

The Death of the King
Matthew 27:33-50
April 5, 2020
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Read Matthew 27:33-50 with your family or on your own as you watch this.

Introduction: A Hidden Life

I often mention movies in my sermons for the sake of an illustration, but I give a caveat that I'm not necessarily recommending them or approving of everything that's in them. This week I watched Terrence Malick's movie, *A Hidden Life*, and not only am I going to use it for an opening illustration, but I recommend it wholeheartedly if you can handle an intense three-hour movie full of beauty, pain, and quiet spiritual themes. (If "The Fast & The Furious" is your idea of great art, you might not love this movie, though. Malick's movies are an acquired taste, though this one is probably his most accessible.) The plot is that a farmer named Franz in 1940's Austria is harassed, then arrested and imprisoned because he cannot go along with the Nazi regime. He's not Jewish, he's not an enemy, he's simply a countryman who won't fight or pledge loyalty to the Nazi party. The tension in the movie is extreme because throughout his imprisonment, you see scenes of his wife and three daughters back home on their beautiful farm, and he is given every opportunity to change his mind and sign a statement that he approves of the Nazi's activities and he will be released. It's a great temptation, but he is a man of principle and even when his suffering has been intense and they allow his wife to visit him and they present him with a statement to sign, "it's just words, God knows what's in your heart," he still will not sign it and approve of what he knows to be wrong. Or does he? You'll have to watch to find out.

Today's passage is also about a principled man who has risked everything to be true to what He knows to be right no matter who it infuriates. He has stood for everything He knows is right and has been falsely arrested and sentenced to death. He has had chances to turn away from the road of suffering that He is on, He is encouraged by others to avoid this fate and save Himself, but He knows that this is the path that He must choose. But His will not be a hidden life, it will be a life raised up on high, written about, reflected on, and ultimately embraced by billions of others because it was a death that accomplished something that nothing else could.

The last three weeks, we've been looking at the passages in Matthew where Jesus told His disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Today is Palm Sunday, but I'm not going to preach on Jesus' triumphal entry. This is more of a Good Friday message; we're going to complete our Path to the Cross series by going to Matthew chapter 27 and reading his account of the time that Jesus hung on the cross. I was struck when I read this again recently that Jesus' death, which should have been quiet, dignified, and somber is just filled with people taunting and insulting Him. The way I've organized the sermon is centered around the way that Jesus is treated. The first point is

I. The Soldiers Mocked Him (vv. 33-38)

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.

The summer before my senior year in High School my family joined a large touring group led by my uncle in the Holy Land. If you've ever been, you know how amazing and meaningful it is to see these

places that the Bible talks about – the Jordan River, the city of Jerusalem – in person. One of the stops on the tour was the site called Gordon’s Calvary, named after a British army officer who argued for it as the site of the crucifixion. Calvary is the Latin version of the Aramaic word *golgatha*. They both mean skull. Many people think that the site of Jesus’ crucifixion is under the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, but Gordon’s Calvary, or Skull Hill, is a site outside that has holes in the side of the hill that make it look like a skull.¹ You can look on Google Images to see pictures and you can read about why the different sites are claimed by different scholars. Regardless of which site is correct, though, Jesus’ execution had to take place outside the walls of the city (capital punishment was not allowed within the walls), and at a place where people were passing by and could read the sign over His head.

The soldiers offering Jesus wine mixed with gall is actually probably a kind action, to help dull His pain. He refuses it, preferring to be fully present in His sufferings and sure that He speaks and thinks with a clear mind. The soldiers taking His clothes from Him so that He would be naked or only covered by a cloth, though, was certainly degrading and humiliating. This is a continuation of the mockery from earlier, back in verses 28-31 which told of the soldiers dressing Jesus in a purple robe, placing the crown of thorns on Him, and kneeling before Him saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ Then they spit on Him and hit Him in the head. This was a mockery that was born from ignorance; the soldiers probably did not know much about Jesus.² They just knew He was a condemned, deluded Galilean, and they were in charge of Him. They didn’t have the malice and indignation that the Jewish leaders had, they are just making sport of Him. “We’ve been assigned to this guy, we can be as cruel as we want.”

John tells us that the sign above Jesus’ head, “*This is Jesus, the King of the Jews*” was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. John says that the Jewish leaders asked Pilate to add “This man said, ‘I am the king of the Jews,’” but Pilate leaves it. How interesting that Matthew calls what is written on the sign the “charge” against Him. All of the other Gospel writers just call it an inscription, but crucified criminals would have their crime written for people to see. He has been charged with being the King of the Jews. What they mean is that He is either impersonating a King or usurping the real King’s authority. But we know the irony – that He is actually being killed for who He is.

Charles Talbert says that, “the very act of crucifixion was a means of execution used for those who, in the Roman mind, tried to rise too high above their station... the depiction of Jesus’ crucifixion is... a parody of the enthronement of a royal figure... the depiction is dramatic irony. ‘In the very mode of the rejection, his true identity as king of Israel and king of the gentiles is paradoxically proclaimed.”³

It’s not just the soldier and government officials, but

II. The Onlookers, the Bystanders Also Mocked Him (vv. 39-44)

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.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvary>

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 363-364.

³ Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), p. 303.

How many of us have felt the sting of being mocked? Kids will find things to make fun of their friends about, whether it's that they're too tall, too short, too thin, too thick, too slow, whatever. I remember kids thinking they were so funny twisting people's names. I had a childhood friend who's last name was Repack and kids called him Retard. They sometimes called me Dave Dork. Adults find ways to mock as well, whether it's comedians or the President or online social media attackers. Nobody likes to be mocked, and some of us have painful stories of being mocked, but how many of us have stories of how we mocked others? I'm certainly guilty, I have plenty of memories of thinking I was being so clever when I was just being hurtful and offensive.

Back to the text, look at the verbs here: derided (v. 39) which can also be understood as "jeered" or "hurled insults"; also mocked (v. 41), reviled (v. 44). Three groups of people mocked Jesus as He is hanging on the cross: those who passed by, the Jewish religious leaders, and the robbers crucified on either side of Him. One commentator called them the "ignorant sinners," "religious sinners," and "condemned sinners."⁴

Look at the taunts they directed at Jesus:

-The beginning of verse 40 - Mocking that He said He would rebuild the temple in 3 days; when that's actually what is happening - the temple of Jesus' body is being destroyed and God would rebuild it/raise it on the third day.

-The ends of verses 40 and 42 - both the crowd and the chief priests say that in order for Jesus to prove who He is, He would have to come down from the cross. But, of course, if He had come down from the cross, they would have only believed for a moment, and then found a reason to deny what they saw. But more importantly, He would have been disobedient to His Father and proved the opposite. His staying on the cross to die for us brought the greatest proof that He is the Son of God and the one to be believed in.

-The beginning of verse 42 - "*He saved others; He cannot save Himself*" - likely this is just mocking Jesus that He thought He saved others in what people are now seeing as a bogus ministry. Of course, Jesus has been teaching that to save your life you must lose it. He is doing that, and even greater, He is saving others now by losing His life.

-Verse 43 - "let God deliver Him now" - God's deliverance and exaltation will come after death. For now He must abandon Jesus and allow Him to hang and die.

The two robbers who were crucified on either side of Jesus joined in the mocking and reviling even though they are in the same situation as He is. Luke's Gospel (23:42) records that one of them changes his mind about Jesus and asks Him to remember Him when He comes into His kingdom. In the midst of all the taunting, at least one person recognizes the truth.

So we've seen all these different groups of people who mocked Jesus. Where is God the Father in all of this? The last six verses show that

III. God's Absence Mocked Him (vv. 45-50)

⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." ⁴⁸ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

⁴ R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (London, 1961), p. 265.

You may have heard that Jesus had 7 last sayings on the cross; Matthew only records one of them, most of them are recorded in Luke and John. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* is the first phrase in Psalm 22. It’s interesting that the bystanders misunderstood Jesus’ crying out. Apparently that saying, *“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”* is a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew. So they think He’s crying out to Elijah. So then v. 49 they interrupt the person getting Jesus the drink on the sponge because they want to see if Elijah really is going to save Him.

I remember being on a youth group retreat as a teen where the speaker went into great detail about what all the suffering of Jesus looked like. He described the whip that the Roman soldiers whipped Jesus with 39 times and how it had bits of glass and metal in it. He described the crown of thorns, the weight of the cross, the nails driven through the most sensitive parts of the wrists and ankles, and how terrible suffocating to death was. Crucifixion is one of the cruelest forms of carrying out the death penalty because it is so slow and wears the condemned man down. The final cause of death is not usually from loss of blood or from eventual starvation, but from suffocation when the victim became too weak to keep pushing himself up to get his next breath of air. But in the meantime, they suffered exhaustion, hunger, thirst, and pain from numb limbs, exposure, and their bleeding wounds.

And the speaker’s whole point was that Jesus experienced all of those things for you and for me. And all of that is true, but it doesn’t seem that the Gospel writers are that interested in describing the gory details. They just mention the things that happened to Jesus and move on. Later in my life I heard speakers explain that as bad as those awful, physical tortures that Jesus endured were, that the spiritual separation from God the Father was so much worse. Jesus, who had existed in perfect harmony with God the Father for all of eternity, was forsaken and abandoned. Why did God abandon Jesus, I thought He was well-pleased with Him? He was, but on the cross Jesus was taking on Himself the sins of all of His people. He was becoming the substitute for us, dying in our place. 2 Corinthians says that *“He became sin who knew no sin”* – our sins were placed on Him and He died to pay the penalty of death for them. God could not be in the presence of sin, He looked away, He abandoned Jesus in one sense.

Two quick notes about the weather and the time: the darkness in verse 45 that was over the land from the 6th to the 9th hours of the day (which is Noon to 3 pm; they start counting those hours at sunrise) parallels the darkness that Jesus felt. But Ligon Duncan talks about two deeper things here:⁵ 3 pm was the time of the evening sacrifice, and the darkness has a parallel in the Passover account back in Exodus with the ten plagues – do you remember what the last two last plagues that God sent were? Darkness on the land. Darkness and the death of the firstborn. So here too, the darkness descended right before the death of the firstborn, with the Lamb’s blood shed to protect God’s people.

Verse 50 says that Jesus cried out with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit. Matthew doesn’t tell us what He said, but John 19:30 says that He said *“It is finished”* right before death, while Luke 23:46 says that He said, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* These are not contradictory, Jesus said both of them; different accounts emphasized different sayings. The truth is that when Jesus was finished paying the penalty for our sins, He committed Himself to the Father’s hands.

Conclusion: He Who Laughs Last Laughs Best

I know that I’ve worked through these passages without mentioning any Old Testament references, the parallels that are found throughout; you may be wondering why. It’s because I wanted to put them all together after we studied the passage and see that you could basically construct a narrative of Jesus

⁵ Ligon Duncan’s sermon *“The Dereliction”* preach on February 6, 2000, found at fpcjackson.org.

dying on the cross from Old Testament passages and prophecies alone. Hear these passages and connect them in your mind to what's happened in Matthew 27:

Psalm 22:18 – *“they **divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.**”*

Isaiah 53:12 – *“...because he poured out his soul to death and was **numbered with the transgressors...**”*

Psalm 22:7-8 – *“All who see me **mock me**; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads. **He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!**”*

Lamentations 2:15 – *“All who pass along the way clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads...”*

Amos 8:9 – *“‘And on that day,’ declares the Lord God, ‘I will make **the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.**’”*

Psalm 22:1 – *“**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?”*

Psalm 69:21 – *“for my thirst they gave me **sour wine to drink.**”*

How amazing is that? The whole story was there in the Hebrew Scriptures just waiting to be fulfilled when Jesus came. The Holy Spirit had given these words to the prophets and Psalmists knowing that they were descriptions of exactly what would happen.

All of these people mocking and jeering at Jesus. But who has the last laugh? Again, the answers are in the Old Testament. Let me give you a moment to turn to Psalm 2:1-6: *“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? **2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.**”*

Sinners - whether they're the important people like the soldiers and the Pharisees; or nameless, common people like those who passed by; or the notorious sinners like the thieves on the cross – sinners, by their very nature have a mocking attitude towards God. Romans says that we are all enemies of God and Psalm 2 says that we rage and set ourselves against Him. Most people are too polite to do it openly, but it's not hard to find people who mock God and Jesus. And I don't blame them, 1 Corinthians says that God uses foolishness and weakness, God's way of rescuing His people looks crazy, totally backwards. But sometimes in the midst of your mocking you might find yourself like one of the thieves on the cross, or like the centurion and the people with him later in the passage, verse 54 says they came to realize *“Truly this was the Son of God!”* So either you'll realize how wrong you are in this life and come to recognize who Jesus truly is, or you will find out in the life to come that you were dead wrong. Again, Psalm 2 says that God laughs at those who plot against Him, and He will take out His wrath on them. We have the sure promise of God that one day every knee will bow to Jesus and recognize His lordship, whether they want to or not.

Wouldn't you rather someone else take your punishment for you? How much better for God to take His wrath out on His Son in your place? The meaning of the cross for us is found throughout the New Testament, but listen to one last Old Testament passage, Isaiah 53:5-6: *“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 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.”* Jesus stood in our place, on our behalf. *“For our transgressions, for our iniquities.”* Why? Because God loves us. God loves us so much that He sent His Son to reconcile us to Himself. *“God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8)

I don't know all of you listening, watching, or reading this sermon, but I want to drive home the point that the Christian life starts here; it's rooted and grounded on what Jesus did on the cross. Accepting what Jesus did for you, paying the penalty for your sins. Do not assume that you are a Christian just because you grew up in the church, or your parents are Christians, or because you don't consider yourself an atheist or a member of another religion, so you must be a Christian by default. You're not a Christian by default, you must believe in Jesus by faith and follow Him as Lord, and His death will atone for your sins. John 6:40 – *“everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”* Don't skip ahead to the blessings of the Christian life or to the instructions on how to live like a believer or anything else in the Bible until you have committed one way or another that Jesus' death fixes your sin problem and puts you in right relationship with God.

If we were having a live worship service, I would invite you to come talk to me afterwards, but since we're not, I'll just tell you that I'm always free to call or email. I'd love to follow up on this with you. Let's close in prayer.

Benediction

Colossians 2:13-14

“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, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”