

The Agony of the Cross

Matthew 27:27-44

Every religion and every ideology has its own symbol. For the Buddhist it is the lotus flower. Judaism has the Star of David and Islam the crescent. In the past century the communists were known for the hammer and the sickle and the Nazis for the swastika. In our day the democrats have the donkey and the republicans the elephant.

Given that background some people are surprised to learn that in the beginning Christianity had no recognized symbol. In the earliest days Christians recognized each other by declaring "Jesus is Lord." It took several generations for the cross to become the universal symbol of our faith. If you visit the catacombs of Rome, you will discover the crude drawings on the wall made by the earliest Christians in that city as they retreated underground during times of persecution. They drew pictures of Bible stories and they drew the fish, which stood as a secret acrostic for the Greek word IΧΘΥΣ—Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. But in the earliest days they didn't draw the cross. That would come later.

John Stott (The Cross of Christ, pp. 21-46) notes that the cross did not become the common symbol of Christianity until the second century when the custom of making the sign of the cross on the forehead arose. By the time of Emperor Constantine, the cross had become well-established as "the sign" of the Christian faith.

In some ways it is a strange symbol because crucifixion was so hated in the ancient world. It may have been the most brutal means of execution ever devised. Unlike modern methods of capital punishment that are designed to produce a quick death, crucifixion was meant to guarantee that the person on the cross would die a slow, agonizing death, sometimes hanging on the cross until his bloated body fell to the ground.

Execution, capital punishment, the death penalty, these are hotly debated issues in our nation today. On June 11, 2001 one of the worst mass murderers in America's history was executed by lethal injection in Terra Haute, Indiana, in the first execution administered by the federal government since the early 1960's. If anyone ever deserved execution, it is Timothy McVeigh who had no regrets about planting the bomb that killed 168 men, women and children in Oklahoma City in 1995.

If anyone ever didn't deserve execution, it is the Lord Jesus Christ. The innocent Lamb of God willingly laid down His sinless life for our sinfulness. The great hymn writer Isaac Watts put it in these penetrating words,

**"Alas and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?
Was it for crimes that I have done he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!"**

Truly, the cross represents God's best and man's worst. It is the ultimate climax of redemptive history, the perfect revelation of God's grace, love and mercy for mankind. Yet it perfectly pictures man's utter sinful depravity. In the crucifixion, we see God's highest and man's lowest. Matthew's account of the crucifixion shows us the darkest hour of man's sinfulness in contrast with brightest hour of God's love and mercy.

So much had happened in a few hours. Jesus ate the Passover meal with His disciples the evening before. In the meal He instituted the Lord's Supper. He then led them to "a place called Gethsemane" where He labored in prayer for hours. Judas, the traitor then led the arresting mob to Him around midnight. After Jesus was betrayed by Judas and arrested by the armed multitude in the Garden of Gethsemane, He was taken that same night to face a trial before the Jews. The Great Sanhedrin Court, the highest tribunal in Israel violated both the letter and the spirit of the Mosaic Law and the dignity of their position in order to bring about the death of Jesus. Everything about this trial was illegal and unjust. They took Jesus to the Roman governor, Pilate, with a charge of treason and a demand for his death.

As we look at Matthew's account of Jesus' death today we will see the dark depravity of man in the torture from the soldiers, the humiliation of the robbers, the mockery of the passersby and ridicule of the religious leaders.

I. Torture from the Soldiers (vv.27-37).

A. Abuse in the Praetorium (vv.27-31).

The Roman governor, Pilate gave in to the intimidation of the Sanhedrin court. Even though he knew Jesus was innocent of any crime, he chose political expedience and satisfied the mob by delivering Jesus up to be crucified (v.26). Thus he turned Him over to the Praetorium guard. Matthew refers to them in v.27 as **"the soldiers of the governor."**

The **"soldiers"** led Jesus inside the Praetorium and **"gathered the whole garrison [or cohort] around Him."** A Roman cohort consisted of 600 men. Rome often conscripted conquered nations into her armies. Because most people would not fight against their own countries, they often used men from an enemy nation to patrol their occupied territories. Many believe that Pilate's garrison was made up of Syrians since they would hate Jews but still speak their language.

To the soldiers, Jesus was merely another condemned Jew. They were free to abuse Him as much as they wanted as long as they didn't kill Him. Knowing the charges against Him, that He claimed to be a king, they served up severe ridicule.

First, Matthew tells us in v. 28, **"they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him."** Pilate had already had Jesus **"scourged"** (v.26). His skin had literally been torn from His body from the shoulders down past His waist. They removed His personal seamless garment and wrapped a **"scarlet robe"** around His shoulders. It was probably one of their own military capes. Mark and John say that the robe was **"purple"** (Jn.19:2; Mk.15:17). Purple was the traditional color of royalty and the **"scarlet robe"** was as close as they could come.

Though it was not their intention, when the soldiers clothed Jesus in the **"scarlet robe,"** they symbolized how He would soon be willingly clothed in the scarlet sins of all humanity. In Is.1:18, the Lord says, **"Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool."** Jesus voluntarily took our blood-red sins upon Himself.

Next, the soldiers **"twisted a crown of thorns"** and jammed it down upon His head. This was no doubt to mimic the wreath worn by Caesar. The **"thorns"** are also symbolic. Part of the curse of the Fall was the **"thorns and thistles"** that plague man (Gen.3:18). That Jesus suffered the indignity of the **"crown of thorns"** signifies how He bore the curse of the Fall on our behalf.

The soldiers also put **"a reed in His right hand"** and **"bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him"** by saying **"Hail, King of the Jews."** The **"reed"** represented a monarch's scepter, the symbol of power and authority. Instead of humbly bowing before the King of kings, they **"spat on Him"** and **"struck Him on the head"** with His own mock scepter.

Rev.19:15 tells us that Jesus will one day **"rule them [the nations] with a rod of iron."** Instead of a **"reed"** He will **"strike the nations"** with a **"sharp sword"** and tread **"the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God."**

Finally the game was over. The whole scene was cruelly designed for extreme indignity. But when the soldiers grew tired of their heartless humiliation, they **"took the robe off Him"** and **"put His own clothes on Him"** and then **"led Him away to be crucified."**

What stands out to me in this whole ugly scene is the control and restraint of Jesus. The only time Jesus even speaks during His trial and torture was when they asked Him the condemning question, **"Are you the king of the Jews?"** (Matt. 27:11). And He answers simply, **"Yes, it is as you say"** (Matt. 26:64; 27:12). Jesus had already submitted to the Father's will and He was at peace. He was fulfilling Isa.53:7 which says, **"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth."**

B. A Substitute carries the Cross (v.32).

Different Bible scholars portray the carrying of the cross differently. Some suggest that He only carried the crossbeam while others believe that He carried the entire cross, which

probably weighed as much as 200 pounds. Part of the public humiliation of crucifixion was to carry the instrument of one's own death through the narrow, winding and crowded streets of Jerusalem.

Jesus had already suffered horribly. The night before, He had no sleep. His face had been beaten to a bloody pulp. He bore horrible open wounds of the Roman scourge. Remember, the spiritual and emotional dread of becoming sin's sacrifice had almost killed Him in the garden (26:38). He had no strength to carry the cross.

This must have been obvious for "**as they came out**" of the Praetorium, the soldiers "**found a man of Cyrene**" who was named "**Simon**" and made him "**bear His cross.**"

"**Simon**" was a very common name. "**Cyrene**" was a city in Northern Africa with a large population of Jews. Mark says "**he was coming out of the country and passing by,**" obviously a Jewish pilgrim (15:21). Further, Mark adds that he was "**the father of Alexander and Rufus.**" These men seem to be well known to Mark and his readers in Rome. In Rom. 16:13, the Apostle Paul says, "**Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.**"

It seems probable that Simon's carrying of Jesus' cross led not only him to faith, but His whole family as well. Carrying the cross of Christ symbolized how he would spend the rest of His life. Simon literally did what Jesus had told His disciples, "**If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.**" (Matthew 16:24-25).

C. The Grusomeness of Golgotha (vv.33-37).

Jesus was led to "**a place called Golgotha, that is to say, Place of a Skull.**" The Mosaic law forbid executions within the city, so Jesus "**suffered outside the gate**" (Heb.13:12). The place of the crucifixion was called by an Aramaic word "**Golgotha**" which meant "skull." The Latin word is *calvaria* from which we get "Calvary." The name probably came from the shape of the hillside and from the executions that took place there.

"**Golgotha**" was beside a well-traveled thoroughfare that led into the city. Romans crucified criminals in high traffic areas or on hillsides because they wanted as many people to see what happens to those who opposed Rome's rule.

V.34 says that they "**gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink.**" Many believe this was a narcotic beverage given to relax the condemned so that the nails could be driven into their bodies with less of a fight. Prov.31:6 indicates that some Jewish women had the practice of "**give[ing] strong drink to him who is perishing.**" Perhaps it was the women who offered the drink to Jesus.

Verse 34 says "**when He tasted it,**" when He realized its numbing purpose "**He would not drink it.**" Jesus had determined to drink the dregs of the cup of God's wrath and our sin. He would not diminish the full level of His suffering on our behalf. He would accept it all in our place.

V.35 says, "**Then they crucified Him.**" Crucifixion was so common to first century readers that the gospel writers give few details. However, Roman history provides us with much graphic analysis. First Jesus was stripped of His clothing and made to lie down on the cross. Then a large spike was driven between the two bones of the wrist near the pulse. In biblical terminology, the hand refers to the area from the elbow to the fingertips. The small bones in the palm could not sustain the body's weight. Next, Jesus' knees were bent at an angle and a spike was pounded through both feet into the wood. The bent knees allowed the condemned to stand up on the spike in order to fill the lungs with air. Finally, the cross was lifted up and dropped into a hole in the ground. Imagine the searing pain that raced through Jesus' body as the cross struck the bottom of the hole! Perhaps this is prophetically what Ps.22:14 means, "**All My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; It has melted within Me.**"

V.35 also says the soldiers "**divided His garments**" by "**casting lots.**" They gambled over his articles of clothing and especially over His inner "**tunic**" which was "**without seam, woven from top to bottom in one piece**" (Jn.19:23-24). The oldest manuscripts of Matthew do not contain the last part of v.35 but it is absolutely consistent with Ps.22:18 and Jn.19:24. Even the minute details of Jesus' sacrifice were prophesied in the OT.

While Jesus hung from the cross tasting death for everyone (Heb.2:9), the soldiers "**kept watch over Him.**" They were stationed there until He died so that friends might not try to take Him down or end His life mercifully.

The Romans completed one last act of mockery. They put a sign "**over His head**" that said, "**This is Jesus the King of the Jews.**" Jn.19:20 says it was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The Sanhedrin wanted it to say, "**He said 'I am King of the Jews.'**" Pilate replied to them "**What I have written I have written.**"

II. Humiliation from the Robbers (vv.38,44).

V.38 tells us that there were also "**two robbers**" who were crucified alongside Jesus, "**one on the right and another on the left.**" These may have been associates of the notorious criminal Barabbas and that he was to have been crucified in Jesus' place. The Greek word for "**robbers**" seems to indicate that these men were not common thieves but vicious cutthroats who enjoyed torturing and killing their victims as well as plundering their goods.

V.44 tells us that "**even the robbers**" who hung beside Jesus "**reviled Him**" with the same taunts and insults as the growing crowd below Him. He was humiliated on all sides. Isaiah prophesied about Jesus in 53:12, "**He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.**"

III. Mockery from the Passersby (vv.39-40).

Many people gathered around the cross. No doubt the large multitude that shouted to Pilate had moved to Golgotha. The city was teeming with pilgrims who followed the excitement. "**Those who passed by**" refers to hundreds, if not thousands of people.

Many of these people had seen Jesus' miracles and heard His powerful teaching. Many had given Him a King's welcome and proclaimed Him Israel's Messiah at the Triumphal Entry. Now, they "**wagged their heads**" in mockery and "**blasphemed Him.**"

Evidently, the priests had circulated the misunderstood statement from Jesus about destroying and rebuilding the temple to the crowd. They used this to incite them against Him. They cried out, "**You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself!**" Others said, "**If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.**"

David prophesied about Jesus in Psalm 22 saying, "**All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, 'He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!'**"

IV. Ridicule from the Religious Leaders (vv.41-43).

"**The chief priests,**" the Sanhedrin also joined in the "**mocking**" along with the "**scribes and elders.**" They were the agitators who brought about the crucifixion.

They said, "**He saved others; Himself He cannot save.**" The truth was if He saved Himself He could never save others! They said, "**If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross and we will believe Him.**" That was a lie. They had ample evidence to believe but their hearts were hardened. They also said, "**He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him.**"

Jesus could have done what they demanded. He had the power. He had told His disciples He could call twelve legions of angels to rescue Him (Matt. 26:53). But Jesus would not do that. He trusted in God the Father so much that Jesus was fully submitted to the will of the Father. That was why He was on the cross. Jesus show us God's very best, His great love, His unfailing mercy, and His saving purpose.

If the cross showed mankind at his worst, it truly showed God at His best.

"The Third Man"

Last night I dreamed I took a walk up Calvary's lonely hill.
The things I saw with my own eyes could have hardly been more real.

I saw upon three crosses, three men in agony.
Two cried out for mercy; the third man looked at me.

And, oh, the hurt in that man's eyes just broke my heart in two.
It seemed that I could hear him say, "I'm doing this for you."

I knelt beneath the third man's cross and slowly bowed my head.
I reached out to touch his feet, and it stained my hands with red.

And when I heard him cry in pain, I raised my eyes to see.
The blood spilled from the third man's side and some spilled onto me.

The third man wore a crown of thorns; spikes held him to the tree.
I heard him say, "Oh, God, my God, hast Thou forsaken me?"

And there within the mighty crowd, the ones who mocked Him cried:
"King, save thyself if thou art King," and then the third man died.

Suddenly I heard the thunder roar, saw lightning pierce the sky.
The third man was still hanging there, and I began to cry.

I saw the boulders fall and heard the breaking of the ground,
And then I woke, and though I'd dreamed, I touched my cheeks and found

My eyes were wet where I had cried. A dream? I wish I knew.
I still can hear the third man say, "I'm doing this for you."

Source: William Richard Ezell. Proclaim!, Spring 1999, p. 42-43.