

The Crucifixion of Jesus

Matthew 27:32-44

Mark Vroegop

32 As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. 36 Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. 37 And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." 38 Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. 39 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 44 And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way (Matt 27:32-44).

Every religion, nation, or social movement has symbols which attempt to capture the essence of their ideology, philosophy, and the foundation of what defines it. For example:

- Buddhism often uses a lotus flower because its wheel shape depicts the cycle of birth and death or beauty and harmony out of chaos
- Modern Judaism uses the "Star of David" which combines two equilateral triangles to speak of God's eternal covenant with David
- Islam uses the symbol of a crescent and a star which originally depicted a phase of the moon and was used by Muslims during the Ottoman Empire
- The Soviet Union used the infamous hammer and sickle to represent the intersection of industry and agriculture
- The swastika, which was made infamous by the Nazis despite its long history, was meant to symbolize creativity and prosperity¹

Symbols have emotional power and meaning because they represent something beyond what is simply seen. A symbol is a window to a larger message and more significant meaning.

The precious and revered symbol of Christianity is, of course, the cross. And it, like other symbols, is loaded with significance, power, impact, and meaning. But what makes it different

¹ John Stott, The Cross of Christ, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1986), 19-20.

than the other symbols is the simple fact the cross is not a naturally attractive symbol. In fact, it was a terrifying symbol of torture, judgment, and imperial oppression. No wonder that Paul says that the message about the cross is foolishness to the Gentiles and an offense to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). The cross, at first and natural glance, is offensive and foolish. John Stott captures the essence of the problem as he reflects on what first-century people must have thought about the cross:

How could any sane person worship as a god a dead man who had been justly condemned as a criminal and subjected to the most humiliating form of execution? The combination of death, crime and shame put him beyond the pale of respect, let alone worship.²

My aim this week and next is to walk you through the crucifixion and the death of Jesus to show you how the **cross, once a symbol of defeat and shame, becomes a symbol of fulfillment and salvation**. In order to do this, I want to explain what is found in Matthew 27 and then connect it to particular passages in the Old and New Testaments.

A Symbol of Defeat

In our text, it is about 9:00 AM on Friday – Good Friday. Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, unjustly charged by the religious leaders, brought before Pilate, exchanged for a criminal, savagely flogged, and mercilessly mocked by the Roman soldiers. Since crucifixion was as much about making a point as it was about killing a criminal, the condemned person was required to carry the instrument of their death (usually the cross beam of the cross) through the city to the place of execution. As you can imagine, people would stop what they were doing or turn out to see what was happening.

Jesus, who has been up all night and terribly beaten, is not able to carry the cross the entire way. When it is clear to the soldiers that Jesus cannot make it, they require someone in the crowd – Simon from Cyrene – to complete the journey (v 32). Cyrene was located in modern-day Libya, and it was an old Greek settlement, and Simon was likely a pilgrim who was in Jerusalem for the feast.

Jesus is led to the place of execution which is called Golgotha. Verse 33 adds, “which means place of a skull” probably referring to the amount of death that happened there or that the area somehow had the look of a skull. Interestingly the Latin word for skull is “calvaria” from which we get the English word “Calvary.”³ The exact location of Golgotha is not entirely known, but we do know that it must have been along a highly traveled road into the city because the intention was to execute people in a public manner. The endgame was not just death; it was humiliation and terror.

² Stott, 23.

³ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008), 660.

Crucifixion was one of the cruelest methods of execution that has ever been devised. It was probably invented by the barbarians on the edge of the known world, and it was modified and adopted by the Greeks and Romans.⁴ Central to its cruelty was the fact that crucifixion delayed death, allowing for the victim to suffer with great agony. The victim's hands were tied or nailed to the horizontal beam, and a large spike was driven through the feet as they were placed on top of each other. From this position breathing was very difficult and was only accomplished by pushing up on the spike to gain a breath. It often took more than a day for the crucified person to die.

However, the goal was not just execution; crucifixion was a political tool meant to terrorize people. So the execution was public, prolonged, and humiliating. The prisoner was stripped naked and hung in a high-traffic area. The Romans used it quite often with the Jews. In 4 B.C., the Roman General Varus crucified 2000 Jews, and the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD by Titus included the crucifixion of Jewish prisoners around the city walls. So many people were crucified that the Romans ran out of space and crosses.⁵ Crucifixion was all about intimidation; it was designed to send a message: "you are defeated."

Additionally, the Jews viewed crucifixion as a symbol of God's curse. Deuteronomy 21:23 explicitly stated that anyone who was hung on a tree was under God's curse. This means of death communicated absolute spiritual and political devastation.

So it is no wonder that it wasn't until the second century that the cross actually became the preferred symbol of the Christian faith.⁶ That should give you some sense of the horror of this means of death and that challenges that it presented.

A Symbol of Shame

Central to the horror crucifixion was the mockery and the shame connected with it. It was as undignified as it was disgusting. The abuse was not only physical.

Verse 34 indicates that the soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with gall. It has often been thought that this was offered to the criminal as a means of dulling the pain. However, gall or myrrh, created a very bitter taste, and it seems out of character for the Roman soldier to offer any assistance. Rather, the drink was likely something that was designed to make Jesus more thirsty.⁷ Therefore they offer him something as a trick to make his misery worse and to mock him.

⁴ Stott, 23

⁵ Stott, 24

⁶ Stott, 21

⁷ D.A. Carson, Matthew – Expositors Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 575

The soldiers were charged with guarding the crucifixion site (v 36) to keep the crowd in check and to be sure that no one offered aid. While they waited the soldiers divided up his garments by casting lots (v 35). They apparently viewed his clothing as either a souvenir or booty.

Above the head of most criminals, the Romans would post the charges. It was often written on a white tablet in red or black letters.⁸ The charge against Jesus was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (see John 19:20). It read: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Pilate no doubt intended it to be an offensive statement, but Matthew includes it because of the important irony. After all, Jesus really is the King of the Jews. Remember, this is THE message of Matthew – that Jesus really is the Messiah, the King of the Jews. But notice where this King is located.

According to verse 38, he is crucified between two criminals, robbers, or (better) insurrectionists. The Messiah of Israel, God's Son hangs on a cursed cross between two rebels. Could Jesus look any more like a failure than this? The Religious Rulers have won. Rome is making a point, and Jesus is cursed by God. This is terrible!

But it gets even worse. While Jesus is hanging on the cross, three different groups of people mock him, tempt him, and shame him. They see him in his weakness, and they use the opportunity to taunt him.

The first group is found in verses 39-40. Remember I told you that crucifixions happened in public places? Well this text tells us that while people were walking by, they derided him (Greek word – blasphemo) and wagged their heads at him as they hurl insults at him. Listen to what they say: *"You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Mt 27:40)*. They are calling into question what he has said about himself and his power. Further, notice how similar this accusation is to what Satan said to Jesus in the desert in Matthew 4:1-11. They challenge Jesus to prove who he is by using his power for himself.

The second group is the religious rulers. It is actually quite remarkable that chief priests, scribes, and the elders (see v 41) have come to the crucifixion. Imagine the President and his cabinet attending the execution of Timothy McVeigh in 2001. But here they are. And notice what they say:

He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God (Mt 27:42-43).

⁸ Carson, 576

It is likely that they are saying this to the people who have gathered at the crucifixion, and it is just terrible. Again, you cannot miss the irony here. They take who he is and what he has done, and they throw it back in his face. They mock his power to save people since he cannot save himself. Little do they know that by not saving himself, he **is** saving people.

Further, the religious rulers have the audacity to say that they will believe in him if he comes down from the cross. They have the gall to excuse their unbelief by putting it on Jesus.⁹ But if Jesus comes down from the cross not only would they not believe him; there would be nothing to believe because there would be no salvation. They are speaking Satanic words.

Finally, they cruelly suggest that he cannot be God's son because of what is happening to him. They appeal for God's deliverance and the absence of it tells them that God doesn't desire him. In other words, Jesus is powerless. He's worthless to God. And their failure to believe is **his** fault. What religious arrogance! What cruelty! What shame!

This a shame-fest pile-on. The crowds, the religious rulers, and even the other crucified insurgents mock him. Verse 44 brings our paragraph to end as "the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way." It seems a bit odd that the other criminals would mock him unless they are angered with people like Jesus who are willing to be critics of the establishment but not risk their lives in revolution.¹⁰ We know from Luke's account (Luke 23:39-43) that one of the criminals said "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" And we also know that one of the criminals famously said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). But Matthew only records that Jesus was mocked even by those with whom he was crucified.

The point of all this is to show the extent of the mockery of Jesus. He is hanging naked on an instrument of death, cruelty, oppression, and curse. He is mocked by people as they walk by, assailed by the religious leaders, and even upbraided by those who are dying with him. He is all alone. He is scorned and shamed from every direction.

He hangs between heaven and earth – cursed by men and by God.

A Symbol of Fulfillment

Matthew's gospel is reaching its crescendo. This is the moment that has prompted Matthew to write. But he wants you, the reader, to see more here than just the suffering and death of Jesus. He wants you to know that everything that is happening in part of God's fulfillment. In other words, this horrible moment is all a part of God's plan.

⁹ Carson, 577

¹⁰ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 179.

This event didn't happen by accident. In fact there is Old Testament fulfillment all over this story. Therefore the cross, while a symbol of defeat and shame, is also a symbol of fulfillment. Let me give you a number of examples:

- Jesus himself looked back to the Old Testament story of Moses holding up a serpent on a stick, and those who looked at the lifted serpent were spared from destruction: *14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, **so must the Son of Man be lifted up**, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15).*
- The giving of the wine mixed with gall is seen in Psalm 69:21 - "*They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst **they gave me sour wine to drink.***"
- The dividing of the garments by casting lots has parallels in Psalm 22:18 – "*17 I can count all my bones— they stare and gloat over me; 18 **they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.***"
- It should be no surprise that Jesus was crucified with criminals: *Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and **was numbered with the transgressors** (Isa 53:12).*
- Jesus seems to be living out Psalm 22:7-8 as he is mocked and upbraided: *7 All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; **they wag their heads**; 8 "He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; **let him rescue him**, for he delights in him!"*

And there is more to come in terms of fulfillment. Matthew loves the fulfillment motif, and it comes through very clearly in this text today because he wants us to know that what his happening here has purpose beyond what we see in the text. God is working his plan.

It is the same theme that Peter will use 50 days from this moment when he preaches to a large crowd at Pentecost. Listen to what he says:

22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, **delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God**, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. 24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it (Acts 2:22-24).

In other words, the cross is a beautiful symbol of God's ability to be God! Think about this: God is able to take the most horrific symbol known to the Jewish people during their lifetime, and he uses it to communicate that his plans never fail. The people who were watching Jesus die have no idea that everything in this horrible moment – even the actions of Satan himself – were all

working according to God's plan. Underneath this vile ground called Golgotha is a flowing stream of providence. God is fulfilling his word through this moment.

A Symbol of Salvation

The cross, once a symbol of defeat and shame, becomes a symbol of fulfillment and salvation. It speaks yet another word – salvation – and this is the theme that drives so much of the New Testament, particularly the heart of the Apostle Paul. The cross is central to everything. It is symbol of salvation. Let me show you how the New Testament brings this to life:

The cross is the dividing line between sin and salvation, between judgment and forgiveness, between hostility and peace with God. The cross brings **reconciliation** between God and mankind.

19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his **cross** (Col 1:19-20).

The cross is the means of forgiveness. The cross is the way that God **took our sins** out of the way.

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the **cross** (Col 2:13-14)

It was the cross that brought us near to God by **making us new people**.

...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the **cross**... (Eph 2:12-16).

Therefore, church ministry and preaching should make the **cross central**.

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him **crucified** (1 Cor 2:1-2).

The reason is must be central is that it is not only the means of salvation; it is **how you live** even after the cross.

20 I have been **crucified** with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20-21)

The cross means that you **don't have to serve sin** anymore!

6 We know that our old self was **crucified** with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin (Rom 6:6).

The cross means new actions, attitudes, or (to use a Bible phrase) fruit comes out of my life because **I am dead to what sin** and devil want me to do.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have **crucified** the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:22-24)

But even more, the cross becomes the ground of everything and the only thing in which we could or should ever **boast**. In other words, the only thing truly worthy of our confidence, joy, and our praise is the cross.

14 But far be it from me to boast except in the **cross** of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been **crucified** to me, and I to the world (Gal 6:14).

Why only boast in the cross? The answer is so simple: Because there is nothing greater than what happened on it. Nothing.

And so, in cross we see how God is able to take a symbol of defeat and shame and transform it into a symbol of fulfillment and salvation. True, Jesus hangs on an emblem of suffering, defeat, and shame. But God will have the last word! God always has the last word! It is like the Hymn-writer said:

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suff'ring and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

The cross shows us that God always has the last word!

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