

Crucified for Sinners

Lesson Text: Matthew 27:38-54

Related Scriptures: Psalm 22:1-18; Isaiah 53:3-12; Luke 23:32-47

TIME: A.D. 30

PLACE: Golgotha

GOLDEN TEXT—"We have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world" (I John 4:14).

Lesson Exposition

One of the darkest aspects of this world is the current fascination of many with the subject of death. The emphasis on death in many current forms of entertainment reveals to some degree how perverse this fascination has become. God never intended that people dwell on death or desire it. Death came to mankind only after sin entered God's perfect world. He has always intended that His children live and enjoy Him, but in order to make that a reality, He had to send His Son to pay for our sins.

Jesus died in our place; thus, His death was substitutionary, like that of all the animals sacrificed during Old Testament days. His was a horribly painful death, but Jesus endured it because He was looking beyond the cross to the joy of having His own with Him forever.

BLASPHEMY AND MOCKERY— Matt. 27:38-44

A challenge to Jesus (Matt. 27:38-40). Isaiah 53 contains the Old Testament's most extensive prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion. Included is the statement that "he was numbered with the transgressors" (vs. 12). Perhaps when Jesus was hung between two robbers, those responsible meant it

as a demeaning insult. God, however, fulfilled His Word when that happened. As Jesus took our place in death, He was numbered among those who deserved to be in that place.

We often picture in our minds Jesus being lifted high above the ground on the cross. A truer picture seems to be that Jesus' feet were just a foot or two above the ground. This made it easy for those walking by to taunt Him and challenge Him to do something spectacular if He really was the Son of God.

The crucifixion site was near a main highway going out of Jerusalem. Since the Sabbath, with its travel restrictions, had not yet arrived, there were probably many who walked by while He hung there.

Early in His ministry, when Jesus was asked for a sign of His authority, He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Those listening did not understand that He was speaking of His own body; so at His trial this statement was twisted into an accusation against Him (Matt. 26:61). Now, as people passed by, they used it to display their unbelief. He was not about to raise up any temples when He could not even come down from the cross!

A charge against Jesus (Matt. 27:41-42). The word "reviled" in verse 39 means to blaspheme. The word "mocking" in verse 41 means to jeer at or deride. It suggests the people spoke about Jesus with contemptuous, childish laughter. While the common people walking by spoke impiously regarding Jesus, the priests, scribes, and elders jeered at and derided Him over His apparent inability to do anything about His situation. They charged that He said He could save others but was helpless to save Himself. Little did they realize what Jesus could have done (26:53-54).

Since Jesus had claimed to be the King of Israel (27:11), the Messiah, He should be able to save Himself! In fact, they said that if He would miraculously come down from the cross, they would believe in Him (vs. 42). It is very doubtful that they really meant this. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), Abraham told the rich man, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Even though God provides evidence of His existence, people still choose to ignore Him.

A rejection of Jesus (Matt. 27:43-44). Perhaps this was the hardest statement of all for Jesus to bear. The implication was that His Father did not care about Him or want Him. Even the dying thieves joined the rejection at this point. Jesus had indeed trusted His Father, and He knew He could now. How tempting it must have been to leap off the cross and prove in a grandiose way that He was the Son of God and loved by His Father! His Father had not deserted Him, but Jesus had to stay on the cross for our sakes.

It is a favorite ploy of Satan to get us to think that God does not care about us. Soon we begin to blame Him for the difficult things we face, and our loneliness and feelings of being un-

loved grow. Jesus' situation did not prove a lack of love on God's part, nor do trials we face mean that God does not love us. Trials are part of His loving plan because of the results they bring.

DARKNESS AND DEATH—

Matt. 27:45-50

A cry of despair (Matt. 27:45-46). Jesus was crucified at nine o'clock in the morning. Between then and noon, He spoke at least three times. At noon darkness came upon the earth, and Jesus became silent. It was dark until three o'clock in the afternoon, as if nature itself suffered with Him. It was a supernatural darkness, perhaps indicating that this was the most horrible period of time in all history. It was then that God "made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (II Cor. 5:21) and that Jesus was "made a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13).

Suddenly, out of the darkness came the heart-wrenching cry of Jesus as He felt the separation from His Father that was caused by having the sins of the world placed on Him. Although the physical suffering was terrible, the spiritual separation from His Father was much worse. He had been rejected by men, but now He was isolated from His heavenly Father.

A drink of vinegar (Matt. 27:47-48). When the bystanders heard Jesus' cry, some misunderstood. Hearing the word "Eli" (vs. 46) made them think He was calling Elijah to come help. A Jewish tradition claimed that since Elijah had ascended to heaven without dying, he was available to come help those who needed rescue. Jesus' cry was actually a quote of Psalm 22:1. If those hearing it had known the psalm, they would have understood what was happening, for His death is clearly described there.

John recorded that Jesus spoke of His thirst next (John 19:28), which was a fulfillment of Psalm 22:15 (cf. 69:21). Someone ran and got a sponge, dipped

it in the vinegary drink used by soldiers, and lifted it to Jesus' lips (Matt. 27:48). Earlier Jesus had refused to drink a narcotic offered to Him (vs. 34). This time, however, He apparently sucked briefly on the sponge. He had something else to say, and it was so important that it needed to be heard clearly and distinctly.

A moment of release (Matt. 27:49-50). Others standing around did not want Jesus to be offered any relief at all. They said that He should be left alone so that they could see whether Elijah would come save Him. They did not expect such an event to occur, but His cry had given them more ammunition for their mocking.

Soon Jesus made His final utterances from the cross, which included a cry of victory (John 19:30) and a committal of Himself to God (Luke 23:46). He then "yielded up the ghost" (Matt. 27:50), which means He voluntarily dismissed His spirit. No one took Jesus' life from Him. In order to provide salvation for mankind, He purposely died.

SIGNS AND FEAR—Matt. 27:51-54

A series of events (Matt. 27:51-52).

At the moment of Jesus' death, the veil in the temple tore from top to bottom. That veil had kept everyone but the high priest from the immediate presence of God. Now that Jesus had died, all believers had access to the Father. Today we have no need for animal sacrifices and priests because Jesus is our High Priest, having made the ultimate sacrifice. At the same time, the earth quaked, rocks were split apart, and tombs were opened. Whether the dead bodies of the saints within came alive at this time or after Christ's resurrection is not clear (cf. vs. 53).

"The earthquake reminds us of what happened at Mount Sinai when God gave the Law to Moses. . . . The earthquake at Calvary signified that the demands of the Law had been met and the curse of the Law forever abolished

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(Heb. 12:18-24). The torn veil indicates that He conquered sin; the earthquake suggests that He conquered the Law and fulfilled it; and the resurrections prove that He defeated death" (Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*, Victor).

A response of terror (Matt. 27:53-54). The people who had come alive walked out of the graves in which they had been buried. After Jesus' resurrection, they were seen walking around in Jerusalem by many people. We cannot imagine what a stir this caused in the city. All these events made it clear to everyone that something supernatural had occurred.

Among those affected the most by the events near the cross were the centurion and the soldiers who were stationed there. They could not avoid the conclusion that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Great fear fell upon them, for they saw divine power manifested.

—Keith E. Eggert.

QUESTIONS

1. In what way was Jesus numbered among the transgressors, as prophesied in Isaiah 53?
2. What taunts did the people and the religious leaders make as they walked by Jesus' cross?
3. How did the doubters use Jesus' own words against Him during His trial and while He was on the cross?
4. What happened during the three hours of darkness in the middle of the day that made that time so horrible for Jesus?
5. What happened as the darkness came to an end, and how did the people interpret this?
6. What events occurred as Jesus died, and what conclusion was drawn by the watching soldiers?

—Keith E. Eggert.

1. Christ's submission to the cross proves His love for us (Matt. 27:38).
2. The example of Christ enduring mockery should challenge us to endure the same for His sake (vss. 39-44).
3. We can be encouraged knowing that Christ has been through the dark times (vs. 45).
4. We should be moved to greater love for our Lord when we consider His sufferings (vss. 46-49).
5. Jesus died by an act of His will; we should decide to serve Him by an act of ours (vs. 50).
6. Jesus' death brought life; we should live in newness of life (vss. 51-54).

—Jesse Waggoner.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. What do the two thieves powerfully portray in their opposite responses to Christ (Matt. 27:38; Luke 23:39-43)?
2. Why were the rulers so intent on completely humiliating Jesus as He suffered on the cross?
3. Why did God darken the earth for three hours while Christ was on the cross (Matt. 27:45)?
4. What does Jesus' being forsaken by God indicate about the nature and perfect holiness of God (vss. 46-49)?
5. Does the phrase "yielded up the ghost" (vs. 50) show anything about Jesus choice in dying, and why did He make that choice?

—Jesse Waggoner.

"We have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world" (I John 4:14).

John had witnessed the horrors of the crucifixion and experienced the bewilderment of having the one he believed to be the Messiah taken from him and killed. The crucifixion was an appalling event that confounded all the hopes and aspirations of the disciples. John wrote his first epistle years later, long after things had become clear to him again. John's hopes and dreams had been restored through having seen Christ again after His resurrection and through the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart. Now his testimony was strong and sure.

John had heard Jesus' own words telling him that Jesus had been sent by the Father (cf. John 20:21). John was sure that Jesus had been sent to do what He did and that His death and resurrection made Him the "Saviour of the world." John had the clear understanding that Jesus never intended to liberate Israel from Rome. Jesus was not a messiah in that sense. His goal, His mission, had always been to save the world from its sins.

John placed this verse in the middle of a discourse about love being the distinguishing mark of a Christian. In the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion, we can see what an enormous amount of love it took for Christ to suffer for us. We can also ponder what depth of love for us prompted the Father to send His only begotten Son.

John described himself as the apostle whom Jesus loved (cf. John 19:26; 21:20, 24). He had much knowledge of the love of God. It was through God's love in his heart that he boldly declared his desire that everyone know Christ and believe in Him as the "Saviour of the world."

—Jesse Waggoner