

The Wickedness of the Crucifixion—Part 1

I. Introduction

The crucifixion of Christ is the climax of redemptive history. God's plan of salvation culminates in the cross, as the Lord bears the sins of the world and provides salvation for all who believe in Him.

II. The Viewpoint of John

The gospel of John looks at the cross from the viewpoint of God. He reveals that it is the fulfillment of prophecy—that God's plan is on schedule. As you read John's record of the crucifixion, you cannot help but be in awe at the wonder of God's glory, grace, and love in the death of Jesus Christ.

II. The Viewpoint of Matthew

Matthew approaches the cross from the opposite perspective. He shows how the death of Jesus Christ demonstrated the wickedness of the human heart.

Acts 2:22-23; cf. Jer.17:9—If ever there were an event at which we could see these verses proven, it is at the crucifixion of Christ.

- **The triumph of wickedness:** It is not as if wickedness had not appeared previously in the life of Christ. It tried to kill Him at birth. It tried to discredit His teaching and stop His miracles. Wickedness secured His condemnation by violating every standard of justice in the Jewish and Gentile world. It betrayed Him by the kiss of a hypocrite. It had Him arrested. It framed Him, slapped His face, punched Him, spat on Him, scourged Him, and mocked Him. Yet before it is through, wickedness will kill Him.
- **The torment of wickedness:** However, even death itself wasn't enough to satiate its evil desire—it had to torment Him as well. It had to mock, scorn, and reproach Him until He breathed His last. The heartless intensity of the words and deeds of all who surrounded the cross beg language to describe them.

Matthew describes four groups of wicked people at the cross: *the ignorant wicked, the knowing wicked, the fickle wicked, and the religious wicked.*

1. THE IGNORANT WICKED: The Callous Soldiers (Matt. 27:27-37)

A. The Mockery of Jesus (vv. 27-30)

1) The guilt of Pilate (v. 27)

- a. **The sin of Pilate:** Pilate was fearful that another insurrection from the Jews would result in the loss of his job and reputation. Instead of releasing Jesus, whom he pronounced repeatedly as innocent, he tried to satiate the mob's thirst for blood by scourging and mocking Him. He then tried to present Christ as a pathetic individual who couldn't possibly be a threat to Rome or Israel. He hoped this strategy would cause the crowd to stop short of forcing him to execute an innocent man.

- b. **The soldiers of Pilate:** Jesus was taken to the common hall, and the whole band was gathered around Him. The Greek word translated "whole band" is *speira*, and refers to six hundred soldiers.
 - (1) **Their identification:** Rome generally conscripted soldiers out of the countries it occupied. The majority of its soldiers was not necessarily Roman, but they reflected Roman military power and presence. The Jews were exempt from service in the Roman military, and they wouldn't have served even if they could.

 - (2) **Their ignorance:** This particular band that surrounded Christ was under Pilate, whose headquarters were at Caesarea on the seacoast, about 60 miles west of Jerusalem. They were probably not familiar with Jerusalem and its religion. They certainly didn't understand much about Jesus, if they even understood anything at all. So what they did was out of ignorance.

- c. **The supervision of Pilate:** Under the tutelage of Pilate, the soldiers mocked Jesus' claim to be a king. I do not believe the soldiers did this independent of Pilate; I think they did it under his watchful eye. John 19:4 tells us that when Jesus was brought out to the crowd after the scourging, Pilate "went out again." So he must have been in the praetorium, aware of what was happening.

2) **The game of the soldiers (vv. 28-30)**

Already bleeding and in agony from the scourging, Jesus became the object of ridicule as the soldiers began their game. They hated the Jews. They would thoroughly enjoy any opportunity they might have to mock them. Jesus had never done anything to them. Yet they had no interest in alleviating His agony. They showed no concern for His suffering and no interest in healing His wounds.

a. **The stripping of the King (v. 28a)** When Jesus was scourged, He was naked. After the scourging was complete, the soldiers put Jesus' inner robe back on Him. One can only imagine the pain that that rough cloth would have caused when put over His open wounds. He had worn it for some time before He was brought back into the praetorium. As the soldiers began their game, they heartlessly ripped that robe off Him once more, again exposing His wounds.

b. **The symbols of the King (vv. 28b-29)**

(1) **The robe (v. 28b)**

a) **Purple:** John may have seen it as purple because that color represents majesty. That would give greater emphasis to the soldiers' treatment of Jesus as a mock king.

b) **Scarlet:** Matthew may have seen the robe as the symbol of our sins (Isa. 1:18).

(2) **The crown (v. 29a):** The soldiers intended for the crown to be a cheap and painful imitation of the wreath worn by Tiberius Caesar. I see the crown as a symbol of His bearing the curse of the world (Gen. 3:18).

(3) **The scepter (v. 29b):** The reed symbolized a king's scepter. The soldiers put it in His hand to mock Christ's authority. On Roman coins at that time, the image of Tiberius was shown holding a scepter.

c. **The suffering of the King (vv. 29c-30)**

(1) **Mocking His royalty (vv. 29c-30a):** In Matthew 26:68 the Jewish leaders mocked His claim to be a prophet. In verse 67, the Jewish leaders had spit on Him, and now the Roman soldiers were doing so.

(2) **Mocking His authority (v. 30c):** The soldiers hit His head repeatedly with the reed to make a joke of His authority. The soldiers didn't have anything against Christ; they were reveling in the depravity of their hearts in their brutal amusement. Yet through it all Jesus endured. He said nothing and offered no resistance.

B. **The Crucifixion of Jesus (vv. 31-37)**

1) **The plan (v. 31):** At the time of Christ and during the era of Roman occupation in Israel, the Romans crucified at least 30,000 Jews. Crucifixion was carried out along the highways to warn people of what happens to someone who

violates Roman law. It was a vivid illustration of the consequences of going against Rome.

2) **The pilgrimage (v. 32-33)**

- a. **Inside the city (v. 32a):** Executions had to take place out of the city because the Jews didn't want it to be defiled (cf. Lev. 4:12). Hebrews 13:12 says that Jesus "suffered outside the gate."

We do need to understand what happened to Jesus after He was lead from the praetorium but before He left the city.

- (1) **The definition of the cross:** We know that Jesus began the procession by carrying His cross (John 19:16-17). There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that Jesus carried only a part of the cross. The cross would have weighed in excess of two hundred pounds.
- (2) **The display of the criminal:** The procession would have gone like this: the prisoner would be surrounded by a quaternion of four Roman soldiers, one at each corner, moving Him through the city with other soldiers before and behind. Jerusalem was swelling with pilgrims who had come to worship and celebrate the Passover. The soldiers would parade the prisoner down the main streets. Either hanging from the prisoner's neck, or being held by someone walking in front, was a placard explaining why the prisoner was to be executed.
- (3) **The dissipation of Christ:** As the procession came out of the city, it was apparent that Jesus' strength was giving out. His blood was draining away. Up to then He had no sleep since the night before. He had been betrayed by Judas and witnessed the defection of His disciples. He had undergone the injustice of His trials and endured the humiliations that followed. The scourgings and beatings had taxed His strength.

Jesus' Last Public Sermon

During His procession through the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus gave His last public sermon, and it was a brief one.

1. **The lesson:** *Luke 23:27-30. There was coming such terrifying judgment that they would wish they didn't have children because they were going to have to see them slaughtered.*

2. **The proverb:** Luke 23:31. *Jesus was the green tree, and the populace of Jerusalem was the dry one. If the Romans would crucify Him, an innocent man, what would they do to the Jewish nation, which was guilty? If the Romans would kill an innocent man, what would they do to the guilty, who continued to initiate insurrections against the Romans? Of course Jesus was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which was precipitated by their hostilities against Rome. Jesus' last message to the people was of coming judgment. And it came very fast, within the lifetime of many of the people. The land of Israel has yet to recover.*

b. **Outside the city (v. 32b)**

(1) **The provision of Simon**

- a) **His residence:** Cyrene was a Greek settlement located west of Alexandria and directly south of Greece on the north African coast, about ten miles inland. Today it would be located in Libya. Many Jews lived there because it was a center of trade. Simon no doubt was in Jerusalem because of the Passover. We do know there was a Jewish synagogue for Cyrenians in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). We believe he was Jewish because Simon is a Jewish name.
- b) **His conscription:** Mark 15:21. No Roman would carry a criminal's cross, and certainly not that of a Jewish criminal.
- c) **His family:** Simon was "the father of Alexander and Rufus." Alexander and Rufus are Greek names. So Simon, a Jewish man, gave his sons Greek names. That was not an unusual practice; it was quite common, especially for someone living in a region other than Israel.

Why did Mark identify Alexander and Rufus? Because Mark probably wrote his gospel from Rome, and his first readers may well have belonged to the Roman church. It is likely that they knew Alexander and Rufus. The apostle Paul said, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine" (Rom. 16:13). Who would the mother of Rufus be? The wife of Simon.

- d) **His salvation:** It's not difficult to imagine that Simon, although inadvertently passing by and being made to carry the cross of Jesus Christ, came to Christ through that experience and raised two sons who became pillars in the church at Rome. Evidently his wife became like a mother to the apostle Paul. So what began as an enforced act may well have been the means of a family's conversion. I like to think

that when we get to heaven we're going to meet Simon of Cyrene, along with his wife and children.

(2) **The place of the skull (v. 33)** *Golgotha* is an Aramaic term that means "skull place." Luke 23:33 used the Greek word *kranion*, from which we get "cranium" —the Latin Vulgate translated that "Calvary," which is the Latin word for "cranium." It was called the place of a skull because it was shaped like that.

3) **The preparation (v. 34)**

a. **The sedative offered (v. 34a)**

(1) **Its purpose:** The Greek text indicates that they gave Him wine to drink. *Gall* is a general term referring to something bitter (cf. Ps. 69:21). Mark 15:23 says that myrrh was mixed with the wine. Myrrh is a bitter gum resin that was put into the wine as a way of calming a person.

(2) **Its provision:** According to tradition, an association of wealthy women in Jerusalem provided gall to ease the pain of the victim (cf. Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 43a). They did that to fulfill Proverbs 31:6: "Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those who are bitter of heart."

b. **The sedative refused (v. 34b):** Jesus wouldn't drink the mixture of wine and myrrh (John 18:11). He was not going to allow any of His senses to be dulled. He was committed to enduring the full pain of the cross.

4) **The profits (v. 35):** Matthew said that Jesus' crucifiers parted His garments—they divided them up. A Jewish man usually wore five pieces of clothing: shoes, an inner garment, a headpiece, belt, and outer cloak. The soldiers each took one piece and according to John 19:23, the inner garment remained. It was a seamless garment that had holes for the arms and head. Since there were four soldiers, they decided to gamble for the inner garment by casting lots. That was a fulfillment of Psalm 22:18, only Matthew didn't comment on it. He wanted us to see how indifferent the soldiers were.

The Preoccupation of Scripture

Matthew uses no dramatic adjectives to describe the pain. He simply says, "They crucified him." The original Greek is even less significant than the English text: "The having crucified Him ones parted His garments." The crucifixion was referred to offhandedly only as a way to describe the ones who parted Christ's garments. Matthew's point is the wickedness of the men. The Bible is not preoccupied with the physical agony

of Jesus on the cross; it describes only what men did to Him. Outside of what Christ endured in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44), we know nothing of His agony. Even His words while on the cross do not express His physical agony, only His separation from God.

A Scribal Addition

Matthew 27:35 includes a quote from Psalm 22:18. But that prophecy doesn't belong in Matthew 27:35. It was most likely borrowed from John 19:24. It is not in the oldest manuscripts of Matthew. What probably happened was that a scribe copying Matthew remembered the prophecy from John 19:24, and added it in the margin of Matthew, just like the verses you find in the margins of an annotated Bible. Later, another scribe copying the same section might have thought the prophecy should be included in the text, removed it from the margin and entered it into the text. You can see why it is important to search out the oldest manuscripts.

All that doesn't make the prophecy any less true. Matthew 27:35 is a fulfillment of Psalm 22:18. The apostle John made a point of recording fulfilled prophecy because he was looking at the cross from God's viewpoint. However, Matthew left such references out because he was concerned about showing the wickedness of men.

- 5) **The protectors (v. 36):** Why did they sit and watch Jesus? It was their job. They were on guard in case someone tried to be unduly savage to Christ or in case someone tried to rescue Him. With cruel mockery they stayed on their guard to make sure nothing happened beyond what had already happened.
- 6) **The pronouncement (v. 37):** Comparing Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John gives us the complete statement: THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. The Jewish leaders didn't like that. In John 19:21 they told Pilate to change the wording. But Pilate said, "What I have written, I have written" (John 19:22). Pilate was mocking the leaders. He wanted the people to look at that claim and laugh at both Jesus and the Jewish nation. He even had it written in three languages: Greek, the universal language; Aramaic, the language of the area; and Latin, the language of the Romans. Pilate remained sarcastic to the very end.

IV. Conclusion:

The world is full of people who are like the soldiers. There are many people who laugh at even the thought of Jesus, seeing Him as a joke. The world is full of ignorant people who are callous toward Jesus Christ. They don't know who it is they are rejecting. However, there is a beautiful ending to this scene: Matthew 27:54 and Luke 23:47. Out of that group of soldiers at least one came to true faith in Christ. As Jesus hung dying on the cross, put there by ignorant, wicked men,

He made the salvation He was procuring for all who believe available to His crucifiers. Is He not the friend of sinners?