



Signs of Life at the Place of Death

Matthew 27:27-54

The account of Jesus' crucifixion completes the passion narrative and fulfills the Lord's earlier prophecies concerning his suffering and death (Matthew 20:19). Jesus told his disciples that he would be "mocked and scourged" by the Gentiles and then killed. His death fulfilled the Messianic Psalms concerning the righteous martyr (Psalms 22 & 69). The prophecies of Isaiah anticipate a Messiah who would be a suffering Servant. He would be beaten and

mocked (Isaiah 50:6), despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3). And yet he "bore our suffering" and "was pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Though Jesus died at the hands of sinful men, his death was to fulfill the promise that God would wash away the sins of his people. He would remove their guilt by the shedding of blood. Just as the Lord covered the shame of Adam and Eve through the life of an innocent one, so too would he cover the guilt and shame of his people once and for all by the sin-bearing substitute of his Son. By his own sovereign will, God directed the event of Jesus' suffering and death as he was put forward to bear the wrath deserved by sinners (Romans 3:25).

"And kneeling before him, they mocked him..."

Vv. 27-30 – Jesus' entire ordeal was shot through with mockery. This is the attitude that unbelief eventually adopts. The effort to dismiss God requires not only denial but enmity. The scarlet robe, the crown of thorns, the reed scepter were all cruel props meant to mock Jesus' claims to divine royalty. Each prop was used to inflict physical pain as well: the robe rubbing against his flayed back, the thorns pressed into his scalp, and the reed used to strike him. They spat upon Jesus and in mock worship cried out, "Hail, King of the Jews!" The irony is that the man they mockingly hailed as "king," truly is the King. Indeed, one day they will confess that very truth (Philippians 2:9-11).

Vs. 31 – The ritualistic mockery of their prisoner now concluded, the guards lead Jesus away to the place of crucifixion.

"Place of a Skull"

Vs. 32 – So weakened was Jesus from his flogging that he could no longer bear the weight of the crossbeam, so a man named Simon was forced to carry it for him.

Vv. 33-34 – Golgotha was a place of public execution outside the walls of Jerusalem. The public nature of executions was meant as a deterrent to criminal behavior. For those being executed, it heightened their shame. Matthew records Jesus being offered "wine to drink mixed with gall." Gall (*kolais*) was bitter and may have been meant to heighten the agony of the condemned (Psalm 69:21).

Vv. 35-36 – Like the other accounts of Jesus' death, Matthew records the event with a strict economy of words: "And when they had crucified him..." For Romans, crucifixion was so degrading that a direct order from Caesar was required to crucify a Roman citizen. For Jews, death by crucifixion was the sign of divine cursing. It meant that the crucified person was outside the covenant community (Galatians 3:13).

Vs. 37 – The account of Jesus' crucifixion includes quite a lot of irony. Here, the Romans post a sign above Jesus' head which read "King of the Jews." It was meant in mockery but was in fact the truth. Pilate delighted in the consternation this aroused in the Jews who demanded that the sign be amended (John 19:17ff).

Vs. 38 – Jesus is bordered on either side by "robbers" reminding us that he was counted as a criminal.

Vv. 39-44 – The mockery of Jesus continued as he hung crucified. This time the cruelty was hurled upon him by those passing by, the Jewish religious leaders, and the robbers that hung on either side. They taunted him by repeating the charge made earlier in his trial (Matthew 26:61). Once again, there is irony in the words of Jesus' mockers. "The true temple (Jesus' body) of Jesus' true prophecy (John 2:19) was to be destroyed imminently, and Jesus will indeed 'build it again in three days' when he is raised from the dead.

So, this becomes an unconscious prophecy of Jesus' death and resurrection."¹ There is further irony as the mockers call him "the King of Israel," not realizing that he is that and so much more. They deride him for saving others while he "cannot save himself." They do not see that by refusing to save himself from the cross, Jesus is purchasing salvation for the vast company of God's people throughout the ages. How ironic that the true nature of Jesus and the purpose of his cross are stated unknowingly by the very ones who killed and mocked him.

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Vs. 45 – At about noon, darkness fell over the land. Whether the immediate cause of the darkness was a physical phenomena (storm clouds) or more directly supernatural, the point is that the darkness was a divine act expressing God's revulsion at the wicked treatment of his Son. The darkness at the cross was likely a harbinger of the final judgment as we see in Amos, Joel, and Zephaniah.²

Vs. 46 – Remarkably, Jesus' citation from Psalm 22 is the only instance in the synoptic Gospels when the Lord addresses God without calling him "Father." Here we find ourselves before the great mystery of the Lord's sin-bearing: his experience of being a curse on our behalf, forsaken by God. Jesus' cry is not to be understood as some sort of fracturing of the Persons of the Trinity. Nor may we conclude that at that moment the Father ceased loving his Son. But neither was Jesus' anguish an illusion. Rather, the incarnate Son cried out in genuine torment, experiencing the Divine wrath as he bore the sins of his people. From the cross, all was darkness for the Son of God. There he experienced hell so that we would inherit heaven. At the cross, the Son's forsakenness became the surety of God's promise to never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6-8; Hebrews 13:5).

Vv. 47-49 – Elijah became a sort of Messianic figure for the people due most likely to the way that he was taken up to heaven (2 Kings 2:1-12). Some believe the offer of "sour wine," was further mockery while others take it as a genuine attempt to relieve him, as sour wine was rather common.³

Vs. 50 – For the second time Jesus cried out "with a loud voice." Whether this final cry was one of anguish or triumph is not indicated. Certainly, the anguish of Jesus' suffering continued to his physical death. But knowing the purpose of Jesus' death and his impeccable purity in achieving that goal, we may also hear victory in his final cry. Matthew and John describe Jesus as yielding up his spirit. Jesus' life was not taken from him. Rather, he yielded his life according to the Divine will.

"Truly this was the Son of God!"

Vs. 51 – The way to God has now been secured by the dying of Christ. The temple, sacrificial system, and the priesthood have all been abrogated in Christ. Jesus is the one Mediator between God and mankind.

Vv. 52-53 – Only Matthew mentions this extraordinary event, and he does not give us any details. We only know that "saints" rose to life. What happened to them subsequently, we are not told. These resurrections served as dramatic signs to the significance of the Lord's death and resurrection. In his dying and rising, the Lord Jesus conquered death for his people. The saints being raised demonstrated the meaning of Christ's death in a way similar to that of the torn curtain in the temple. It makes perfect sense that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (the most significant event in creation history) would be met with the emptying of tombs!

Vs. 54 – While Luke's account of the confession of the centurion and accompanying soldiers is not as clear, Matthew emphasizes the Christian particularity of their words. All that they had seen and heard left them with no other conclusion that the man on the cross was truly "the Son of God!"

"What mercy and grace and love are to be seen in the face of Jesus Christ as he hangs on Calvary as the forsaken one! What hope for you, O anxious, trembling, yet believing souls! Jesus is forsaken that you may be received as returning prodigals to the Father's bosom and the Father's love, and never be forsaken to all eternity... Take peace and consolation in the thought that Jesus was the forsaken one for you, that the Father's answer to the Savior's piercing cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,' is his word of peace to the believing soul, 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.'"⁴

¹ Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010) p. 1034

² Ibid, p. 1037

³ R.T. France, *Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 1985) p. 399

⁴ Robert Ireland, *Light from Calvary* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2024) p. 57