

THE AGONY OF VICTORY

Matthew 27:27–54

The Cross is central to our faith. What happened on Good Friday defines Jesus' life and ministry. We are going to look through the eyes of Matthew to the value the Cross has for us by providing new life.

Some years ago, a 14-foot bronze crucifix was stolen from Calvary Cemetery in Little Rock, Arkansas. It had stood at the entrance to that cemetery for more than 50 years. The cross was put there in 1930 by a Catholic bishop and had been valued at the time at \$10,000. The thieves apparently cut it off at its base and hauled it off in a pick-up. Police speculate that they cut it into small pieces and sold it for scrap.

They figured that the 900-pound cross probably brought about \$450. The thieves obviously didn't realize the value of that cross.

That is the problem, of course - understanding the value of the Cross. As Matthew relates the story of Jesus' crucifixion, the theme that runs through all the details is rejection. Not only didn't people see the value of Jesus, they also didn't understand the value of his death. May we not be so blind!

1. JESUS - REJECTED AS THE MESSIAH KING - Matthew 27:27–54.

As we come to this text, Jesus has already felt the heavy blows of rejection - Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, the disciples' abandonment, the courts that found him guilty of blasphemy, and the cries of the crowd for his crucifixion. Now the descent continues.

The Roman soldiers dramatized mankind's rejection of Jesus as King in verse 27–31. They played a sadistic game with Jesus, outfitting him like a king but with a cast-off robe, a crown of thorns, a reed sceptre, and a mocking tribute: "Hail, king of the Jews." It would have been horrible for anyone, but this is Jesus, whose rightful throne is encircled by "a rainbow, resembling an emerald," whose rightful attendants are 24 elders also seated on thrones, thousands upon thousands of angels, and beings too extraordinary for human description; whose rightful worship resounds with "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "You are worthy ... to receive glory and honour and power." This is the one whom those guards parodied and whom this world rejected.

Everything that surrounded the crucifixion shouts rejection (verses 32–38), a tightly packed summary according to the Old Testament script:

- He was taken outside the holy city - rejected by his people, like the sin offerings in Deuteronomy.
- He was offered wine mixed with gall, which tasted like bile. Some think this was a merciful narcotic, but more likely it was another mocking rejection, as predicted in Psalm 69:21: "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst."
- He was crucified on a man-made tree, the sign of God's curse: Deuteronomy 21:23: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse".
- His clothes were confiscated, leaving him nothing, fulfilling the prediction of Psalm 22:18, a psalm of the Messiah's rejection: "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."
- They ironically placed over his head the charge: "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews."
- They crucified him between two terrorists or robbers, as predicted in Isaiah 53:12 "[He] was numbered with the transgressors."

Rejection was written on every single act that surrounded Jesus' death, yet apparently no one saw that this was the Suffering Servant of Israel prophesied by Isaiah.

Added to these deeds of rejection was the crowd's ridicule in verses 39–44. In essence, these taunts said:

- You can't build a new temple; why, you can't even save yourself.
- You aren't the Son of God, because God won't save you. God doesn't want you!

To think such things were said to the one who is one with the Father - to the one who is the Son of God.

Then came the hammer blow: Jesus was forsaken by God the Father (verses 45–49). The darkness from noon till three signalled that God's own court was in session. Dark drapes were pulled around the proceedings. It was both too holy and too terrible for our eyes. The darkness was a familiar portent of God's judgment. Listen to the ominous prediction of Amos 8:9–10:

“‘In that day,’ declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.’”

The darkness meant judgment, the judgment of God upon our sins, his wrath as it were burning itself out in the very heart of Jesus, so that he, as our Substitute, suffered most intense agony, indescribable woe, terrible isolation or forsakenness. Hell came to Calvary that day, and the Saviour descended into it and bore its horrors in our stead.

We call it the cry of desolation - “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” - It climaxes the abandonment of Jesus.

C. S. Lewis wrote: “To God, God's last words are ‘Why hast thou forsaken me?’” God the Father forsook God the Son because the Judge would not look upon the sin-bearer. Jesus in those moments was no longer spotless; he was thoroughly stained with our sin. He was no longer faultless; he was guilty through and through with our sin. God could not help him; God could not even face him.

When all this rejection came to the crushing climax of the Father's own rejection - when Jesus had suffered from sin and for sin - when it was all accomplished, verse 50 says:

“He gave up his spirit.”

It was at this moment, when he was experiencing the abyss of his alienation from the Father and was being cruelly mocked by those he came to serve, that he chose to yield up his life a ‘ransom for many.’

Jesus endured all this rejection for sinners. He died from sin and for sin.

Gale Webbe wrote: “The only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living, human being. When it is absorbed there, like blood in a sponge or a spear thrown into one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further.”

The charge of the mockers hangs in the air:

“He saved others,” they said, “But he can't save himself.”

Of course, he could not save himself. He had not come to save himself. He had come to save the world.

2. JESUS INAUGURATED A NEW KINGDOM OF LIFE – Matthew 27:51-54

In this passage Matthew records some amazing events. Each was a sign of the life that Jesus had secured. When Jesus died, rejected as king, he inaugurated a new kingdom of life.

In verse 51, the torn veil in the temple signalled that forever after, forgiven sinners could go boldly to God without fear. The temple would continue to be in use for nearly another 40 years, but in that moment it was essentially obsolete. All it represented had been torn down, just as Jesus had

promised. No more sacrifices were needed. The priests all became unnecessary; they were just going through the motions. The great festivals were fulfilled.

By being rejected as Messiah-King, Jesus opened the way to God and closed the door forever on the old ways.

- Did you pray this week? You were heard because the veil was torn when Jesus died.
- Did you find forgiveness for your sins? You were forgiven because the veil is torn.
- Did you enjoy the Lord's company, his grace and truth? It was so because the veil is torn.
- Did you think of your heavenly home? It will be yours because the veil is torn!

Verses 51–53 indicate that when Jesus died there was an earthquake and the bodies of the holy people were resurrected.

The seemingly powerless Saviour was mighty enough in his death to break open the dungeons of the dead. These holy people had trusted God for this moment, never imagining quite how extraordinary it would be. This hints at our own future - saints walking out of death, into the Holy City, testimonies of the power of Christ's life to all we meet in that eternal home.

In verse 54 the centurion and soldiers, who abused Jesus, mocked him as king and crucified him as a criminal, they praised and acknowledge Jesus as God.

The blasphemed Son of God is vindicated by the praise of the very sinners who killed him.

This first expression of budding faith is not made at the empty tomb, but at the feet of the dead Saviour. This all happened as darkness of judgment fled away and the earth convulsed beneath their feet.

There were at least two converts on that afternoon - the one crucified terrorist and the crucifying centurion. And they were the first of an innumerable host of unlikely descendants born to Jesus in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:10:

“Though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days.”

Had the centurion not said it, the rocks would have - as would have the angels, the stars, even the demons. But he did say it. It fell to a nameless foreigner to state what they all knew.

‘Surely this man was the Son of God.’”

So let us together echo that great triumphant affirmation from the foot of the cross: Surely he was the Son of God!

How do you need to respond to Jesus' death on the cross for you?

Do you need to accept his forgiveness and proclaim him Lord of your life?

Do you need to commit your life to his service as a result of his sacrifice for you? If you have previously made that commitment, evaluate the current direction of your life. Does it reflect gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice and discipleship in his ways?