

Jesus Died For Our Sins
Matthew 27:27-56
Key Verse: 27:46

"About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')."

In this passage Matthew tells the facts of Jesus' crucifixion and death. Evil men killed Jesus like a criminal, suppressing his innocence and true identity. Yet Jesus' words and deeds, Scripture, and God himself testify that Jesus is the king of Israel and the Son of God. Jesus' death was for our sins. Jesus opened the way to God and gives eternal life to all who believe. This message is simple--even a child can understand. Yet its meaning and application are as deep as the ocean. As we studied in Galatians earlier this year, Paul's secret of a victorious life was to live each day by faith in Christ crucified, the Son of God, who loved him and gave himself for him (Gal 2:20). Both mature and new Christians, as well as seekers, have precious lessons to learn from this passage. Let's consider prayerfully what Jesus' death means and how it applies to each of us personally.

We will study in two parts: Jesus' crucifixion (27-44), and Jesus' death (45-56). In crucifixion, Jesus is an example to us in carrying the cross of mission. In death, Jesus is our Savior, and the object of our faith.

I. Jesus' crucifixion (27-44)

As verse 26 tells us, after being condemned, Jesus was flogged. It was a severe beating administered to the flesh with rods and whips, some of which had metal hooks attached to the ends to gash the flesh, causing blood to ooze forth. It was not unusual for flogging to induce death. Bleeding from a hundred wounds and in great pain, Jesus was handed over to Roman soldiers. He was taken to the Praetorium, where the governor resided. A whole company of tough soldiers, perhaps two hundred of them, gathered around Jesus. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. They twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. Then they put a staff in his right hand, knelt in front of him and mocked him: "Hail, king of the Jews!" They spit on him and struck him on the head again and again. In addition to the great physical pain, Jesus experienced mental and emotional anguish. He was utterly humiliated by crude soldiers. This kind of wounding and mocking arouses intense anger and hatred; it can drive a person insane. But Jesus endured it without response. Jesus was taking the punishment and all the wounds in our places. Isaiah 53:5 says, "...by his wounds we are healed...."

A New York Times bestseller this year is "Unbroken." It recounts the experience of Louis Zamperini. As a member of the U.S. Air Force during World War II, he was captured by the Japanese and imprisoned as a POW. There he was routinely tortured by one particular guard, nicknamed "the Bird." After rescue, his physical wounds healed relatively quickly. But his inner wounds did not. He had constant nightmares of being beaten. Finally he determined to go to Japan and find the Bird and kill him. In this murderous state he attended the 1949 Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles. He accepted Christ and was healed instantly from hatred and bitterness. He began to sleep well and stopped abusing alcohol. He began to grow in the love of Christ and eventually forgave his tormenter. Many people have been deeply wounded. They try to soothe themselves through vain amusements, substance abuse, or buying what they like. When this fails, they despair. But there is healing for the wounded soul. Jesus was wounded in our places. When we accept Jesus we can find true healing.

Jesus' quiet courage in the midst of mocking and beating must have impressed the soldiers. But they had an agenda to keep. They were not being paid to think, but to carry out orders. So they put his own clothes back on him and led Jesus away from the Praetorium to Golgotha. This came to be called the "Via Dolorosa," or "the way of grief." People lined the streets, many of them jeering Jesus, assuming he was a condemned criminal. Jesus was so weakened by pain and the loss of blood that he could not carry the cross by himself. So the soldiers conscripted a man named Simon from Cyrene to carry the cross. At first, it seemed like a terrible intrusion into his personal life. He had just been observing the event as he went about his business. And suddenly he was thrust into the midst of it all. He had to share the punishment and derision that Jesus received. But it became his opportunity to meet God in Jesus. His life was profoundly changed and blessed. Simon's family later became influential in the Christian community (Mk 15:21; Ro 16:13). God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, blesses people through Jesus' cross in unexpected ways. It is pure grace.

After a painful march, they came to Golgotha, which means, "the place of the skull." It was an eerie place that reeked of death, for it was used for public execution. As they prepared to crucify Jesus, they offered him wine mixed with gall. This was a bitter narcotic that could dull his senses to pain. Jesus politely tasted it, showing gratitude for the favor. But Jesus refused to drink it. At the Last Supper, Jesus had vowed before his disciples not to drink of the fruit of the vine again until he drank it with them in his Father's kingdom (Mt 26:29). This vow represented Jesus' resolve to go through the pain of crucifixion. Jesus did not seek to alleviate his suffering, but to fulfill his mission, going through all the pains. Furthermore, Jesus did not want his senses to be dulled by drugs. He needed to be spiritually alert to pray and to fight the forces of evil which were assailed against him. We can learn from Jesus how to carry out God's mission for us. Mission involves pain. If we are preoccupied with reducing our pain, we will be distracted from the mission itself. Like Jesus, we should decide in prayer to go through the pain, whatever it is, and keep our focus on carrying out the mission.

Verse 35 begins, "When they had crucified him...." Matthew does not describe the process of crucifixion, for it was commonly known. It was the form of capital punishment used by Romans until Constantine declared it illegal in the fourth century. For modern people, it requires explanation. In America, many publicly denounce torture of any kind, even for terrorists. Capital punishment is carried out humanely and quickly through painless drugs or electric shock. However, the Romans devised crucifixion for the express purpose of inflicting pain--as much as possible, for as long as possible. To them, it was not only a means of obtaining justice, but it was also a deterrent. Crucifixion may be the most awful form of punishment ever devised. The condemned was stretched out and nailed to a wooden cross through his hands and feet. Then the cross was put upright to display his naked and dying form to all who passed by. Movement was excruciatingly painful. Yet the condemned needed to lift up his body to take the pressure off of his lungs in order to breathe. The punishment kept the condemned struggling between life and death for as long as possible. One man took nine days to die, and fell in and out of consciousness a thousand times in the process. Why did Jesus have to suffer in this way? Isaiah said, "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...." (Isa 53:4-5) We deserve this punishment for our sins. But Jesus took it in our places. Thank you, Jesus.

Here we learn how offensive sin is to God. We tend to take sin too lightly. With nasty gossip, some assassinate another's character, and say, "I was just venting." Some cheat their employers by using work time to surf the Internet or do personal business, and then say, "Anyway, I am overworked and underpaid." Some indulge in pornography and say, "I didn't hurt anyone." Some abuse their bodies through gluttony, alcohol or drug abuse, and then expect subsidized health care which burdens our entire society. Some randomly waste resources with no regard to the effect it will have on future generations. Some rebel against God-given authority, claiming human rights. But this kind of selfish, ungodly behavior is sin. Sin is so offensive to God that he made Jesus suffer terribly on the cross. In light of the cross, we must call sin the awful thing that it is. We must hate sin and repent of it. Our response to the cross should not be trite and superficial. We must deeply realize the seriousness of sin through Jesus' suffering.

Above Jesus' head the soldiers placed the written charge against him: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." It is a true testimony of who Jesus really is. It must have given the soldiers pause as they beheld the quiet dignity of Jesus, hanging under the sign "The King of the Jews."

Verses 38-44 tell us how Jesus was slandered viciously on the cross. He was placed between two rebels to portray him as a chief rebel, guilty by association. He was insulted by passersby, the religious leaders, and even the rebels being crucified next to him. Jesus must have felt totally rejected as the object of everyone's contempt. The content of their insults were mockery of his claims to be the king of Israel and the Son of God. Their taunting, fueled by the devil, sought to provoke Jesus to prove his identity by coming down from the cross, displaying his power to save himself. Jesus could have done so. But it would mean forfeiting the chance to save us. Jesus did not save himself, so that he might save us from our sins.

The religious leaders insinuated that if God loved Jesus he would rescue him. By this logic, not rescuing him meant God did not love him. This was the devil's temptation to doubt God's love and fall into self-pity. Matthew does not record Jesus' response. The book of Hebrews explains that for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at God's right hand (Heb 12:2). Jesus' heart was set on God's promise of victory and the joy to follow. Jesus held this promise with faith. In this way he overcame temptation and stayed on the cross to the end.

Many of us are in the midst of lonely and painful struggles. For some it is a sudden illness that has left us feeling helpless. For others it is a broken relationship that leaves us feeling isolated. For others it is a job problem that makes us feel shameful. As we struggle, the devil comes and says, "If God really loved you, would he let you suffer like this?" This is the same temptation that Jesus endured. In those moments, we must look at Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of our faith. He understands our suffering through his experience. He overcame it and won the victory. Jesus on the cross showed us how to overcome temptation. When we depend on Jesus, we can go through trial and hardship until we gain victory.

II. Jesus' death (45-56)

Matthew's narrative takes a turn in verse 45. Until now, the emphasis has been on the awful treatment that Jesus had to endure. But something happened that turns our attention to God himself. Look at verse 45. "From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land." As we know, these are the hours when the sun shines the brightest. Yet it became dark over all the land. This darkness came from God. God silenced the mockers who were deriding Jesus. God covered Jesus for three hours while he finished his work on the cross. God was in control of this event, not evil men. The prophet Amos foretold this: "'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 make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day'" (Am 8:9-10). God's only Son Jesus was hanging on the cross dying for the sins of the world. God's heart was broken for his Son. God mourned for his Son with great pain. God bore this pain to show his love for us. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God loves each one of us so much that he exchanged his only Son for our salvation from sin (Jn 3:16). Regardless of how we may feel, the fact is that God has expressed infinite love for each of us. Let's accept the love of God with faith.

Until this moment, Jesus had not expressed pain or any emotion. Jesus endured the ordeal silently and willingly. Then Jesus spoke one sentence--the only words recorded from the cross by Matthew. Look at verse 46. "About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')." Jesus' words expressed deep anguish of soul. Let's consider two important truths that Jesus' words reveal.

First, Jesus expressed the meaning of his suffering and death. Jesus' words are addressed to God. But he spoke them verbally with a loud voice. This is our window into what was happening between God and Jesus. Jesus began by calling, "My God, my God." It was his declaration of trust in God. Though he had been severely tried, he loved God, honored God, and worshiped God without ceasing. Jesus never doubted God even for a moment. However, the words "why have you forsaken me?" tell us that Jesus suffered greatly in this moment. Jesus experienced what it was like to be forsaken by God. For a time, Jesus did not receive the steady flow of God's love and favor upon him, as he always had before. It was because he became an object of God's wrath. In that moment, Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...." God looked upon Jesus as though he was a murderer, liar, thief, adulterer, idolater, coward, and every kind of wicked sinner. God poured out the full measure of his wrath and judgment against Jesus without holding anything back. It was for the sin of the world. God satisfied his justice fully. Jesus experienced the full punishment for our sins, especially the alienation from God. This is what made Jesus cry out from the cross.

Second, Jesus expressed the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus' words were not just a cry of anguish, but they were the exact words of Psalm 22:1. Jesus was meditating on the word of God and fulfilling it through his suffering and death. Though Jesus quoted only verse 1, he was fulfilling this entire Psalm: the mocking and insulting by everyone around him (Ps 22:6-8), the physical pain of crucifixion (Ps 22:14-17), the dividing up of his clothes by the soldiers (Ps 22:18). This Psalm foretold not only the suffering of the Messiah, but also the assurance that God was his strength (Ps 22:19), that God answered his prayer (Ps 22:24), and that he would achieve God's victory and restore all creation to God (Ps 22:27-31). After taking the full measure of punishment decreed by God, Jesus cried out to God in prayer and was sure that God accepted and would answer his prayer. This assurance gave birth to his final cry in verse 50. It was a loud cry of triumph. After this cry, Jesus gave up his spirit. Jesus' life was not taken from him by evil men or the devil. Jesus offered it willingly to God as the ransom sacrifice for the sin of the world.

At the moment of Jesus' death, several remarkable things happened. In the first place, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (51a). This curtain separated the Most Holy Place, which was God's inmost sanctuary in the temple, from the Holy Place. Being in the Holy Place was near to God, but being in the Most Holy Place was

to be in God's very presence. No one could go into the Most Holy Place because of their sins. Only the High Priest could enter there once a year with a blood sacrifice. If anyone else tried to enter, God's holiness would break out against them and put them to death. God placed a curtain between himself and his people in order to protect them. However, when Jesus died, God tore this curtain from top to bottom in a divine act of reconciliation. Hebrews 10:19-22 read: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...let us draw near to God...." God invites us to the Most Holy Place for intimate fellowship with him. Ironically, the Jews condemned Jesus for claiming to destroy the temple and raising it in three days. Then, through his death, Jesus made the temple obsolete. Now we can go to God directly through Jesus Christ anytime, wherever we are, through faith in his death for us. Now we can live in the presence of God and serve the living God with joy and gratitude all our days. In the second place, the earth shook and many holy people were raised to life! After Jesus' resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many people (51b-53). This tells us that Jesus' death brought new life to mankind. Death is a consequence of sin. Jesus' sacrificial death was sufficient to atone for all the sins of mankind. When sin was atoned for, people were freed from the power of death. They were brought into a new and living relationship with God. This event is described uniquely by Matthew and is a prelude to Jesus' glorious resurrection.

In the third place, the centurion and the Roman soldiers exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!" These hard-hearted Gentile soldiers had abused Jesus and mocked him in the beginning. But as they watched the crucifixion and death of Jesus and experienced the earthquake and all that had happened, they began to fear God and exclaimed honestly and sincerely what they believed in their hearts. They dared not make this confession lightly. It was an admission that Rome had made a mistake. They could be disciplined severely. Yet in that moment, they cried out the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. The whole world had condemned Jesus. Yet in the end Jesus' true identity as the Son of God and King of Israel was clearly manifest. Truth cannot be suppressed for long. Truth is always revealed in the end.

Matthew notes that many women were at the scene when Jesus died. They had followed him from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph--which probably refers to Jesus' mother, and the mother of Zebedee's sons, James and John. These women were witnesses of Jesus' death. Jesus actually died in time and space. It is a fact, not a myth or a legend.

In this passage we have studied Jesus' crucifixion and death. It was for our sins. Through his death Jesus paid it all. Now we can go to God the Father directly by faith in Jesus and live as his blessed children. In this Easter season, let's approach the throne of grace with confidence and claim this victory boldly. Let's pray for our friends and neighbors to come to Jesus, be reconciled to God, and receive the new life that comes from his cross. Let's learn to follow Jesus' example by taking up our own crosses as we look forward to the final victory that is already assured through his death.