

## The Christ on the Cross

Matthew 27:32-54

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” To be forsaken means to be left alone, and in today’s passage, that is clearly Matthew’s emphasis. Yes, Simon of Cyrene was drafted into service to carry the heavy cross beam at least part of the way to Golgotha – after being scourged by the Romans Jesus would have already lost a lot of blood and would have been too weak to do that by Himself. But once He had been nailed to the cross, He was on His own. No one could help Him make the sacrifice He was about to make on behalf of all His people.

And those people don’t come off so well, do they? Oh, they could see the label that Pilate placed on His cross: “The King of the Jews.” But the religious leaders of the Jews didn’t believe that any more than Pilate did. Oh, they knew that Jesus claimed to be the Christ, the Messiah of God, but they couldn’t imagine a king who would choose to suffer, who would be willing to die on a cross. They couldn’t imagine someone who had miraculous powers but who would refuse to use those powers for his own good. And so they called out for Jesus to come down from the cross – then, they said, they would believe in Him.

But the rest of the crowd were no better, for they also misunderstood what He had said about Himself. Yes, they remembered what John’s gospel tells us: that on Jesus’ first visit to the temple in Jerusalem, He had driven out the merchants who had set up shop there, selling sacrificial animals to be used in the temple rituals while disrupting the prayers that were supposed to accompany those sacrifices. And when the people asked Him what authority He had to cleanse the Temple and return it to being a house of prayer, they remembered that Jesus had said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

And so, as he hung on the cross, the people of Jerusalem flung those words back in His face. For they thought He had been bragging about His great power. They thought He had been boasting that He could singlehandedly tear down all those huge buildings and reconstruct them Himself in three days. And as they saw His increasingly feeble attempts to push Himself up by His nail-pierced feet and to pull Himself up by His nail-pierced hands so that He could breathe, they thought that His physical weakness proved that He had been a liar all along.

Now, we know that the crowd and the religious leaders were wrong. We know that Jesus really is the Son of God, the Messiah Whom God had promised to His people so many years before. We know that Jesus really was the One through Whom the whole world had been made in six days, so erecting even the largest of buildings in three days would have been a snap for Him.

For we know that Jesus was really talking about the temple of His body. We know that He was predicting that the Jerusalem crowd would destroy Him, but that on the third day after His death, He would rise again. The very words of Jesus that the crowd used to mock Him were actually a prophecy of the crucifixion that they were witnessing – yet another sign that Jesus was in complete control of all the events of history even as He was dying on the cross.

So of course Jesus had the power to do what the crowd and the religious leaders demanded of Him. Of course He could have come down from that cross at any time. Of course He had the power to bring His sufferings to an end, but He chose not to.

Yes, we know all that. But I wonder if we don’t sometimes find ourselves in sympathy with the crowd and the religious leaders. I wonder if we don’t get just as impatient for Jesus to show some of His power right here, right now, in the way we want Him to.

Think about it. Do we ever wonder why Jesus doesn’t bring immediate help to those in need or swift justice to the wicked? Are we ever disappointed when Jesus doesn’t bring healing to our loved ones? Worse yet, do we ever give ourselves over to temptation because we question whether Jesus can free us from our besetting sins? Do we catch ourselves surrendering to despair, as we doubt Jesus’ power, or even His desire to help us?

No, it's easy to understand how the Jerusalem crowd completely missed the point, even when Jesus quoted the scriptures to explain why He was hanging on the cross. They thought He was calling out for Elijah, but He was actually quoting from Psalm 22, a psalm that David wrote 1000 years before the events of today's passage happened.

For David, like Jesus, knew what it meant to be alone. Early in his life, he spent many years on the run from King Saul, his own father-in-law. And at the end of his life, he was driven out of Jerusalem by Absalom, his own son who was leading a revolution against him. Time after time, David had to turn to God as the only One Who could help him.

And by quoting this passage, by relating His own sufferings to those of David, Jesus was trying to help the crowd see that He really was the Son of David. He was trying to help them understand that suffering and rejection are just part of the package for anyone who consistently tries to do the will of God in this sinful world.

And that's still true for us today. For if David could suffer at the hands of King Saul because he was trying to obey God's call on his life, if Jesus could suffer at the hands of the Jerusalem crowd because He told the truth about Himself, why should we be surprised when suffering comes into our lives? No matter what we are going through, if God could use the sufferings of David and the cross of Christ to accomplish His will, why can't He use our own difficulties as part of His plan to draw us and our loved ones closer to Him? Yes, just as our sufferings often confirm not our distance from God but our closeness to God, Jesus' sufferings proved that He really was the suffering Son of David.

And this connection between Jesus and David should have been even more obvious to those who were witnesses of His crucifixion, for Psalm 22 goes on to describe many of the details they could see around them. For how does David depict his suffering? "The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced my hands and My feet; I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide my garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots."

Yes, David may have thought he was being poetic, but it turns out that He was being prophetic, accurately describing in minute detail the events of the crucifixion that would happen 1000 years later. It turns out that Psalm 22 wasn't just a prayer of David – he was predicting the suffering of the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Himself.

Moreover, this Psalm is a prayer, a plea for God's help in the midst of tremendous suffering. For right after that amazing prediction of the crucifixion, David goes on to make his pleas explicit: "But You, O Lord, do not be far from Me; O My Strength, hasten to help Me! Deliver Me from the sword, My precious life from the power of the dog. Save Me from the lion's mouth And from the horns of the wild oxen!" And we cannot doubt that Jesus shared the same sentiments, as they clearly echo His own fervent prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."

And we find the same earnest, desperate desire expressed in the opening verse of the Psalm from which Jesus quoted on the cross, even while every breath was sheer agony for Him: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning?"

Yes, make no mistake: Christ was in fact forsaken, abandoned not just by His people, but by the Father Himself. For it wasn't just the veil of the Temple that was torn on the day that Jesus died. No, in some mysterious way, the very fabric of the Trinity was torn; the perfect eternal fellowship of the Father with the Son was severed. As Christ took upon Himself the sins of all His people, the Father rejected Him, allowing Him to experience the separation from God that all our sins deserve.

No, we don't understand why anyone would choose to go through such suffering, such rejection, least of all the Son of God. But perhaps even more strange is the way that God the Father chose to answer that prayer of Jesus, the way that God the Father chose to glorify Jesus and give Him the victory – not by avoiding suffering and death, but by enduring them.

Now, David certainly experienced victory in his life, right? At times he was on the run from Saul and from Absalom, but at other times, the land was at peace and David triumphed over his enemies. From verse 21 to the end of Psalm 22, he records such times: "You have answered Me." David insists in verse 24 that when he cried out to the Lord, God heard him. And in response to God's hearing and answering his prayers, David says that he will praise God, and that not just the Jews but all the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord. He says, "All the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations."

And we know that it is precisely through the suffering of Christ that David's prophecy came true. For it was only by His death that Jesus could receive the victory. Yes, it was only when Jesus died, it was only when that greatest sacrifice was made that the veil of the Temple was torn in two, breaking down the dividing wall between God and the people, opening our way into the presence of the Lord. And it was only after the death of Christ that people from all the nations began to come to faith in Him – after all, it was a pagan, Roman centurion who first declared Him to be the Son of God.

And so the religious leaders and the Jerusalem crowd couldn't have been more wrong. They thought Jesus' sufferings proved He wasn't the Son of David. They thought Jesus' death on the cross proved He couldn't have been the Messiah, the One sent to save God's people.

But it was only because of the sacrifice of Christ that any of them could be saved. And it is only because Jesus died for us that people from all over the world, from every tribe and tongue and nation will one day be raised from our own graves, gathering around His throne, and saying "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing."

So, while we wait for that great day, for the marriage feast of the Lamb, let's enjoy a foretaste of that fellowship. Let's gather around His table, enjoying spiritual communion with Him and fellowship with one another. Let us draw near to the One Who was forsaken so that we might be welcome, the One Who died so that we might truly live.