

Crucified and Risen

Sermons on Matthew 26–28

John Calvin

Newly translated from the French of 1558

by Robert White



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

This ebook is licensed to and provided for the exclusive use of tysonturner@gmail.com

NUMBERED WITH THE TRANSGRESSORS

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the praetorium and gathered the whole band in front of him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. 29 And when they had plaited a crown of thorns they put it on his head, and a reed in his right hand; and they bowed the knee before him, saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' 30 And they spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 And after they had mocked him they took the robe from him and put his own clothes on him, and led him away to be crucified. 32 As they were coming out they found a man of Cyrene named Simon; they compelled him to bear his cross. 33 And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is, the place of a skull, 34 they gave him vinegar to drink mixed with gall, but when he tasted it he would not drink. 35 They crucified him, and having cast lots, divided his garments, so that what the prophet had said might be fulfilled: 'They parted my garments among them, and cast lots for my robe.' 36 And sitting down they kept watch there. 37 They set up over his head this charge which was written: 'This is Jesus, the king of the Jews.' 38 There were two thieves who were crucified with him, one on his right and the other on his left. 39 Those who passed by reviled him, shaking their heads, 40 and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it up in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' 41 Similarly the chief priests mocked him, with the scribes and elders, saying, 42 'He saved others, he cannot save himself. If he is king of Israel, let him come down from the cross and we will believe him. 43 He trusted in God, let him deliver him now if he will accept him, for he said, "I am the Son of God."' 44 The thieves also, who were crucified with him, reviled him in the same way.

(Matthew 27:27-44)

Previously we made the point that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is not of this world. We need to ponder this fact more deeply still. We see the shame and taunts he suffered: instead of a royal diadem he had a crown of thorns, instead of a sceptre, a reed. Every possible indignity that could be devised for man was devised for him. If, then, we concentrated on the facts as told to us here, they could prove enough of a stumbling block to alienate us from our Lord Jesus Christ, and thus from all hope of salvation.

Now what we have to contemplate by faith is the spiritual kingdom of which I have just spoken. We will therefore conclude that, however much men may mock the kingdom of Jesus Christ, he never ceases to be precious both to God and to his angels. We must always remember that when men dealt with the Son of God this way, it was so that he might take upon himself the ignominy which we ourselves deserve. For what can we bring to God as long as we are defiled by our iniquities? It is because our Lord Jesus allowed himself to be spat upon, to be struck and roundly abused, that God today acknowledges and reckons us as his children. This is where our confidence lies.

We should always remember, too, that God wants us to feel our faults more keenly, so that we should shrink from them in disgust when we realize that the heavenly Father did not spare his only Son, but that he had to suffer much in order to make atonement and to obtain grace and pardon for us. Given the shame which our sins brought upon him, we ought surely to humble ourselves and to feel utter dismay. Nevertheless, as I said before, we must also take fresh heart, and be so well grounded in our faith that, when we come before God, we cannot doubt that our Lord Jesus Christ obtained grace for us in allowing himself to be reviled for our sake. He thus obtained glory and dignity for us in the sight of God and his angels.

Our text records that our Lord Jesus *was led to a place called Golgotha, that is, the place of a skull*. The Hebrew from which the

word comes means 'to roll'. It has this sense because when a corpse decays the head is bare of all flesh and resembles a ball which rolls. The place was therefore called Golgotha, because that was where criminals were punished and where their skulls could be seen. We are reminded here of what the apostle says in the letter to the Hebrews, that our Lord Jesus Christ was taken outside of the city (Heb. 13:12). This commonly happened when sacrifices were made; they were burned and their blood was brought into the sanctuary to wipe away the people's sins. Such sacrifices were likened to a curse; they thus had to be cast well away.

The Son of God was, therefore, willing to take this responsibility upon himself, so that we might know that we have been truly delivered and absolved by God. When we think of what we were really like, we deserved to be rejected by God and to see his terrible vengeance displayed. We can obtain grace only by coming to our Lord Jesus Christ and by seeking refuge in him, since our burden was lifted when he became hated and accursed for our sake, that we might find favour with God and be pleasing to him. For although Pilate his judge pronounced him guiltless more than once, he had to accept in his own person all that was necessary for our salvation. He guaranteed our debt, and in each and every way went surety for us.

Because our Lord Jesus Christ was cast out as unworthy of human company, as one who was so vile that he could not be tolerated, let us learn to follow him and to renounce the world, as the passage in Hebrews urges us to do. And if we are to be derided, cut off as rotten limbs and regarded with abhorrence, let us bear it all with utmost patience and with heads bowed, until the day when our sorrow will be turned to joy and when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Then what we now think of as shame will be changed into glory for us, for it is certain that all that we suffer for our Lord Jesus' sake is nobler in God's sight than all the splendour of this world. That is all we need to know about Golgotha.

The Evangelist now adds that *those who passed by mocked him, particularly the chief priests, scribes and elders*. For what reason? *'If he is the Son of God,'* they said, *'let him come down and save himself. He saved others. If he is king of Israel, let him show it!'* Here we see how dreadfully blind these wretched men were. Possessed by Satan, they had neither insight nor discernment. We see priests who should have been messengers of God (Mal. 2:7). They had been appointed for this purpose, so that by their lips God's word and will should be made known. We see the scribes, men trained in the law, but who in seeking to destroy our Lord Jesus showed that they trampled on holy Scripture and the religion in which they gloried. When previously they had been told of the Messiah, they answered correctly that he would be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:5, 6). They should also have been warned and informed that the Redeemer who had been promised was to suffer this kind of death. There was nothing obscure about this: Isaiah's text was as clear as if the story of our Lord's sufferings had been related to them (Isa. 53:1-12). They ought thus to have known that there could not have been a better account than that provided by the prophet, even though he spoke well ahead of time. Then too, both Daniel and Zechariah clearly state that God would gather his people together and restore his church, by having the Redeemer suffer every reproach and curse in the sight of men (Dan. 9:24-27; Zech. 12:10, 13:7).

How, then, can they abuse the Son of God when he is doing all that duty requires, as the prophets had clearly revealed? It is obvious that, in forgetting what once they had known, they have been carried away by Satan. We, for our part, should make sure that we walk in God's fear, and that having tasted his word we receive it with reverence, being obedient to Jesus Christ whom it sets before us. It is in him that we find fullness of blessing, provided we come humbly to him. But if we think we can sport with God, our temerity will be rewarded in the same way as happened to these poor wretches who were beside themselves with fury.

There is something useful, though in a contrary sense, that we might learn from their blasphemies. It was because our Lord Jesus Christ chose to be our king and head that he did not save himself. The enemies of the truth cried, 'Let him save himself if he is king of Israel!' Yet it was necessary for him to suffer in his own body to obtain salvation for us. Why did he not spare himself? Why did he endure so bitter and shameful a death? Because only by such a ransom could we be set free. Accordingly we must defy all of Satan's henchmen and all his evildoers who spew forth the blasphemies recorded by the Evangelist. We must be all the more certain that we truly have a king who put our salvation before his own life, and who suffered all that was necessary for our redemption. His one concern was to redeem that which was lost. There would have been no hope for us if God's Son had left us to our plight. He was swallowed up in death: that is where our deliverance lies. Thus if God now stretches out his mighty hand to help us in time of need, it is because Jesus Christ bore all things with patient suffering.

Our Lord Jesus Christ had, as it were, to be forsaken by God so that we might know that he watches over our salvation and is always ready to assist us when we ask him. At the same time, let us arm ourselves against the trials which come when the devil attacks us, hoping to persuade us that God has abandoned us and has turned his back on us, and that it is pointless to hope in him. At such times we should know that Jesus Christ is the perfect model for all believers, showing us the path to follow and our need to be made like him. He allowed these blasphemies to be hurled at him, yet he steadfastly resisted and so won the victory for us. So let us fight today whenever the devil attacks, for he seeks to overthrow our faith and to close the door that gives us access to God, as if he had entirely forgotten about us. Let us follow Jesus Christ and await the hour when God will stretch forth his arm to show that he is merciful to us and is our Father, even if he allows us to be cast down for a

time. So much, then, for the taunts and jeers which were heaped upon our Lord Jesus Christ.

There were other taunts besides: *'He trusted in God: let him save him if he loves him!'* Already we see this in the person of David, who uttered these very words when he laments that his enemies have had cause to poke their tongues out at him and almost to put their foot upon his throat, reproaching him for his trust in God (Psa. 22:7, 8). This surely is the deadliest wound that Satan can inflict, for just as the life of man resides in the soul, so spiritual life resides in faith, in making God our refuge and in resting on his promises. If we are deprived of these, it is the end for us: we are lost and crushed. That was why Satan tried to overturn the faith which our Lord Jesus had in God his Father. True, he fought far more powerfully than we can, for he was not subject to unbelief. Nevertheless he felt the full fury that these trials contained. Just as earlier the devil had contrived these things, so now he repeats them through his human agents. He had said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread, and you will eat, for you are desperately hungry. Should you not try to see whether you have power or not?' (Matt. 4:3). Jesus Christ cannot have been unmoved by this, any more than he was unmoved when reviled for his trust in God. So although we do not have similar power to resist and might in fact fail, we should find strength in him, knowing that it was for us and for our gain that he conquered these assaults and overcame them.

His enemies continue to shout, however, crying, *'He saved others, but cannot save himself!'* Again we see how reprobate in mind they had become. Was not the fact that he had saved others a sure, unerring mark of his divine power? They were not unmindful that he had brought the dead to life. He had restored sight to the blind and had healed paralytics, the lame and even the demon-possessed. In every miracle that he had done he had displayed the great treasures of his goodness and power. Yet these things are still held against him. We see, therefore, how these poor madmen, with no one to

coerce them, are their own judges and rob themselves of every excuse, so that when they come before the great judgment seat of Jesus Christ they will have nothing to plead in their defence: their own mouths will condemn them.

If our Lord Jesus Christ saved others, he could most certainly save himself, unless he preferred to put them before himself. What is it we witness here, if not a marvellous act of kindness by which he chose to be destroyed in the sight of men, that he might rescue us from destruction? He chose to suffer what we ourselves deserved, in order to discharge our debt. In a word, he surrendered all temporal salvation by not placing his own life first or by sparing himself, in order that we might be certain of our eternal salvation, and might have a guarantee and proof of payment. Our faith, then, should be all the stronger. And whatever the devil does to upset us and to hinder our coming to Jesus Christ, should serve to fortify us even more. Let us make the most of what we are shown here.

The devil naturally knows where our salvation lies, and he makes that his mark so as to deprive us of it. He knows that if he can succeed in making Jesus Christ offensive to us, we are done for. Experience proves this all too well. Besides, all the obstacles which the devil visibly puts in our way to turn us away from God's Son should help to make us stronger still.

I said before that, when we hear that our Lord Jesus saved others but not himself, that comment might, on our own understanding, make us feel a little disdainful toward him; we might even reject him and cease to hope in him. On the contrary, we should know that when the Son of God cared nothing for himself and his own life, it was because the salvation of souls was so dear and precious to him that he did his utmost to achieve it. It follows then that we, being firmly grounded in him, should call upon him, fully trusting that his suffering for us was not in vain.

Now when they say, *'This is the man who would destroy the temple and build it again in three days'*, they display the utmost malice by

pretending that he threatened to destroy the temple. What he said was, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19). He attributed the destruction of the temple to his enemies, not to himself. And when they crucified him, did they not know that this had already begun to be fulfilled? For they were not unaware that our Lord Jesus Christ had declared himself to be the true temple of God as to his human body, for since he is God made manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16), and since his divine being is joined to the nature he took from us – since, I say, all fullness of the Godhead dwells in him, his body indeed deserves to be called a temple, much more than the Jerusalem temple or any other under heaven. His enemies did all they could to destroy this temple, but he built it again in three days. They had not forgotten his words, for they later repeated them to Pilate (Matt. 27:63). It is obvious, however, that once the devil takes possession of men he makes them so mindless that they can no longer tell right from wrong. Rage so seizes them that they hurl themselves recklessly at God, as if they mean fully and deliberately to defy him. Since this is so, we are warned to walk all the more carefully in the fear of God, when we see how well he worked to show how truly Jesus Christ spoke, when he said, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' For in his death we see at first glance only ruin, for so it appears to men. By his resurrection, however, he made all things right. We ought, accordingly, to be all the firmer in our faith, having no regard for Satan or for anything he might do to shake us or to cause us to doubt.

We are told next that *they gave him vinegar to drink, mixed with myrrh and gall*. We may assume that this was in accordance with the custom of that time, in order to hasten the criminal's death. At any rate Jesus Christ tasted but refused to drink, for he knew that his hour had not yet come. Before the condemned were lifted up, it was usual to give them this to drink, so as to disturb the blood and help them breathe their last more quickly. This type of death was most cruel and they needed help to die. As we will shortly see, the bones

of the thieves were broken so that they would languish no further. Our Lord Jesus, however, would not drink, showing that he was ready to accept in full obedience the part entrusted to him by God his Father.

The death he endured was hard indeed. Horrible as it was, there were the spiritual torments which we will speak about tomorrow if God permits. All this might well have prompted our Lord Jesus Christ to bring death as close as possible. Instead he was willing obediently to submit and to suffer until he was delivered without any human agency. These things we need to bear in mind.

As to the clause which says that *his garments were divided, and lots cast over them*, Scripture was fulfilled. David makes these same complaints and thus prefigures Jesus Christ (Psa. 22:18). It is true that he speaks figuratively when he says that vinegar and gall were put into his drink, that men divided his spoils and in his troubles pierced and distressed him even more (Psa. 69:21). Such is the way of cruel and ruthless men who seek to harass poor, afflicted souls who are totally exhausted. David therefore is using metaphors to describe his deprivation – his loss of wife, house, possessions and estates. In Jesus Christ, however, all these things are clearly seen. He was given gall and vinegar so that we might understand that David was merely his image, while he was the true Redeemer, promised before time began. Why, after all, was the kingdom set up in the house of David, if not for the promise that it would last as long as the sun and moon (2 Sam. 7:13, 16; Psa. 89:4)? There was thus the eternal kingdom, which is now firmly founded on the Redeemer. Those things which were portrayed in shadowy and symbolic form in David, of necessity found fulfilment in Jesus Christ, as we see here.

For the rest, the Evangelist relates that *the thieves who were with him also mocked him*. This is true of only one of them, as is clear from Luke who gives a fuller account (Luke 23:39, 40). This is a common way of speaking, as when we say: 'Even little children know that.' Though only one child is meant, the plural is used. Or else:

‘That’s a matter for the women’, though there may be only one. Thus we read that our Lord Jesus was derided, mocked and blasphemed by all, even by the thieves. Hanging him between two thieves was meant to make his death more shameful still. This was the place where evildoers were usually put to death, but even this disgrace was not enough for them. The impression had to be given that he was worse and more hateful than all the bandits in the world. So they put the thieves on either side of him, meaning that he was the chief of them. Accordingly, as Mark recalls, the prophet’s words were fulfilled, ‘He was numbered among the transgressors’ (Isa. 53:12; Mark 15:28).

Now if he had not been numbered thus, what would have been our place and standing in God’s sight? We cannot obtain grace without righteousness. God must hate us and reject us, until we are righteous before him and cleansed of all our sins and stains. Can God deny himself? Can he divest himself of his holiness, righteousness and justice? As long as we bring him only our defilement, we must be abhorrent to him. How then could we be justified before him if Jesus Christ had not been numbered among the transgressors? We are thus delivered from our condition. God receives us and accepts us as if we were pure and blameless, because our Lord Jesus Christ suffered such shame and humiliation in the eyes of men. This is what we have to remember concerning the thieves.

Consider how Luke’s story ends (Luke 23:40-43). One of the thieves reproaches his companion for his stubbornness. ‘Isn’t it high time you were humbled?’ he says. ‘You have been condemned, and the punishment you suffer is for your own misdeeds and offences. You are a man accursed, and although all your life you were so mindless that you enjoyed your crimes, you have got to start lamenting them now.’ Anyone, however bad, who has spent his life in pleasure, not thinking that he can be called to account, and who scorns justice as long as he remains unpunished, will have to

change his tune once he is arrested. 'Well,' says the thief, 'you're in real torment. God and men are calling you to account. Your uneasy conscience tells you that you are suffering for your crimes. Will you still go on defying God?'

What the thief says surely proves that he has been taught by God's Spirit. Soon we will see many more things beyond compare, yet in this man's words we already see what sort of teacher God's Spirit is, when he instructs those who are completely lost and senseless, so that they not only acknowledge their wrongs and yield in order to obtain pardon, but are also able to speak like teachers themselves, like men long trained in holy Scripture. Is not the protest which this poor thief makes the foremost thing that we could say to anyone who is hard of heart and who continues to rail against God, when what he should be doing is submitting and coming to repentance? Whatever the case, his protest had the effect of stripping this man whom Satan possessed of every excuse. Now although his warning was of no benefit to him, it ought to be profitable to us. Let us learn, then, to fear God, even though he spares us, but especially when he beats us with his rod and makes us feel that we have wronged him. We should be all the more affected so that we groan, while remaining steadfast and patient in our afflictions as this poor thief was. Nor should we rise up in pride and anger as the other man did.

Moreover we see in these two men mirrors of the human race. We see the wretchedness which wraps us round. This life is a pit of misery, the fruit of our sins, for Adam's fall deprived us of God's blessing. Admittedly God in his bountiful goodness overcomes this curse, showing himself to be our Father in many different ways, by letting us experience his gentleness, love and care for us. Nevertheless we bear many marks of our sinfulness, and whether high or low we are made to see that we are all under God's curse, death being the end which is common to us all. So we languish in this world, prone to illnesses of every kind, suffering heat and cold and sorely troubled in one way or another. In short, when we have

suffered endless misery, where does it lead? We must all return to dust and decay.

We know that there are some who are touched by God, so that the afflictions they bear are effective and help toward their salvation, as Paul points out in the eighth chapter of Romans (Rom. 8:28). Others become worse: instead of humbling themselves and being moved somehow to repent, they grow all the more bitter, at the same time provoking God's wrath and lighting a hotter fire which will consume them. These things we know. Thus let us view the two thieves as mirrors of us all, for from the greatest to the least we are all guilty before God. If we all suffer in common, who can boast of being innocent? Who can possibly absolve himself? We are over our heads in condemnation! We suffer rightly for our sins, yet we do not all confess them equally.

There are, as I said, those who grow worse and worse and who openly rebel against God. They gnash their teeth and foam with rage and cruelty; they will never accept their condemnation. Or else they take the bit between their teeth and display such wilfulness as if to say that God will never win or overpower them. In sum, when poor sinners own up, humble themselves and confess their debts, they should give glory to God, admitting that he deals justly and fairly with them, and that it is only right that they should allow themselves to be punished. When, I say, poor sinners come to their senses, we can be sure that this is God's hand at work, that he has touched them by his Holy Spirit, and that in them we contemplate his infinite goodness in rescuing from hell and perdition those who were without hope.

In this poor thief we see as outstanding an example of faith as ever there was. We ought, then, to thrill and marvel at this miracle wrought by God. Consider his plight. He is close to death, and suffers awful torment as he waits for someone to come and break his bones and to dismember him – torture so bitter and terrifying as to make him lose both mind and memory. He sees our Lord Jesus Christ hanging there, like him, and suffering the greater disgrace. Yet

what does he say? He not only acknowledges his faults humbly before God, not only assumes the role of teacher, so as to bring his companion back to the right path, but makes a confession which, when we look at the facts closely, deserves to surpass all others. 'Remember me,' he says, 'when you come into your kingdom' (Luke 23:42).

How could he conceive in Jesus Christ the idea of a kingdom? Our Lord is hanging there on the tree, cursed both by God and men, for in the law God with his own lips had said, 'Cursed is the man who hangs on a tree' (Deut. 21:23). It was no accident, then, that this was where God placed his only-begotten Son. When, therefore, the thief sees Jesus Christ accursed by God and man, and in human terms sunk in utter despair, only through faith and in spirit could he fix on the idea that Jesus Christ was king. He was well aware of the things which might turn him away from the Son of God, and which might make him think that it would be foolish and wrong to trust in him. Despite that he calls him king, and sees him as such even in death. 'Save me!' he says, 'Give me life! Remember me! Only then will I be blessed.'

In weighing up all these circumstances, we can be sure that this thief's faith was as splendid as that of anyone who has ever lived. Let us not be ashamed to be his disciples, for the death of our Lord Jesus Christ will avail us nothing unless we stand condemned, as it were, in order to obtain salvation in him. God cannot absolve us unless we confess that we are full of iniquity and defilement. Since we are guilty before God and since our consciences judge and condemn us, let us not be ashamed to follow the example of the thief, who can be a sound teacher for us. And now that our Lord Jesus has ascended up to heaven and taken possession of the glory given to him by God his Father, so that every knee should bow before him (Phil. 2:10), let us not hesitate to commit ourselves completely to his care. Let us know that to be truly blessed, Jesus Christ must remember us, must guide us and, since he has been

appointed our shepherd, must watch over our salvation, so that we may be safe under his hand and protection.

The miseries of this present life should not hinder us from coming to him. Let us bear them patiently. The thief's prayer was granted, as we see, even though he could not avoid suffering a hard and dreadful death. May we so prize the spiritual grace given to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, and daily offered to us in the preaching of the gospel, that it may enable us to overcome all the worries, obstacles, griefs, troubles and assaults which we might meet. May all our afflictions be tempered by the knowledge that everything can be made to work for our good and for our salvation, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let that be clearly understood.

Nor should we forget our Lord's reply to the thief, when he says, 'Today you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43). Although he had not yet risen from the dead and had not yet fulfilled all that needed to be done for our redemption, already he displayed the power and fruit of his death and passion. Its fulfilment lay, it is true, in the resurrection, but it was joined to his death and passion. We know that as he suffered in the weakness of his flesh, so he was raised in the power of the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:4). We know also that as he suffered for our sins to clear us of our debt to God, so he rose to justify us (Rom. 4:25). Since we know these things, let us come freely to him with readier hearts, and let us not doubt that when he graciously remembers us and hides us under the shadow of his wings, we are able to defy Satan, death and all misfortune, glorying in our very weakness. And although in men's eyes we may be wretched ruffians, let us nevertheless rejoice in God and in the taste which, by faith, he gives us of the heavenly life and of the inheritance he has so dearly purchased for us, and which, through hope, can never disappoint us.

Now let us cast ourselves down before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our faults and asking him to make us feel them more and more, so that, being touched by them, we may with greater

earnestness repent of them and grieve for them. May we so walk in his fear that he may be glorified in us. May we know the purpose for which we were redeemed, and dedicate ourselves in all holiness to him and to our great Saviour, who sanctified himself so that we might be partakers of his holiness. And may he graciously pour upon us the gifts of his Holy Spirit, that we may be cleansed of all the infirmities and corruption of our flesh.