

-

Sermons on Matthew

Come Down from the Cross

Matthew 27:35-44

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
10/5/2008*

Come Down from the Cross

Matthew 27:35-44

Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots,
that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet:

*“ They divided My garments among them,
And for My clothing they cast lots.”*

⁻³⁶⁻ Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. ⁻³⁷⁻ And they
put up over His head the accusation written against Him:

THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

⁻³⁸⁻ Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and
another on the left.

⁻³⁹⁻ And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their
heads ⁻⁴⁰⁻ and saying, *“ You who destroy the temple and build it in three
days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the
cross.”*

⁻⁴¹⁻ Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and
elders, said, ⁻⁴²⁻ *“ He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the
King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe
Him.”* ⁻⁴³⁻ He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have
Him; for He said, *‘ I am the Son of God.’*

⁻⁴⁴⁻ Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with
the same thing (Matthew 27:35-44).

Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots,
that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet:

*“ They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they
cast lots.”* ⁻³⁶⁻ Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. ⁻³⁷⁻

And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him:
THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS (Matthew 27:35-37).

They Crucified Him

All four gospels very simply express the crucifixion of Christ with the
words, **“they crucified Him.”** The Old Testament, on the other hand, is
much more graphic in its depiction of the anticipated event. It is there that
we learn how they plucked out His beard (Isaiah 50:6), how the emaciated
Jesus could count his own bones (Psalm 22:17), that His bones were out of

joint (Psalm 22:14), His tongue would cling to His jaw (Psalm 22:15) and that His heart was melting like wax (Psalm 22:14).

The brief record of the crucifixion of Christ in the gospels is yet another example of how dependent we are upon the Old Testament to fully appreciate the glory, grace and power of God in Christ. It is in the Old Testament that we are more fully made aware of the ignominious humiliation and suffering of Christ, and it is in the Old Testament that we are exposed to the glory of Christ and His power to redeem the world. The same Psalm which reveals the disgrace and mortification of Jesus also trumpets the breadth of His redeeming grace.

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You.

²⁸ For the kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27, 28).

Truly in the cross, Jesus is lifted up that He might draw all men to Himself (John 3:14; 12:32).

Casting Lots

They cast lots for His garments. In doing so they unwittingly fulfill prophecy (Psalm 22:18). Something as casual and random as killing time, gambling for a robe, is ordained by God reminding us of who governs whatsoever comes to pass. These little things signal the invisible hand of God who declares **“the end from the beginning, And from ancient things that are not yet done, Saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, And I will do all my pleasure’... I have purposed it; I will also do it”** (Isaiah 46:10, 11). There is no item or action so small that it somehow escapes the attention and providence of God.

The Accusation

It was the custom to place a sign over the crucified man that people may be aware of his crime. The gospel writers record different portions of the sign they believed to be significant for their intended audience. Matthew writing primarily to Jews highlights (much to the chagrin of the Jewish leaders) that Jesus is the **“King of the Jews”**.

We learn from Luke that this inscription was written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew (Luke 23:38). Even on the cross the message of Christ was being

translated into a variety of languages (these three being the most known languages of the era).

At Pentecost the Spirit of God would ensure the gospel was heard and understood in **“every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5)**. In the same way the treacherous Caiaphas was an unwitting prophet, advising that it was advantageous **“that one man should die for the people” (John 18:14)**, Pilate was an unwitting Bible translator.

__ Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. ⁻³⁹⁻ And __ those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads ⁻⁴⁰⁻ and saying, __ “ _ You who destroy the temple and build *it* in three days, save Yourself! __ If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross _” (Matthew 27:38-40). -

Blasphemed

We read that Jesus is crucified between two robbers—in the middle—as if He were the chief sinner. This high visibility station of dishonor lent itself to a large audience of those who would revile, mock and blaspheme Jesus.

To blaspheme (*eblasphemoun*) means to speak evil or profane words—especially as it relates to God. Those who passed by blasphemed Jesus. A confrontation with a holy and righteous Christ can operate like a catapult for man’s sinful nature. Jesus is now greeted by thoughtless, vicious and unmerciful men. We see in these detractors the antithesis of the tender and compassionate heart of Christ. They would seek to snuff Him out—dying surrounded by profanity. Jesus had promised just the opposite, that **“A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench” (Matthew 12:20)**.

Blasphemy and its brother ‘heresy’ (which means false teaching) are in vogue. In the “Thought for today” section of Thursday’s *Daily Breeze* (10/2/08) there is a quote designed to free us from the bondage of a limited perspective. It read,

“Heresy is another word for freedom of thought”—Graham Greene, English writer (1904-1991).

It is a pathetic irony when people interpret their own bondage to sin, darkness and ignorance, as freedom of thought.

A new movie coming out (*Religulous* by Bill Maher) is an open criticism of religion in general and will introduce heresies and blasphemies in spades.

There is an anger the natural man has with Christ. And there are certain times in history when that anger peaks—it just appears to me that we are moving into one of those times.

Come Down, Save Yourself

The blasphemy is followed by an accusation of inability on the part of Christ. And the ignorance of the accusations are not unlike the criticisms we hear today from the lips of profane and ignorant men. The words reveal their lack of understanding of the promise and power of God in Christ. They said to Jesus:

You who destroy the temple and build *it* in three days, save Yourself! __If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross (Matthew 27:40).

Jesus taught that the temple would be destroyed by surrounding “armies” (Luke 21:10). And the only record of rebuilding a temple in the New Testament is the body of Christ (John 2:21). Both of these events would come to pass.

These words are similar to the words of Satan (Matthew 4:6), as is the temptation. They beckon Jesus to save Himself, as if the salvation of self is what any reasonable person would view as the highest priority. Was there ever a more ignorant request than to ask Jesus to come down from the cross? Not only are they tempting Jesus to disobey that which He was commissioned by His Father to achieve (Hebrews 10:5), they are tempting Jesus to abandon a mission which is man’s only hope of redemption.

Let us thank God that He doesn’t always accommodate our requests—even the ones that seem so reasonable. Besides, what is the greater miracle, coming down from the cross or coming up from the grave? No doubt if Jesus came down from the cross, blame would be placed on the incompetency of His crucifiers. And though they sought to lie about the resurrection (as many seek to do to this very day) the lie would be smothered by the truth.

They would see a resurrected Christ, but it would be of no avail in terms of their own sinful, unbelieving hearts (Hebrews 3:12).

Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the __scribes and elders, said, ⁻⁴²⁻ “_He __saved others; Himself He cannot save. __If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe __Him (Matthew 27:41, 42).

Come Down and We'll Believe

Let Him come down and we'll believe—as if they hadn't already been given sufficient proofs of the power of Christ (Matthew 4:23-25). People want to determine the necessary causes of their own belief. Time and time again we see that the things people think (or at least claim) will bring them faith are impotent to salvage the corrupt human heart—and this includes frivolous requests as well as legitimate evidence.

If one rejects the words of Christ, inspired by the Spirit in the Holy Scriptures, they will most assuredly reject the miracles of Christ. For the words of Christ are more powerfully used by the Spirit to redeem than the supernatural signs and wonders. This is clearly explained by Abraham when the rich man requests that Lazarus be sent to the house of his brothers that they may escape the torments of hell.

Abraham said to him, __' _They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them._' -³⁰ And he said, ' _No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent._' -³¹ But he said to him, __' _If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, __neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' _ (Luke 16:29-31)

If they don't hear Moses and the prophets (i.e. the Scriptures) nothing can persuade them, even a resurrection. This brings us to the final section which I think needs to be understood from the perspective of the humanity of Jesus.

He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ' _I am the Son of God._' _" -⁴⁴ _Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing (Matthew 27:43-44).

Human Discouragement

I was deeply affected when J. I. Packer explained in *Knowing God* that we should not view Jesus as a sort of superman. In the same way Jesus is fully God, with all the attributes which make God who He is, Jesus is fully man, with all the attributes which make man what he is (with the exception of a sinful nature—which is not part of the necessary definition of man—man does not have to be sinful to be man. Adam was a man when he was sinless and we will be humans in heaven without sin).

I say this because I understand these words to be immensely discouraging—especially coming from the mouths of priests. Jesus is on the cross and death lies before Him. These evil men are seeking to destroy whatever respite that might have remained deposited in the His soul. As if to say, “If God doesn’t help him now, there will never be deliverance.” A modern atheistic version of this might be, “If your God doesn’t deliver you immediately from your present trouble, He obviously doesn’t exist.”

Brothers and sisters, life can be easy and enjoyable. Faithfulness, especially faithfulness of whole cultures, can yield wonderful blessings in this world and in this life. Yet we have had spiritual siblings throughout the ages and even today who endure lives of pain and sorrow, pining away in prisons and consigned to wallow in torment and misery. That God does not deliver us at all from the ravages of this sinful and broken world, does not mean He is a God who does not deliver. We are to have a heart crucified with Christ, for it is then that we may afterwards partake in His eternal deliverance.

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness of His resurrection* (Romans 6:5).

Yet this is no easy path in a world where Abel is slain by Cain and Isaac is tormented by Ishmael (Galatians 4:29).

My father passed away right after I graduated from college, and my mother entered into a thirteen year tailspin of grief, depression, self-destructiveness and near madness. Continually the object of my prayers, I sought every imaginable method of deliverance for her.

On one particularly awful night, she had attempted to take her own life (which she did regularly) and I had to have her brought to the locked psychiatric ward of Harbor-UCLA Hospital. Shortly afterward she escaped and took a taxi home. When I called the hospital they sent an emergency medical team to bring her back. The exhausting late night scene is more than

I can explain here but I remember it was well past midnight and I was finally going to have dinner. When there was a knock at the door.

A neighbor walked in my house with a cigarette and an attitude. She had known my mother all of one week but was ready to offer aggressive criticism. The only words I remember her saying were, "I guess your 'praise the Lord' stuff isn't going to work here." I politely (I think) dismissed her. But it wasn't as if I could as easily dismiss her derision of my faith. But we must learn and be influenced by the Spirit of Christ over the spirit of this sinful world. The Spirit, through the epistle to the Hebrews helps, in speaking of Jesus...

...who, in the days of His flesh, when He had _offered up prayers and supplications, __with vehement cries and tears to Him _who was able to save Him from death, and was heard __because of His godly fear, ⁻⁸⁻ though He was a Son, yet He learned __obedience by the things which He suffered (Hebrews 5:7, 8).

The Scriptures often use Christ on the cross as an example which we are to imitate. For it is there, that we become best acquainted with the darkest environment human nature has to offer. We are called to persevere. Calvin explains,

It is, therefore, contrary to the nature of faith, that the word *now* should be insisted on by those whom God is training by the cross and by adversity to obedience, and whom he entreats to pray and to call on his name; for these are rather the testimonies of his fatherly love (_Hebrews 12:6_).¹

Questions for Study

¹Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

1. Discuss the Old Testament versus New Testament depictions of the cross and its results (pages 2, 3)?
2. What do we learn from the soldiers casting lots (pages 3, 4)?
3. What is blasphemy (pages 4, 5)?
4. What were they tempting Jesus to do when He was on the cross and why (pages 5, 6)?
5. How can people discourage us with their accusations? How should we respond (pages 7, 8)?