

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 27:32-54
“Crucifixion”

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Matthew 27:32-54

Verse 32

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and forced him to carry the cross.

- After his “trial” before Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea from 26-36 A.D., Jesus had been sentenced to death by crucifixion. He was “flogged,” beaten with a whip embedded with splinters of bone. Sometimes these beatings were so severe that the prisoner died before reaching the place of crucifixion. Jesus was then taken into the Praetorium, Pilate’s official residence in Jerusalem, where Pilate’s soldiers mocked and beat him again. Then the procession to Golgotha, the place of crucifixion, began. Under normal circumstances, the prisoner was forced to carry his own cross to the place of crucifixion. The severity of the beating he had received made it impossible for him to carry his own cross.

Verse 33

They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).

- While the exact location of Golgotha is disputed, it was the place where crucifixions took place.
- There is no mention in the Gospel of this place being on a hill, although tradition so implies.
- It may have been called the place of the skull because it resembled a skull in some way or because it was the place where people were executed. Perhaps unclaimed bodies were left there unburied.

Verse 34

There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

- Gall was a bitter tasting narcotic.
- Tradition says that the women of Jerusalem offered wine mixed with the narcotic, gall, as a way of lessening the suffering of those condemned to be crucified.
- After Jesus tasted this drink, knowing that the narcotic would lessen his consciousness and his suffering, he chose not to drink it.

Verse 35

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothing by casting lots.

- Jesus suffered a Roman crucifixion. Heavy wrought-iron nails were driven through his wrist bones and his heel bones to hold him to the cross. Death was slow and very painful. The cause of death was suffocation. If the victim lingered too long, his legs were broken to quicken death. This method of execution was reserved for slaves, non-Romans, and base offenders.
- It was the right of the executioners to take the condemned's clothing. They normally divided the garments between the members of the squad by casting lots.

Verse 36-37

And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: "THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS."

- This was customary practice. As the condemned person made his way to the place of crucifixion, a sign was carried before him on which was written the charge against him.
- The charge against Jesus was treason. The sign said that he claimed to be king of the Jews, the Roman understanding of his claim to be Israel's Messiah.

Verse 38-40

Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God."

- These verses are somewhat problematic: First, robbery was not a capital offense under Roman law. Thus, robbers would not normally have been crucified. These men must have been involved in some sort

of insurrection against Rome, as well as being robbers. Second, there is no place where Jesus actually made the remark that he is accused of making here. The closest remark to it is that found in John 2:19. See also Mark 15:57-59 where, at his trial, false witnesses accuse Jesus of having said this.

Verse 41-44

In the same way the chief priest, the teachers of the law, and the elders mocked him, “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

- Those who witnessed the crucifixion saw it as proof that Jesus was not who he said that he was. They challenged him to prove that he was who he claimed to be by coming down from the cross. Jesus could have done just that. However, if he had come down from the cross the plan of God to provide for our salvation would have been thwarted, and still those who mocked him would not have believed. They would have concluded that he came down from the cross by the power of Satan. See Matthew 12:22-23.
- The mocking of Jesus as he hung on the cross was universal. It came from those highest up, the chief priests and the elders of Israel, to those also condemned to die as criminals.

Verse 45

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.

- The sixth hour of the day was high noon. The ninth hour was at 3 o’clock in the afternoon. Thus, from noon until 3, normally the brightest part of the day, there was darkness over the place where Jesus was crucified. The cause of this darkness is unknown.

Verse 46

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” -- which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

- Near the hour of three, Jesus spoke from the cross. The words are in Aramaic but with certain Hebraisms.

- As the weight of the world’s sin fell on his shoulders, Jesus felt separation from God the Father for the first time in all of his existence. The pain of this separation caused him to cry out in anguish.
- This is a quotation from Psalm 22:1

Verse 47

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.”

- Apparently, those standing near mistook Jesus cry, “Eloi” for the Hebrew word “Eli” and thought that he was calling the great prophet Elijah to come and help him.

Verse 48-49

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

- Sour wine was a cheap drink used by common laborers. It was offered to Jesus to help clear his speech.
- Those who mocked him, having misunderstood what he said, now watched to see if Elijah would come to his aid.

Verse 50

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

- The phrase, “he gave up his spirit, was written to affirm the great truth. Jesus did not die in the ordinary way that men die. He released his spirit of his own accord, thus choosing, embracing, death as part of God’s plan for him and for the salvation of humankind.

Verse 51-53

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

- The curtain that was torn in two was the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies, the place where God was believed to be enthroned on earth, from the rest of the temple. The Holy of Holies was entered only once a year and then by a specially appointed priest. The tearing

of the curtain symbolized that a new way of coming into the presence of God was established for us by the death of Jesus Christ. See Hebrews 9:1-14 and 10:14-22. That it was torn from top to bottom instead of from bottom to top, indicates that this tearing was by God's doing according to God's design.

- At the same time a great earthquake occurred which split rocks and opened tombs.
- At the same time holy people were restored to life and appeared to many after Jesus was raised from the dead.
- Those who mocked him as he hung on the cross and sought after supernatural signs to prove that Jesus was the Messiah were given such signs. However, since these were not the signs they sought, they did not believe.

Verse 54

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God."

- However, those who had no preconceived notion about who Jesus was were impressed by the signs they saw. They correctly realized that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Crucifixion*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen*. They are used here by permission.)