

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

C. THE REDEEMER.

30. Lifted Up to Die.

Matthew 27:1-31 (Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25 and John 18:28 – 19:16.) Having managed to pin a charge of blasphemy on Jesus, the chief priests and elders still had a problem – the Roman government had taken from the Jews the right to carry out capital punishment. The only solution was to hand Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pilate, to do the job. If the Jews had been able to carry out the death penalty, they would have done it by stoning. Yet Jesus had said in **John 12:32**, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” The fulfilment of that was by the Roman method of crucifixion. Once again they submitted Jesus to the ignominy of being bound as, rejecting Him who had come to save their nation, they led him like a criminal to the pagan judge.

But these scrupulously law-abiding Jews would not enter Pilate’s palace, for going into a Gentile dwelling would have made them “unclean” and so unable to eat the special Passover meal. It did not matter to them, of course, that they were killing the fulfilment of Passover – the very Lamb of God! But they knew that a charge of blasphemy would not have impressed Pilate, so they changed their charge to one of insurrection - subverting the nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and claiming to be a king. (**Luke 23:2**) In lying so blatantly in their witness they were once again breaking their own laws.

Rituals and laws can sometimes blind us to the truth: can you think of other instances in Scripture or in present-day life where this has happened?

A hot potato for Pilate!

Pilate didn’t want any trouble. The Roman Emperor had already heard complaints against him for his contempt of the Jews and their religious rules, his use of temple funds to build an aqueduct in Jerusalem and his savage crushing of any uprising. So when the Jewish leaders warned Pilate that “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar” (**John 19:12**) they knew they had him by his Achilles’ heel. Pilate tried to brush off his responsibility by sending Jesus to Herod for trial – the same Herod who had killed John the Baptist - but when Herod could not get Jesus to perform for him, he sent Him back, revealing his baseness by joining with his soldiers in their mockery of Jesus. (**Luke 23:6-12**).

It was obvious to Pilate that Jesus was innocent, and this was backed up by his wife who broke protocol by sending a message to Pilate even while he was sitting in judgement, (**Matthew 27:19**), “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.” Desperately Pilate tried to release Jesus, even to presenting the very lowest criminal, Barabbas, as an alternative. He was dumbfounded at their choice – “A murderer they save, the Prince of Life they slay!”¹

Referring to **John 19-1-16** we see that, hoping to satisfy the Jews, Pilate had Jesus flogged – punishment that was enough to kill any man not physically strong – while his soldiers mocked Jesus’ claims to kingship by dressing Him in a purple robe, jamming on His head a crown of thorns, then striking Him in the face with a reed “sceptre”. Pilate brought Jesus out to the crowd with a challenge to their pity, “Here is the man!” But the frenzied shouts from the *chief priests* as well as the crowd was “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate tried to protest Jesus’ innocence, whereupon these rampant law-breakers demanded, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” And now Pilate was really afraid of this enigmatic prisoner who

stood in front of him, and tried once more to appeal to the crowd with “Here is your king”. Back came the answer, “Take him away! Crucify him!” Pilate gave in. He literally “washed his hands” of the whole affair and handed Jesus over to be crucified (**Matthew 27:24,25**) with the disclaimer “I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your responsibility.” Actually, he was far from innocent: Roman law said that an innocent man could not be put to death! All the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” It did not take long, as we see in **Acts 5:28**, for them to try and shrug off this foolhardy challenge: they failed, and the judgement of God fell on them, to continue in some measure down the centuries to this very day.

There are some questions of great importance that we have to answer. Perhaps the greatest is Pilate’s question in Matthew 27:22 – “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Our whole eternity depends on our answer!

On to Calvary.

Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21. And so Jesus was led to Calvary, carrying His own cross, as was the custom. But some flicker of pity for Jesus, weakened as He was by the terrible scourging, made those Roman soldiers dragoon a passer-by to carry the cross for Him. **Mark** calls him Simon, a man from Cyrene (in Libya), the father of Alexander and Rufus, whom, it seems, were well-known. Were they perhaps notable among the early Christians and if so, would their father Simon have also become a follower of Jesus? What impression would Simon have gained as he walked with Jesus? Was he outraged that the Romans should have unfairly subjected himself to this shame? Or did he, even in his humiliation, feel the love of God manifest in Jesus, so that shame turned to faith?

What seemed a burden of shameful injustice for Simon turned out to be a highest privilege. How do we feel about even menial tasks done for the sake of Jesus? Are we prepared to share the shame of the Cross for His sake?

In **Luke 23:27-31** we see Jesus again caring for others in spite of His own suffering. Women of Jerusalem followed the procession with loud mourning wails for His fate, but Jesus even here was concerned for the terrible fate that would soon befall them, as in A.D. 70 Jerusalem was destroyed and the nation ravaged. Jesus, going now to meet the judgement of God, was still filled with pity for those who were soon to come under God’s judgement through their unbelief.

At Golgotha.

Mark 15:22,23 And so they came to Golgotha. It was customary for the women of Jerusalem to offer victims of crucifixion wine drugged with myrrh to dull the pain a little, in compassionate deference to advice given in **Proverbs 31:6**, “Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish.” But Jesus refused that comfort: in this great cosmic struggle where He was taking on the sins of the whole world, it was imperative that He be fully aware and able consciously to offer Himself to God as the complete sacrifice.

Victims were stripped, their hands nailed to a transverse beam as it lay on the ground, then lifted up as the beam was attached to an upright stake and their feet nailed to it. We can hardly bear the horror of it all, and recoil when films make the most of those graphic details. But the gospel writers did not need to harrow our feelings with vivid descriptions: the story is graphic enough with the use of factual restraint. They simply tell us “they crucified Him” and we can see it all. And not only that – somehow, through all the dreadful scene there comes the unmistakable impression that Jesus is still in control. Only He could say, as the blows fell, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (**Luke 23:34.**)

John 19:19-24. A notice of the crime was often posted on the cross of the criminal and Pilate did just that, almost as if he were taunting the Jews, describing Jesus' "crime" as being "The King of the Jews." When the chief priests protested that it was only a claim, not the truth, Pilate refused to placate them: he had already gone far enough. And so, by the use of Aramaic, Roman and Greek languages, Jesus of Nazareth was made manifest to the worlds of religion, of civil power and of culture, as truly the King.

As a reward for their gruesome task Roman soldiers were allowed to divide the victim's clothes among themselves. But when they came to the seamless robe they were reluctant to tear it up, and so cast lots for who should have it. Significantly, their action fulfilled **Psalm 22:18** – "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." It is also significant that the robe of the high priest was seamlessly woven from one piece of fabric. Jesus went to the Cross as our High Priest.

Matthew 27:39-44, Luke 23:39-43. Not that they were any more convinced: the chief priests, teachers of the law, Jewish elders and Roman soldiers were all among the passers-by who taunted Him to prove His claims of divinity by saving Himself even as He hung there. Yet in all that darkness there was a beam of faith. One of the thieves joined in the bitter insults, but it seems that whatever the other thief saw in Jesus, it was enough to convince him of the truth, enough to believe in Christ as Saviour and King. And what the religious law-keepers, the civil upholders and the leaders of society could not do, one sinful man achieved through nothing else than his faith in Christ, who assured him that "today you will be with Me in paradise." (**Luke 23:43**)

I was shocked the first time I heard the saying, "If you had been the only person in the world, Jesus would still have come to earth for you - and you would have killed him." Is it possible that God could love each person as if he/she was the only one in Creation?? Look at that thief - coming to Jesus as we all must come - and Jesus, in that focal point in the universe, that pinnacle of history, giving his whole love to him with the amazing words, "you will be with Me, in paradise." And do you imagine that Jesus loved that poor broken man more than He loves you?

John 19:25-27 gives more evidence of Jesus' selfless compassion. Jesus saw His mother and, knowing the grief she was enduring amid the lack of understanding of His brothers, He made provision for her to have the sympathy and compassion she needed in the arms of His trusted disciple, John. Later, when His brothers did come to believe in Him, John might be released from his obligation. Jesus addressed His mother as "dear woman", a tender and intimate term – in sharp contrast to the insults and mockery He had been receiving.

The ultimate battle.

Matthew 27:45-56. It was noon, the height of the day, yet suddenly there came over the land a strange, pervading darkness, which lasted for three hours. It was not an eclipse – at Passover there was a full moon – but rather, it seems, a thick veil sent by God to shelter His Son from the sacrilegious gaze of any human being during that terrible time as Jesus bore the sins of humanity. That sight was not for human eyes. At the end of that time, the cry came from Jesus' tortured lips, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" That echo of **Psalm 22:1** could also be rendered, "How you have forsaken me!" Jesus did not need to ask why.

Yet the divine Son of God was still human: now He expressed His very human need of water. He suffered for us as a man. **Mark 15:36** tells us of one man, anonymous at that, who became the last person on earth to do something for the human Jesus! He ran, in his eagerness, filled a sponge with wine vinegar (the drink of those who could not afford anything better), stuck the sponge in a bunch of hyssop (**John 19:29**) and held it up to Jesus' lips. A significant fact arises when we realise that

hyssop, a symbol of purification, was used to sprinkle the blood of the Passover lamb on the Israelite doorposts in Egypt!

In **Isaiah 42:13** the prophet describes God as a victor – “The Lord will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior He will stir up His zeal; with a shout He will raise the battle cry and will triumph over His enemies.” And now we come to an amazing echo of that, recorded in **Matthew 27:50, Mark 15:37 and John 19:30**. Victims of crucifixion normally suffered long periods of complete agony, exhaustion, asphyxiation and then unconsciousness before dying. But not so with Jesus. The battle was over, the victory won, and now was the time for the Victor to give His victory shout. Amazingly, Jesus had enough breath and strength to cry with a loud voice, “It is finished!” It was not the last whimper of despair: the actual Greek word He uttered was “tetelestai” which means, “It is accomplished!” He had done what He had come to earth to do, just as He had foreshadowed in His high-priestly prayer, (**John 17:4**) – “I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work You gave Me to do.” It was indeed a cry of triumph.

The Open Way to God.

According to **Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, and Luke 23:45** it was at that moment that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. This curtain, as thick as a man's hand, had hung for centuries in front of the Most Holy Place which, although missing the Ark since the time of the captivity, still represented the earthly dwelling place of God. No man was allowed to enter that sacred place, except for the priest, once a year, taking with him the blood of sacrifice for the sins of the people. But now on the Cross Jesus had done just that – our High Priest had taken His own blood into that Holy of holies where God dwells, and offered it up in that complete and perfect sacrifice for the whole of humanity. So there was no need for the curtain now: through the sacrifice of Christ every believer can go directly into the presence of God. Notice that the curtain was not torn from the bottom to the top: men (they'd have to be strong!) could have done that: only God could tear it from the top to the bottom. (It is interesting to note that an orthodox Jew even today will tear his robe from top to bottom, if his son dies!)

The torn curtain marked the beginning of the decline of temple worship and sacrifices which has never been completely reinstated. Do we appreciate enough our freedom to worship God at any time, anywhere and in any circumstances? And do we heed Jesus' words in John 4:24 – “God is spirit, and His worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

And now Jesus was dying – but not as other crucified victims died. In **John 10:17,18** Jesus had told His disciples, “I lay down my life ...no one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord.” And now, as told in **Luke 23:46**, Jesus called out again with a loud voice, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” And then, in perfect submission and perfect trust in His Father, He took His last human breath.

And in the face of all the scorn, hatred, grief and shame, one man – a Gentile, a Roman centurion - came to a place of faith. **Mark 15:39** says, “When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard His cry and saw how He died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

Of course, those law-abiding religious leaders could not break the law of **Deuteronomy 21:22,23** by having bodies hanging on a tree overnight, so they asked Pilate to kill the victims off so that they could take them down that day. No trouble for the Roman soldiers – they simply broke the legs of the two thieves and this last straw would hasten their death. But with Jesus there was no need to do that: He was already dead. With unspeakable savagery one of the soldiers thrust his spear into Jesus' side, whereupon there came forth a flow of blood and water. Medical authorities say that, in the case of heart rupture, the blood collects in the pericardium – the lining around the wall of the heart – and

divides into a bloody clot and a watery serum. There is no doubt at all that Jesus did actually die – and He died of a broken heart. The suffering for humanity's sin was more than even the strongest human constitution could stand. He did that for us.

I cannot work, my soul to save:
That work my Lord has done!
But I will work like any slave,
For love of God's dear Son. ²

¹Come in, O come! The door stands open now, H.C.G.Moule, Hymn 251, Baptist Church Hymnal, (Revised) 1933, Psalms and Hymns Trust, London.

²Author unknown: TheAnvil Ministry