

The Wickedness of the Crucifixion, Part 2

Scripture: Matthew 27:38–44

Code: 2396

INTRODUCTION

Jesus clearly stated that His generation was wicked (Matt. 16:4). He said the leaders of Israel were full of wickedness (Matt. 22:18; Luke 11:39). Paul, in reference to unbelieving Christ-rejectors, said they are filled with all wickedness (Rom. 1:29). The heart of man is desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). When given over to his own devices, man will perpetrate crimes beyond imagination.

A. The Expression of the World's Wickedness

The wickedness of man is no more clearly seen than in the execution of Jesus Christ. Nothing could prove more conclusively the pervasive corruption of human nature. That seems to be Matthew's particular concern in writing his gospel. As we go through Matthew's record of the crucifixion, we see unrelenting evil.

Commentator David Thomas wrote, "For six thousand years wickedness had been growing. It had wrought deeds of impiety and crime that had rung the ages with agony, and often roused the justice of the universe to roll her fiery thunderbolts of retribution through the world. But now it had grown to full maturity; it stands around the cross in such gigantic proportions as had never been seen before; it works an enormity before which the mightiest of its past exploits dwindle into insignificance and pale into dimness. It crucifies the Lord of life and glory" (The Gospel of Matthew; A Homiletical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979], p. 536).

B. The Extent of Christ's Sufferings

Wicked men were not content just to execute Jesus Christ; they had to torment Him in the process. Such is the cruelty of the human heart when fully exposed.

We should not be shocked at the sorrow our Savior bore. He was a man of sorrows (Isa. 53:3). His sufferings were great. They were too great even for us to comprehend fully. We could say He suffered more sorrow than any man who ever lived. According to Isaiah 53:4, He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. So in bearing sin, Jesus bore the collective grief and sorrow of every person who ever lived. He also experienced sorrow at being alienated and separated from His Father for a time as He bore the sins of the world. Jesus suffered more than all men put together have ever suffered.

The prophet Isaiah said the Messiah was acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3). He experienced little else. Grief was His constant companion. He wept on several occasions, but never does Scripture indicate that He laughed. Many Christians centuries ago used to beg God to give them mercy for the unknown sufferings they might have caused Jesus Christ. They realized they could not even conceive of all the suffering He endured.

How Did Christ Suffer?

1. He suffered from temptation

Hebrews 4:15 says He "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Hebrews 2:18 says, "He himself hath suffered being tempted." Jesus was constantly assaulted by temptation. His temptation was real even though He never sinned.

2. He suffered from self-denial

Jesus refused to have what we assume to be the normal comforts of life. He deprived Himself. As Henry Barraclough said in his hymn "Ivory Palaces," our Lord went "out of the ivory palaces, into a

world of woe." Paul said Christ "thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and, being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death" (Phil. 2:6-8). He was born in a stable. He had no personal possessions. He experienced hunger, thirst, weariness, and the absence of all worldly comforts.

3. He suffered from rejection

Jesus was hated, despised, mocked, maligned, reviled, rebuked, blasphemed, reproached, and falsely accused. All that reached a furious culmination in the events around His cross.

4. He suffered from sin

Although He was sinless, Jesus bore all the sins of all the world on the cross. Paul said Jesus actually became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). He suffered from the weight of sin. And because of His omniscience, He no doubt suffered in anticipation of His suffering.

5. He suffered from Satan

Satan plagued Jesus from the time of His birth, having tried to eliminate Him by Herod's decree. He continued his assault on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane with three great waves of temptation in an attempt to dissuade Him from going to the cross. Satan threw all the fury that hell could break loose on Jesus' head, yet he could only bruise His heel (Gen. 3:15). Yet that still caused Jesus tremendous suffering. Satan even used His beloved Peter to tempt Him. Jesus had to say, "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Matt. 16:23). In one final assault, the devil entered Judas and used him to betray Christ.

6. He suffered from the wrath of God

When Jesus became sin on the cross, God poured out on Him all of heaven's fury against all the sin on earth.

Matthew 27:27-44 shows us Christ's suffering at the hands of wicked men. Matthew's objective was to emphasize the rejection of the King. And that rejection mounted until it reached its climax in the crucifixion. To help us see the wickedness of the scene, I want to draw your attention to four different groups: the ignorant wicked, the knowing wicked, the fickle wicked, and the religious wicked. Every person in the world who does not come to faith in Jesus Christ fits into one of those groups. They were all present at the cross, and they are still around today.

I. THE IGNORANT WICKED--The Callous Soldiers (vv. 27-37)

A. The Mockery of Jesus (vv. 27-30)

The Return of the King

As the Roman soldiers mocked Christ's sovereignty, little did they know He was a King who one day would wear a different blood-spattered robe. Revelation 19:13 shows Jesus Christ coming out of heaven in glory wearing a robe of majesty. However, this robe will be spotted with the blood of His enemies and not with His own blood. One day Jesus will also wear a royal crown (Gk., diadema) far different from a crown of thorns (Gk., stephanos). In fact, Revelation 19:12 says He will wear many crowns. Jesus alone will be King. Some day He will wield a scepter, but it will not be a reed. According to Revelation 19:15, Jesus will rule with a rod of iron, with which He will bring instant judgment on an unbelieving world. There will be no one to mock Jesus then. Psalm 2:4 says, "He who sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision."

B. The Crucifixion of Jesus (vv. 31-37)

Examining a Crucifixion Matthew doesn't give us any of the details of the crucifixion, but it is helpful to have some understanding of what Christ endured on the cross. The soldiers first laid the cross on the ground and then placed the victim on it. They extended His feet, pulling His toes down. Then they

drove a large nail through the arch of one foot and then through the arch of the other foot. Next, they extended His hands, allowing His knees to flex a little. Then they drove two great nails through His wrists, just below the heel of each hand. They couldn't put them through the palms because the flesh would tear.

Once the soldiers nailed the victim to the cross, they lifted it and dropped it into a hole. When it hit bottom, the shock caused the victim great pain. He is now crucified. Slowly He began to sag down more and more. With his weight being held by the nails running through His wrists, excruciating pain shot up his arms. To try to relieve the pain, the victim pushed up on the two wounds in his feet. That caused even more pain. Hour after hour he endured a wrenching, twisting tradeoff as he tried to relieve the pain in his hands and then in his feet. After awhile, the pain made it impossible to move.

Dr. Truman Davis writes,

At this point, another phenomenon occurred as the arms fatigued, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs but it can't be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself to get even one short breath. Finally carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps subside. He would grasp short breaths of air, hours of limitless pain, cycles of twisting joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down the rough timber, a deep crushing pain in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with [fluid] and begins to compress the heart. And this leads to death.

What agony!

II. THE KNOWING WICKED--The Crass Thieves (vv. 38, 44)

A. Their Character (v. 38)

"Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left."

Another way Pilate dishonored Christ was to crucify Him between a couple of "malefactors" (Luke 23:33), which means "evil doers" or "criminals." The Greek word in Matthew 27:38 is lestai. There are two words in the Greek language for stealing. Kleptai is the word from which we get kleptomaniac--a petty thief who is addicted to stealing. But lestai refers to a bandit or a plundering robber--a man who would kill if he had to. These men were the worst of criminals. It is likely they were associates of Barabbas, who originally was intended to be crucified between them before Jesus took his place.

B. Their Contempt (v. 44)

"The thieves also, who were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth."

The thieves heaped the same insults on Him as the Jewish leaders, who said, "If he be the king of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him [God] deliver him now, if he will have him; for he said, I am the Son of God" (Matt. 27:43).

They probably knew something about Jesus because they were part of Jewish society. They may have had occasion to hear Him speak. We don't know for sure. Chances are they knew more about Him than the Roman legionnaires, who for the most part didn't care what happened in that part of the world.

The two thieves were wicked. They heaped insults at Jesus. The ignorant pagans were not the only ones who rejected Jesus Christ and took pleasure at his execution. For these crass, materialistic bandits, life revolved around the loot they could steal. They had no thoughts about righteousness, truth, justice, honor, and godliness. They had no concern for morality and Messiahs.

There are people like that in our world today. They know about Jesus--they may not know much, but they know a little. However, for them life revolves around material things. They have little regard for righteousness or truth. They live to indulge themselves, and pay a great price for it. The two thieves were so committed to their life-style that they continued to fire insults at the Son of God while facing

their own death. They represent blasphemers who have a greater love for the things of the world than they do for the things of God.

III. THE FICKLE WICKED--The Careless Crowd (vv. 39-40)

The careless crowd represents people who hear Christ's words, and invite Him to be a part of their life, but eventually turn away.

A. Their Decreasing Enthusiasm (v. 39a)

"And they that passed by"

We can be sure many people passed by Jesus since victims were crucified along a highway. The crucifixion took place directly outside the wall of Jerusalem along a road heading north. It was frequently traveled, and especially this day since it was the Passover. Pilgrims swelled the city as many prepared to eat the Passover that evening. With so much traffic, the scene of the crucifixion was a busy place.

The same crowd that cried "Crucify Him!" had hailed Him a few days earlier with their hosannas (Matt. 21:10). They hailed Him as their Messiah, the Savior, the one who would deliver them from Rome's oppression. But they were fickle. They had a place for Jesus: they wanted to see His miracles, signs, and wonders. They listened to His teaching. They were awed by His teaching and His confrontation of the evil religious leaders. Jesus fascinated them. They knew who He claimed to be, and had seen Him demonstrate the veracity of those claims. But now He was a victim of the Romans, so they rejected Him.

B. Their Increasing Rejection (vv. 39b-40)

1. Physical taunting (v. 39b)

"[They] reviled Him, wagging their heads."

The Greek word translated reviled is in the imperfect tense, which indicates that they kept on reviling Him with continual defamation and blasphemy. They wagged their heads in taunting fashion. Psalm 22:7-8 predicted that would happen: "All they who see me laugh me to scorn; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him; let him deliver him." They weren't trying to fulfill Scripture; they didn't even consider it.

2. Verbal taunting (v. 40)

"And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross."

a) The claims Why did they say that? Because those were the two accusations that came out against Christ in the trial before Annas and Caiaphas. (1) He would raise the Temple The religious leaders gathered false witnesses who said, "This fellow [Jesus] said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days" (Matt. 26:61). They tried to come up with a crime because they wanted to kill Jesus. The Jewish leaders knew what the verdict was going to be; they just didn't have a crime to fit it. So they bribed false witnesses to give false testimony. Jesus did say, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up (John 2:19), but He was referring to the temple of His body (v. 21). So the leaders perverted one of Jesus' statements to use against Him, claiming He was intending to destroy their Temple. (2) He claimed to be the Son of God In Matthew 26:63-64 Caiaphas said to Jesus, "I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said" (cf. Mark 14:61-62a). He was condemned for clearly stating the truth. b) The challenge The leaders now used the same accusations to incite the passers-by to mock Christ as He suffered on the cross. The people obliged, saying, "So you're going to destroy the temple and then build it in three days? Well, let's see you show your power by getting off that cross--some Son of God!" It wasn't enough for Christ to die; they had to taunt Him in the process. The mindless, fickle crowd that was throwing palm branches at His feet and hailing Him as the Messiah on Monday was now mocking and blaspheming His name on Friday. c) The conviction Jesus didn't fulfill the crowd's expectation. When He rode into Jerusalem on Monday, they thought He would

attack the Romans. But He didn't. For an entire week He had done nothing, and now He was hanging on a cross, put there by the Romans. They thought He couldn't be their Messiah because He had become a victim. The affirmation from Pilate that Jesus was innocent added to their conviction that Jesus wasn't their Messiah. They assumed the Messiah would lead them in military triumph over Rome and all the other nations. The crowd had forgotten their hallelujahs and hosannas in their disappointment over Jesus' failure to give them what they wanted when they wanted it. So they turned against Him and continually blasphemed His name. The fickle crowd is reminiscent of evil people today. Many people have been to church: perhaps they were raised in the church and know the message of salvation. Maybe they've had Christian training and made a profession of faith at some point in time. But that was all in the past and they are no longer interested. Since then they've gone on to other things. They're interested in Jesus only if He can bring immediate satisfaction--if He doesn't deliver what they want when they want it, they forget Him. I grieve about that. The person who knows about the claims and power of Jesus has a great responsibility to respond to that knowledge. If he walks away, he will receive the severer punishment. The mother of a young man approached me on one occasion and said, "I raised my son in the church and in the things of the Lord, but now he's decided to be a homosexual." What a tragedy! He represents the fickle crowd that finds something they want more than Jesus Christ. At one time they sing the songs and hail Him; at another time they blaspheme His name. The world is full of people who at one time hailed Jesus but now taunt Him. They never had salvation. They knew the truth about Jesus, but rejected it. The fickle wicked are traitors.

IV. THE RELIGIOUS WICKED--The Cruel Leaders (vv. 41-43)

A. The Hypocritical Authorities (v. 41)

"Likewise also the chief priests, mocking him, with the scribes and elders"

The religious leaders were insincere and hypocritical. They were the lowest level of blasphemers--religious hypocrites who paraded their supposed piety. They appeared to represent God, to know the truth, and to be pure, godly, and virtuous--but they hated Christ.

The chief priests were the upper level of priests who served in the Temple ministries. The scribes were the authorities on the law. And the elders were supposed to be the revered men of wisdom and maturity in the land. Those three groups constituted the Sanhedrin--the ruling body of Israel. The religious elite--who supposedly knew everything there was to know about God--mocked Jesus. Notice that they didn't talk to Christ like the crowd did. They despised Him so much that they wouldn't talk to Him, so they talked to each other about Him.

B. The Hateful Attacks (vv. 42-43)

1. Against Christ's Power (v. 42)

a) His healing ministry (v. 42a) "He saved others; himself He cannot save." The leaders were referring to Jesus' deliverance of people from demons. The leaders never once denied the miracles of Jesus. It was impossible to do that. To get around the obvious problem, they attributed them to Satan's power (Matt. 12:24). When Jesus did not come down from the cross, they were sure of it. They believed God was on their side, and that His greater power kept Christ on the cross. b) His sovereignty (v. 42b) "If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him." They wanted to see His power and sovereignty in action right then. They often asked for a sign (e.g., Matt. 12:38-41). Yet even if He had come down from the cross, they wouldn't have believed Him. That's how evil their hearts were. They were not sincere in their request; they were mocking and laughing at Him. They had no idea why Christ would remain on the cross if He really had the power to come down. They didn't understand the concept of a sacrificial death.

2. Against Christ's person (v. 43)

"He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him; for he said, I am the Son of God." That verse is the fulfillment of Psalm 22:8. The truthfulness of the prophetic Word was declared at

the cross.

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God on many occasions--most recently in response to Caiaphas' question (Matt. 26:63). The religious wicked had nothing to do with God. They were blind leaders, apostates, false teachers, hypocrites, and wolves in sheep's clothing, doomed to the hottest hell.

CONCLUSION

Every unbeliever fits into one of four categories: he is either an ignorant unbeliever, a knowledgeable unbeliever, a fickle unbeliever, or a religious unbeliever.

A. The Guilty

Every unbeliever, no matter when he lives, is as guilty as the unbelievers who witnessed the crucifixion of Christ.

1. Zechariah 12:10--Someday Israel will look on Him "whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son." The people who will be alive at the time Zechariah is referring will be just as guilty as those who put Christ on the cross.

2. Hebrews 6:6--Those who reject Christ "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." You either stand with the believers or the crucifiers.

B. The Forgiven

What sticks in my mind regarding the crucifixion of Christ is His saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners, would not come down from the cross because He had to die for the ignorant soldiers, the knowing thieves, the fickle crowd, and the vile religious leaders. So great is the compassion of God that Christ died for all who would crucify Him.

1. A centurion

Matthew 27:54 says, "When the centurion, and they that were with him watching [guarding] Jesus." Who was he? Verse 36 tells us that the Roman soldiers put Him on the cross and then sat down and watched Him. This centurion was the leader of those men. Verse 54 continues, "[When they] saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly, this was the Son of God." Luke 23:47 says, "When the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man." I believe Scripture indicates the centurion came to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior that day. By the saving grace of God, he and perhaps some of his companions were plucked out of the group of the ignorant wicked to embrace the Savior they crucified.

2. A thief

Luke 23:39-43 says, "One of the malefactors who were hanged railed at him [Jesus], saying, If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us. But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we, indeed, justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds. But this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." Here are the knowing wicked--one self-indulgent thief heaping insults of blasphemy on Jesus Christ and the other crying out for mercy to the only one who can save him.

3. A crowd

The apostle Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, launches into a great sermon about Christ (Acts 2:14-40). He indicts the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ in verse 23. In verse 24 he talks about the resurrection of the Lord. Then in verse 36 he says, "God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." What happened? The people "were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.... they that gladly received his word were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (vv. 37-38,

41). God, in His sovereign grace, saved three thousand souls out of the crowd that rejected Christ, screamed for His crucifixion, and reviled Him on the cross. Verse 47 says more were added every day.

4. A company of priests

The church was beginning to flourish as more people were led to the Savior. Acts 6:7 says, "The word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." I'm confident that God saved some of the religious leaders who mocked and blasphemed the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is indeed the friend of sinners. He died on the cross to bear the sins of the very ones who crucified Him--and those of all ages who reject Him. He calls sinners to Himself out of each group. He is able and eager to forgive. Where are you? If you're in one of those groups of rejectors, know that Christ died for you. He longs to embrace you and give you the salvation He so freely provided. He stayed on the cross not because He couldn't come down, but because He wouldn't come down. The Savior shed tears for those who shed His blood. Such is the compassion of God and the gift of salvation.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In what ways did Jesus experience sorrow?
2. How did Jesus Christ suffer?
3. Whose blood will be on Christ's robe when He returns in glory? What kind of crown will He wear? What kind of sceptre will He wield (Rev. 19:12-15)?
4. Describe how a person was crucified.
5. What kind of thieves were crucified on either side of Jesus?
6. Why can we probably conclude that the thieves knew about Christ?
7. Why did so many people pass by the scene of Christ's crucifixion?
8. Why did the crowd taunt Jesus the way they did (Matt. 27:40)?
9. Why didn't the Jewish crowd believe Jesus was their Messiah?
10. Who were the chief priests, scribes, and elders?
11. What aspects of Christ's work did the religious leaders mock (Matt. 27:42-43)?
12. Give examples of people who were forgiven, even though they either mocked or crucified Jesus.

Pondering the Principles

1. Review the section on the sufferings of Christ . If rated on a scale of 1-10, Christ's sufferings are a 10. How do your own sufferings rate? To what degree do you share in the sufferings of Christ? Read 1 Peter 4:1-2, 12-19. The apostle Peter learned some valuable lessons from our Lord about suffering. What one lesson can you apply to your life today?
2. Review the conclusion of this lesson . You might know of some unbelievers who fit into one of the four categories of the wicked. How do you perceive them? Do you resent them because they reject Jesus Christ? Or do you resent them because they reject what you believe about Christ? What was Christ's attitude toward all the wicked people who mocked Him (Luke 23:34)? How might you apply Christ's attitude to the relationships you have established with unbelievers?

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