



Matthew 27 The Power of the Cross

Summary: Christ is crucified though obviously innocent, so that we who are obviously guilty might find forgiveness.

Today is called Palm Sunday on the church calendar; it's the beginning of Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. But we've actually been looking at the events of Holy Week all year. It began, for us, way back on January 4th when we looked at the Triumphal Entry in Matthew 21.

So, today, on Palm Sunday, we're looking at the events of Good Friday – the events surrounding the death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away our sin by laying down His own life as a sacrifice for us. When we jump into the text, Jesus has already been arrested and tried by the Jewish leaders. And now,

Matthew 27:1 When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. **2** And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor.

Only the Roman government could exercise capital punishment, they had taken away that right from the Jewish government years earlier, so the leaders of Israel take Jesus to Pilate.

Pilate won't be interested in debates over religious doctrine though, so they present Jesus as someone claiming to be the Messiah, a coming king of Israel, who should then be seen as a revolutionary and political enemy of Rome.

Of course, those who have been paying attention to His words and actions know nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus has no plans to open up a palace and start flying a flag and Pilate will see that too.

Before we get to that though, we learn what happened with Judas.

3 Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, **4** saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."
And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!"

Just a day or so ago these men were so happy to have Judas working with them, but now that they have achieved their purposes, they're done with him.

It's sad, but unfortunately, the world is often this way, isn't it? People will involve you, use you, let you in, for a time, and then, when you're no longer helpful, you're no longer what

they want, or when you're in need, they cut you off. It happens to us and we do it to others – we get caught up in our own agenda and leave others to sort out their own mess.

Well, Judas realizes he's on his own, he's disposable, and now he's desperate. So,

5 Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.

If you were here last week, you remember Judas isn't the only person who betrayed Jesus. Peter betrayed Him too. Peter denied, three times, vehemently, with cursing that he didn't know Jesus. Both men turned their backs on Jesus in different ways.

And both men later regretted what they had done. But their stories have two separate outcomes. Judas went back to men and looked for a way out. Peter looked at Jesus and wept bitterly. Judas found no help for his troubled soul and committed suicide. Peter rejoiced when he heard Jesus had risen from the dead, and was eventually restored.

How do you get two radically different outcomes? Well, as you have probably experienced, there are two kinds of sorrow. There's the kind of sorrow that says I'm sorry about this situation, I'm sorry it turned out this way, I'm even sorry for doing what I did and sorry for hurting you. And then there's the sorrow that says, I don't ever want to do this or be this way again, please help me change. The two can look similar, but there's a critical difference.

Regret is not the same as repentance. Remorse is not the same as repentance. It's good to *feel* sorry, but if all you do is feel, and you never repent, you never ask God to help you change and fight and kick and scratch and sweat for the sake of change, it's only a matter of time before you're right back where you started: feeling sorry for what you've done, *again*.

But if you take the path of Peter and not only feel bad, but repent – that is, go to Jesus and find forgiveness and declare your allegiance to Him - He will help you resist temptation, break habits and patterns of sin in your life, and become more of the man or woman He wants you to be, it won't always be easy, but it can happen: you can be restored, and you can change.

Don't follow the path of Judas – take your burdens to Jesus, not people like this:

6 But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood."

This is so ironic, because you have to assume they took the money out of the treasury to give to him for betraying Jesus. This is what you find in the world though, isn't it? Most people have flexible ethics depending on what they want to accomplish. We may have the highest of standards one minute and the greatest of excuses the next. It all depends on what's at stake. These men are having a moment of twisted morality, so

7 And they consulted together and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, 10 and gave them for the potter's field, as the LORD directed me."

As we said, Peter is going to be restored. He'll become a leader in the early church, he'll be involved in ministry, write two letters that become part of Scripture - we call them 1 and 2 Peter, and he'll tell his version of Jesus' story to Mark who will write it down and we'll call it the gospel of Mark. But Judas' story ends here - without hope, without restoration. My friends do not simply feel remorse over your sin, repent - find forgiveness and change.

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." 12 And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. 13 Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" 14 But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly.

You remember the prophecy from Isaiah 53 – like a sheep before it's shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. He has no defense to make, no excuse to give because it's so obviously a sham.

15 Now at the feast [remember, it's Passover] the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. 16 And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. 17 Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" 18 For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy.

Mark that in your Bibles, he knew it was a sham. He knew something wasn't right here. And then he's sent another sign:

19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."

Dreams are common in Scripture – from the first chapters of the Bible to the last, we see people having dreams sent by God. Now, that doesn't mean every dream is – it could just be that ice cream you ate at 9:30 keeping your brain awake – but there is no avoiding the fact that God has, and I believe, still does, use dreams on occasion to get our attention.

Matthew 27:20 But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they

should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. 21 The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?"

They said, "Barabbas!"

22 Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"

They all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!"

23 Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?"

But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!"

With so many people visiting Jerusalem don't assume these are the same people who cried out Hosanna or who heard Jesus in the Temple. Some of these people no doubt knew of Barabbas and knew Pilate would release someone today and they had come to ask for a pardon for their friend. And now, when the high priest shows up, they and others want to be supportive. These people have come to Jerusalem from all over Southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, they've never heard of Jesus, and they're automatically going to default to siding with the high priest. If he was calling for a particular action, they were most likely to support whatever he asked for, just on the basis of his position especially since they're in town to celebrate a religious holiday.

24 When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather *that* a tumult was rising, he took water and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see *to it*."

Now, there are some things you need to know about Pilate. He was a political appointee of the Emperor and his job was to keep peace in the colony. He needed the support of the high priest and elders to do that though, and he had gotten off to a bad start with them a few years ago and things had never improved. In fact, he will eventually lose his job due to their complaints about how he handles a particular event.

The point is: power is not always as potent as you think. Pilate may have looked powerful from the outside, but the truth was, he didn't have as much freedom, independence, and autonomy as you might think. And that's often true of those in power – they're not all they're cracked up to be, keep that in mind the next time you think about promotion or look at someone in leadership, the system is full of constraints.

Pilate isn't convinced this is the right thing to do, but he goes along with it anyway for the sake of keeping the peace and therefore, keeping his job – he makes a deadly compromise and then tries to delegate responsibility.

25 And all the people answered and said, "His blood *be* on us and on our children."

26 Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered *Him* to be crucified.

Now, we have historical documents that describe the process. Scourging involved tying the prisoner to a post and beating them with a flagellum, a leather whip with metal studs and bits of bone knotted into the straps. The whipping tore open the prisoner's back, ripping

the skin. The trauma usually shortened the amount of time the prisoner hung on the cross, accelerating death. Some even died from scourging before they made it to the cross.

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole garrison around Him. 28 And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. 29 When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put *it* on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

The symbolism here is profound because, as you some of you Bible students know, thorns are a sign of the curse that resulted from sin. But they're not done yet.

30 Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. 31 And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His *own* clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified.

32 Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross.

Remember the Romans are occupying Israel, and they have the right to compel anyone living under their authority to assist with any task, though there were some boundaries. For example, they could compel someone to carry a load for them, but only for one mile and then you need to compel someone else.

Simon is from Cyrene, a large city in Libya. He's most likely in town to observe Passover. He may have saved up for years to make this trip. When Mark tells this story in his gospel, he says Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). It seems that Simon later became a Christian and his sons were well known and active in the early church.

So, think about what a shift in perspective Simon must have had. At first no doubt he was bothered about being singled out to do this distasteful thing for the Romans - he was going about his day when he was dragged into a crucifixion, not cool! But later, after he understood who Jesus was and what had happened, after he was born-again, he must have looked back on *that same event*, as the most holy privilege he had ever been entrusted with.

What he did never changed, only his perspective on it. I wonder how often that is true for the "inconveniences" and "disruptions" and frustrations of our lives? If we could see them from another perspective, would our attitude change?

33 And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, Place of a Skull, 34 they gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted *it*, He would not drink.

This drink was intended to intoxicate the prisoner and deaden the pain of crucifixion – the soldiers had to sit there and wait for you to die and it was kind of annoying if you withered

and moaned for hours. But Jesus refused it.

35 Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet:

*“They divided My garments among them,
And for My clothing they cast lots.”*

36 Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. 37 And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him:
THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Remember, they construed it as a political crime so they had a reason to use the power of the state to execute Him.

The cross could be made in the shape of an X, a T, or a traditional cross and the prisoner could be anywhere from several inches to a few feet off the ground. Jesus was most likely crucified on a traditional cross, with his arms outstretched, several feet off the ground.

Crucifixion was invented by the Persians. They worshipped the god Ormuzd and thought the earth belonged to him, so when they put a criminal to death they hung him up in the air so his death didn't defile god's property.

The Romans learned it from the Persians and it was considered so shameful and cruel that you couldn't crucify a Roman citizen without a direct edict from Caesar. But foreigners and criminals like Jesus were another story.

In crucifixion the prisoner was stripped naked, tied to a cross beam with ropes and sometimes additionally pierced by nails, unable to swat away the insects that were attracted to open wounds in the hot sun. The body's own body weight would pull down on the shoulder sockets making it increasingly difficult to raise your chest enough to breathe. The prisoner's feet were often placed on a footstand so he could raise himself to assist with breathing, though sometimes, as with the men crucified next to Jesus, the soldiers would smash the prisoner's legs, breaking the bones and taking away their ability to press up. Either way, strength eventually gave out and death was often the result of suffocation while weakened by numerous other injuries. It was a sickening, horrific, monstrous, way to die.

38 Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left.

39 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, “You who destroy the temple and build *it* in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

41 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 42 “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. 43 He trusted in God; let Him deliver

Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.' ”

44 Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.

I want to point out that human beings were doing this. This is how we treat each other. It's an extreme example, of course, but we've all looked down on someone, we've all made fun of someone, we've all laughed at someone and mocked them. We've all wanted to hurt someone or see them hurt. There is darkness in the human soul and depravity in the human heart and mind – you cannot deny that it exists – you can only debate what to do about it.

They did this to a perfect man – someone who never harmed others, spoke poorly of others, never desired any one's harm, only wanted what was best for them. Men and women are not automatically attracted to goodness, righteousness and truth at all times. Jesus was the light but men loved the darkness.

They called for Him to demonstrate His power but He was busy demonstrating His love.

45 Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. 46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

47 Some of those who stood there, when they heard that, said, "This Man is calling for Elijah!" 48 Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink.

49 The rest said, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him."

50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

51 Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, 52 and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

Miracles were associated with both His birth, think of things like the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem, and His death. They are interesting, and they raise questions, but they're overshadowed by the greatest miracle of all – His resurrection.

We need to take note of the splitting of the veil thought – this is important because the curtain that separated God from man has come down – there's no longer any need for an earthly priest, a mercy seat, sprinkling of blood, incense, and an annual day of atonement – the final offering has been made. And God Himself has removed the separation.

54 So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

55 And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were

there looking on from afar, 56 among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

57 Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. 58 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him.

Joseph was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, a Jewish Parliament of sorts and like several others we have seen recently, he made what he had available to God.

Roman custom was to leave the bodies of crucified criminals hanging in full view until they rotted away, but Joseph wanted to give Jesus the dignity of a proper burial.

He wasn't a pastor, or missionary, didn't lead a Bible study, he was a wealthy man and a politician, but he used what he had as an act of service and worship to God. His status gave him access to Pilate, and his real estate holdings gave him a place to put Jesus' body.

59 When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed. 61 And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb.

Ladies were the last to leave Jesus' tomb after His death and the first ones there after His resurrection. That's important to note. You have to remember this was not a culture with female pilots or PhDs or Prime Ministers. Women were not highly regarded by the Jews or the Romans.

And yet, throughout the gospels you find women drawn to Jesus, serving Jesus, often in very practical ways. They weren't just servants – they were students. They sat at His feet and listened to His teaching. And He let them, in fact, He encouraged them.

This tells us something about how we should view women, but it also tells us something about how we should view everyone. Anyone the world sees as less valuable, less prominent, less competent, anyone who feels marginalized by the majority culture is welcomed by Jesus. If you want to get close to Jesus, you are always welcome here.

62 On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, 63 saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' 64 Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first."

It's interesting to me, they only asked for three days. They knew and understood what Jesus said, even though His own disciples had a hard time with it.

65 Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.” 66 So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.

Pilate stands his ground and tells them, ‘I’m done with this issue. You have your own Temple Guard, use them and see what they can do.’

This is where we pause the story until we take things up again next week. But before we close, let’s take a moment to consider: what was this all about?

Well, if you keep a book for too long from the library, you start to accrue fines. If you don’t pay all your college fees, they won’t release your transcripts. If you park in the wrong place, you may get a ticket. We all understand the fact that penalties are imposed for doing wrong. If the library, the school, and the local government can all impose penalties, why not God?

What happens we violate His rules, when we sin? The answer is: we accrue penalties. Death and separation from God in hell. And there is no way we can personally pay them off. The fines are too steep.

That is why Jesus steps in. He does for us what we could never do for ourselves. He pays our penalties. Listen to the testimony of Scripture:

1 Peter 2:22 Christ “bore our sins in His own body on the tree”

1 Peter 3:18 Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God

2 Cor 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Gal 3:13 Christ “became a curse for us”

Heb 9:28 Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many.

Is 53:5 But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Today we have seen that Jesus was scourged so that by His stripes we are healed.

He was condemned, though innocent, so that we could be pronounced innocent, though guilty.

He wore a crown of thorns, so that we might wear a crown of glory.

He was stripped of His robe, so that we might be given a robe of righteousness.

He was mocked and humiliated, so that we might be honored and blessed.

He was put to death in a monstrous manner, so that we might be raised to an eternal life.

Let us remember these things, but let them also fill us with joy – for our sins are real, they are many and they are great, but where sin has abounded, God’s grace has abounded even more. The atoning work of Jesus is sufficient for our salvation and we should praise Him for it. Let the awareness and memory of the cross stir in us a hatred of sin and an earnest love for Christ.

Let’s pray.