections against them? When the time for your judgment comes, you watch and see what they'll do to you. If they would do this to Me as an innocent man, what are they going to do to you as guilty ones? And we all know He's referring to the destruction of 70 A.D. which was precipitated by their hostilities against Rome. Jesus' last message to them on the way to His cross was a message of coming judgment and it was coming very fast, within the lifetime of many of those people there ... the holocaust of 70 A.D. from which the land of Israel has yet to recover.

And so, verse 32 we find then they came out of the city. They came out the gate because there was always a crucifixion outside the city and always along a main highway. And no doubt they came out a northern gate in the city, may well have been the Damascus gate. The northern part of the city, they came out and there they found a main highway and that would be the place where the execution would occur so that everyone would see it, everyone would know, an agonizing testimony of the foolishness of crimes against Rome. The Jews didn't crucify people, they stoned people. The Romans did that.

But when they had just come out of the city it was apparent that Jesus, even though I believe He was the strongest man that ever lived because He was without sin and there was no decay or defilement in His body, His body would have been all that God ever intended a body undefiled by sin to be, He would have been all that Adam was and more before he fell. And so, even Jesus in all of the strength that human kind could ever have has run out. His blood has drained. The agony is beyond belief, a full week, a late Passover, no sleep, the betrayal of Judas, the defection of the disciples, the trials, the injustice, the beatings, the scourgings. Its dissipated all of His strength and there aren't any angels now to help Him. There are no angels to strengthen Him as after the days of forty...after the forty days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness. And so He comes out. And they find a man from Cyrene, Simon by name, and they compelled him to bear the cross.

Cyrene was a Greek settlement. It was located west of Alexandria and directly south of Greece on the north African coast, about ten miles inland. I suppose today it would be located in Libya. There were many Jews there because it was a trade center. Simon was a Jew from that Greek settlement on the north coast of Africa who, no doubt, was in Jerusalem because it was Passover. We do know from the book of Acts that there was in fact a Jewish synagogue for Cyrenians in Jerusalem. So he was there to worship at the season.

His name is interesting. It is a Jewish name ... Simon. So we believe him to be a Jewish man. Now we don't know a whole lot about him but there are some very interesting insights. Mark chapter 15 tells us in verse 21 that they compelled Simon of Cyrene who passed by coming out of the country. This is most interesting. He's just walking along. Jesus comes out of the city. Simon comes out of the country. Jesus is leaving Jerusalem. Simon's coming into Jerusalem. He's been out in the country perhaps seeing someone that he knew, perhaps just taking a walk, perhaps securing some things for the preparation of his own Passover that day. And some have suggested that he shouldn't have been doing that because it was a holy day, but you must remember the Sabbath law did not apply on the feastday, necessarily. It applied on the Sabbath day. This is Friday the feastday. And so it would not have been wrong for him to be walking.

So, here's a devout Jew come to the Passover. Simply passing along, runs into this procession coming out of the city. And for whatever reason, he is conscripted by the crowd ... by the crowd of Roman soldiers to carry the cross of Jesus. No Roman would carry a criminal's cross, certainly not a Jewish criminal, certainly not such a criminal as this strange and bizarre character. And so they get Simon.

And then it tells us most interestingly in Mark 15:21 that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Now at first we think that may not have importance. We know that ... that's an interesting designation ... Alexander and Rufus, Greek names. He gave his sons Greek names. That's not unusual, very common, especially if he lived in a region other than Israel, as he did on the north coast in a Greek

settlement.

But who are these two and why are they identified? Well, you have to remember this. Mark wrote his gospel most likely from Rome and the first readers may well have been Romans and here may well have been two that the Romans knew. And so, he simply identifies Simon further as the father of two that they know ... Alexander and Rufus.

This is further developed in Romans 16:13 where Paul writing to the Romans says, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord." Now here then you have Paul referring to someone named Rufus, and Paul is writing to the Romans. You have Mark referring to someone named Rufus who seems to be commonly known by the Christians. And Mark is also writing in Rome. So in Rome there was an Alexander and a Rufus. Here we find Rufus identified as one chosen in the Lord.

"And his mother and mine." Now who would the mother of Rufus be? The wife of Simon. It's not too difficult then to realize that it may well be that Simon, though inadvertently passing by and made to carry the cross of Jesus Christ, through that experience came to faith in Jesus Christ, raised two sons who became strong stalwarts in the church at Rome. His wife herself becoming like a mother to the Apostle Paul. So what started out as an enforced act became the means of his conversion. And I like to think that that is indeed the scenario and then when we get to heaven we're going to meet Simon of Cyrene along with his wife and his children. Wouldn't that be a fitting way for the Lord to reverse things?

Then verse 33, Simon now carrying the heavy cross, Jesus along side surrounded by the four soldiers and all the rest before and behind. And they come unto a place called Golgotha. That is an Aramaic term transliterated really into Greek and then into English. It means "skull place ... skull place," the place of a skull. In Luke 23:33, Luke calls it a skull and uses the word kranion from which we get cranium. And the ... and the Latin Vulgate translated that "Calvary" which was the Latin term for cranium. So we get Calvary out of it because of the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek word kranium, or kranion.

We conclude then that this is a place not as some have suggested where skulls are lying all over everywhere, or it would have been called the place of the skulls, plural. Furthermore, you know this for sure, the Jews weren't going to have anyplace where a whole lot of bones were lying around above the ground ... which was the antithesis of their toleration. So it was called the place of a skull, or skull place because it was shaped like that.

There is a place today, and I've been there on several occasions and some of you have been there as well, that is believed to be the place of a skull. It still looks like a skull, very much like a skull. It is right outside the north part of the city of Jerusalem. It is along a main highway. In fact, before it is an Arab bus station literally crammed with buses spewing out fumes that run and belch up against that

very bill of Calvary. You can stand in the garden where the garden tomb is and throw a rock to the top of the hill, it's not far at all. It looks like a skull and I believe it's an accurate indication of where Christ was crucified...not so much on top of it as in front of it, right along the road as everybody walking by would be able to see.

And so, when they came to Golgotha, the place of a skull, they began the procedure which started with giving Him vinegar to drink. Actually the text in the Greek says wine, oinos. They gave Him wine to drink. "Mingled with gall." Now gall, simply a general term referring to something that is bitter. And if you were to read Mark's gospel, Mark says the bitter that they gave Him was myrrh. And myrrh is a sort of a vegetable narcotic that was put into the wine as a way to calm the person down.

This is reminiscent of Psalm 69:21 in which the psalmist says they gave me also some gall. So here was a drugged wine. Mark tells us the drug they used was myrrh. It was suppose to stupefy the victim. And, from the vantage point of the soldiers, no doubt, that the stupefication wasn't on their part an act of mercy, they really didn't care whether the patient suffered...or the victim suffered or not. I mean, they weren't trying to treat this person with kindness, or they were in the wrong business to start with. It accommodated them because it might have been very difficult otherwise to hammer four nails through someone's limbs if they weren't stupefied to some degree. Consequently, at that very time, it would be propitious for them to have some way to stupefy the patient.

Now that's from their standpoint, but watch this, here's a most fascinating thing. While from the soldier's viewpoint it was simply an accommodation to the process of crucifixion, we know from history that it was done by an association of wealthy women in Jerusalem. They provided this from their viewpoint to ease the pain and they did it in a direct connection, according to what we know from ancient Jewish teaching, a direct reflection of Proverbs 31, wanting to fulfill what it says in Proverbs 31:6, "Give strong drink to him that is ready to perish and wine to those that are heavy hearts." They were wanting, I suppose, in a sense to be Proverbs 31 women. And out of the kindness of their heart to render that service required in Proverbs 31:6 to a victim who was in this direst of all situations. And so the wealthy women come out, the wealthy women try to give Jesus this in order that His pain might be alleviated. It says when He tasted it, "He would not drink."

He tasted it and He wouldn't drink it. They put it to His mouth, He wouldn't drink it. He spit it back. And the reason is He Himself had said in John 18:11, "Shall I not drink the cup My Father gives Me?" He was not going to drink this. He was not going to have any of His senses dulled. He was going to the cross to endure the full pain of everything. And then it happened.

Verse 35, "And they crucified Him and parted His garments casting lots." And I read that again this week and I said, "Boy, they went over that fast." I mean, there was no dramatics. There was no fanfare, no hammer this nail, and hammer the next nail. There's no adjectives here. No descriptives, no nothing, no cries of pain. It doesn't say a thing. They crucified Him.

And I thought, "Well, maybe the English has missed something that's in the Greek." So I went to the Greek text and you know what the Greek text says? It was actually even less significant. The Greek rendering literally is this: "The having crucified Him ones parted His garments." The having crucified Him ones parted His garments, which even makes the crucifixion more insignificant because it only refers to it offhandedly as a way to describe the ones who parted His garments. It's as if he just runs right by that. Why? Because the issue for Matthew is the wickedness of the men. And you could say it this way, "And the crucifiers parted His garments and casting lots," and there isn't even a reference to the actual crucifixion.

The Bible is not preoccupied with the physical events of the cross. It is preoccupied with the wickedness of men. It never describes the agony of Jesus. Do you know that? It never does. It only describes what men did to Him. It doesn't describe His own feeling. Outside the garden, we know nothing of the agony. And outside the sayings on the cross, which themselves do not express His agony, except in separation from God. The physical agony of Jesus is not the issue. They crucified Him and parted His garments, casting lots.

Now in the Authorized Version, in verse 35, there's a prophecy given after that. "That it might be fulfilled which spoken by the prophet," and it quotes out of Psalm 22:18. I must tell you that that doesn't belong in Matthew chapter 27, that was borrowed from John 19.

You say, "How do you know that?" Because we find it in some manuscripts of Matthew. Then we find older manuscripts and it isn't there. It is in John 19, but it isn't here in the older manuscripts. You say, "Well, how did it get in?" I'll tell you how. The scribe is copying Matthew, he's copying Matthew, and he remembers John 19:23 and 24 and he remembers how that fit so beautifully right here. And so he adds it in the margin, just like you have in a marginal Bible or an annotated Bible, you have verses in the margin, verses in the middle, verses down below, explanation thoughts, so forth. So a scribe adds that verse over here.

Later on a scribe recopying thinks that's good enough over there, it ought to be right in here and he brings it right in. And that's how in the gospel records sometimes things which started out as a marginal or comparative reading wind up in the actual text. Now when we find the oldest manuscripts and get behind the guy who put it in the text, and behind the writing who put it in the margin, we find the pure text, we know it wasn't there. So it was added later on. It's true. It is a fulfillment. But listen to this. John is always putting in the fulfillments because John is looking at the cross from whose viewpoint? From God's. Matthew leaves them out because all he's concerned about is the wickedness of men. And so, all Matthew says is that the having crucified Him ones parted His garments, that is they divided them up and every Jew had five pieces of clothing. He had his shoes, obviously. He had his inner cloak. He had his head piece. He had his belt. And he had his outer cloak. And they split up the first four and what was remaining, according to John's gospel, was that

inner garment, that inner cloak. John 19:23, that inner garment is called a seamless garment. It went with holes for the arms and the head, just over the body.

Well, they've each gotten one piece, but you remember, you've got four soldiers. They each take one of the first four and it remains that they should decide who gets the inner garment and they gamble for it. They cast lots, they draw straws. This indeed is a fulfillment exactly of what I read earlier, Psalm 22:18, but Matthew doesn't comment on that. All he wants us to see is they're so indifferent. Here they are just gambling to get everything they can get from Jesus#, even His last garment.

And then verse 36, "Sitting down they watched Him there." Sitting down they watched Him there. Why? It was their job. They were on guard...lest somebody be unduly savage to Christ or lest somebody tried to rescue Him. They had to stay on guard. With cruel mockery and morbid sensation, they stayed on their guard to make sure nothing happened beyond what had already happened.

And then a final note in verse 37, "And they set over His head His accusation, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." Matthew doesn't give us the whole thing. Compare Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, pull it all together, you'll get the whole statement. "THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS." That was the whole sign. Matthew just emphasizes again, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

The Jews didn't like that. Remember that in John 19? They said, "Get that down, get that down." And Pilate said, "Not that's going to stay where ... the way it is. What I have written, I've written." It was mockery. He wanted everybody going by to look and say, "This is the king of the Jews. This is Jesus of Nazareth the king of the Jew, what a laugh." It was mockery. And he put it ... he put it in Aramaic, in Greek, in Latin. Greek, the universal language; Aramaic, the language of the area; Latin, spoken by the Romans. It was there for everybody to read, this is the king of the Jews, what a joke. And the Jews hated that but Pilate would not change it. They had screamed, "We will riot have this man to reign over us," Luke 19:14, but Pilate put it up there anyway. Sarcasm to the very end. The soldiers put the sign up, put Him there. Wicked, but ignorant wicked ... the ignorant wicked, the callous soldiers.

The world is full of people like that. It really is. I mean, it's full of people who just laugh at Jesus, the whole thing seems so silly, such a joke, so ridiculous and they're so ignorant. The world is full of ignorant people who are callous toward Jesus Christ. They don't know who they're talking about. They don't know who they have on their hands and unless they awaken to it, they'll spend an eternity in the same kind of remorse these soldiers are spending right now ... right now. It's frightening.

There's a beautiful ending to this. Do you see verse 54 of chapter 27, can I have you go ahead and close with this? "Now when the centurion," that's a commander of a hundred soldiers, "and they that were with him watching Jesus," now this is one of those soldiers there who was watching, on guard,

when he saw the earthquake and the things that were done, "They feared greatly saying, Truly this was the Son of God." Oh what a wonderful thought. And Luke says, "The centurion glorified God and said, This is a righteous man."

I don't think you have to stretch your thought too far to realize that out of that group of soldiers that day there was at least one of them that came to true faith in Christ, right? I say that to say this. Jesus was dying on the cross, put there by ignorantly wicked men and offering those very same men the salvation that He was procuring. Is He not the friend of sinners?

Father, we thank You for our time in Your Word this morning. We thank You for the picture we have seen with such vividness of our Savior, dying for us. We know the world is yet filled with those who are the ignorant wicked. They just don't know. They just really don't care. But, Father, how thankful we are that even some of them if they look long enough will see who really was there on the cross, some who so flippantly take the name of our Lord in vain, some who make Jesus the butt of jokes. If they look long enough and if the Spirit of God by sovereign grace works on the heart, will see what the centurion saw, the friend of sinners dying for the very ones who took His life. We thank You that there will be some of those ignorant wicked, yes many in heaven. We thank You that Christ died even for His executioners. Oh, what a friend of sinners is He.

While your heads are bowed in the closing moment. If you don't know the Savior, if you've not come to Him for forgiveness, embraced Him as Lord, this is the day for that. If you've been a part of the ignorant wicked who treat Jesus with indifference and coldness, who have no concern, no empathy, no sympathy, for whom Jesus is no issue except perhaps to be the butt of your jokes, may I remind you that according to Scripture you crucify the Son of God and put Him to open shame ... it says in Hebrews 6 ... by rejecting Him? We still have the ignorant wicked with us who execute Christ by their rejection. But that can turn around. Look at Him. As He is lifted up, see in Him the Son of God, the Savior of the world who died for your sin, embrace Him in faith.

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