

Matthew 27:27-56: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 27 verses 27 to 56. And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.
- Then they sat down and kept watch over him there, and over his head they put the charge against him, which read, This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.
- Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself.
- If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, He saved others, he cannot save himself.
- He is the King of Israel, let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God? Let God deliver him now if he desires him. For he said, I am the Son of God.
- [1 : 4 6] And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.
- And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachthani. That is, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
- And some of the bystanders hearing it said, This man is calling Elijah. And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.
- But the other said, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him. And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.
- And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.
- [2 : 4 6] And coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, Truly, this was the Son of God.
- There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.
- Towards the end of Matthew chapter 27, we've reached the point that the entire gospel has been working towards, especially since chapter 16, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.
- And it begins with a parodic coronation and enthronement. Gentile soldiers ridiculing the king of the Jews, gathering as an audience before him, dressing him up with a crown and a scarlet robe, giving him a reed of authority, and kneeling before him, expressing a sort of feigned homage to him as the king of the Jews.

He has the crown of thorns, which is a mark of the curse upon his brow. The soldiers then reverse this ironic pattern. They spit instead of kneeling. They take the reed that they had given him, and they strike him on the head with it, where they had earlier placed the crown.

[4 : 03] Then they strip him of the scarlet robe that they had dressed him in, and they lead him away to be crucified. But there is truth even in the mockery. Jesus is the king of the Jews.

Indeed, he's the ruler of all, and those Gentile soldiers are included in that. And for all the pride of the soldiers of the Romans, they have suffered a humiliation.

Pilate has bowed to the Jews in surrendering Jesus to the Jewish mob. He's not expressing Roman authority. Rather, he's submitted to the Jews in this matter. There's a contrast between Simon of Cyrene, who bears the cross for Christ, and his namesake, Simon Peter.

Simon Peter is the one who said that he would follow Jesus all the way to the end, and that he would never forsake him or deny him. And yet, he's nowhere to be found. Whereas Simon of Cyrene, a Gentile who carries his cross, is showing the very mark of discipleship that Simon Peter, the chief of the disciples that Jesus called, has failed to show.

Throughout this passage, the voice of Scripture is whispering in the background. Matthew expects his readers to know Scripture fairly thoroughly, and to recognise its voice throughout his Gospel, and most particularly here.

[5 : 16] There are a number of references to the Psalms, which were the songs of the people of God. And by evoking this biblical background, Matthew conveys a deeper account of what is happening at the cross too.

For instance, in being given gall to drink, Jesus is being given a narcotic that will relieve some of the pain. But it's also an allusion to Psalm 69 verse 21, They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

We might also hear the words of Lamentations in the background. Lamentations chapter 3 verse 19, Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall.

And then in chapter 2 verse 15 of the same book, The people are treating Christ in the same way as they treat the fallen Jerusalem, after its destruction by the Babylonians.

And there is a theology here. Jesus is presented as the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations. Jesus is suffering the judgment of Jerusalem's exile himself, the predicted fate of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 18 verse 16.

[6 : 35] And then they cast lots for his garments. Again, there's Old Testament scripture in the background here. Psalm 22 verse 18, They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

And the charge against him is that he is the king of the Jews. To the Romans this would be maybe a sign of insurrection, a sign of claiming an authority that he did not have. And for the Jews they would have a sense of the more messianic connotations, that this is one who claims that he's going to destroy the temple, and rebuild the temple in three days.

He's the one who's taking on the mantle and the task of the Messiah. He has robbers placed on either side of him, like people on either side of an enthroned king. And again we need to recognize that this is a parodic coronation and enthronement.

There are many rituals and rites and other things like that that are being performed here in either mockery or unwittingly in these chapters that help us to understand what is really taking place.

This is truly a coronation. This is truly an enthronement. But the people involved do not realize what's taking place. They do not know what they are doing. And the fact that he has robbers on either side of him is a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12, that he's numbered with the transgressors.

[7 : 52] And people passing by wag their heads. We've already seen the way that this alludes back to lamentations and the fate of Jerusalem, and the way that people respond to its miserable condition.

But it also relates to, again, Psalm 22 verse 7. All who see me mock me. They make mouths at me. They wag their heads. Jesus is ridiculed as the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days by passers-by.

He's also ridiculed by the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders as the one who, though he saved others, cannot save himself. He's the supposed king of Israel and claims to trust in God. But where's God now? He's not coming to his aid.

And the questions at the cross, the challenges and the mockery followed by the centurion's confirmation, truly this was the Son of God, might remind us of the testing of Jesus in the wilderness, where the question of whether he was the Son of God was also central.

Maybe we could think back to the trial before the Sanhedrin. Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God, in verse 63 of chapter 26, the choice there. Is he going to live by the word of God?

[9 : 00] Is he going to accept the cup? Or is he going to take the easy route out? And again, there's the temple reference in verse 40 of chapter 27. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.

And he is the one who said that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. And then, after that, there's the reference to his kingship. If you are the king of the Jews, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders mocking him here, again telling him to come down from the cross.

Perhaps we're supposed to see that Jesus is being tested once more. Once more, he's proving faithful through testing. He's not giving up. He's not surrendering. He's not being unfaithful to his calling.

Jesus was accused of blasphemy. But this whole scene is one of extended blasphemy. And the chief priests and scribes and elders ironically quote Psalm 22 verse 8, seemingly completely unwitting of its significance.

Psalm 22 verse 8, He trusts in the Lord. Let him deliver him. Let him rescue him. For he delights in him. There is then darkness over the entire land from the sixth to the ninth hour, from about noon to about three o'clock.

[10 : 11] The final of the cycle of the plagues before the death of the firstborn, which also occurred in the darkness of midnight, involved the darkness over all the land.

It could be also seen as decreation, return to the original darkness of the unformed creation. The darkness at Jesus' death contrasts with the light of the dawn upon his rising.

And it also might recall the darkness of the day of the Lord described by Zephaniah in Zephaniah chapter 1 verse 15. We should consider the similarities between the description of Jesus' trial, mockery, crucifixion and death and the events involved in and leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Jesus is suffering a similar fate to Jerusalem's fate, but presenting an alternative for all who trust in him. He is suffering the fate that he describes in those earlier chapters.

Here there is a fourth allusion to Psalm 22, which arguably serves as the most foundational text that Matthew wants his readers to hear his crucifixion account in terms of.

[11 : 17] At the ninth hour, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And these are the first words of Psalm 22. It's a psalm of the suffering Davidic king.

And the bystanders don't recognise that Jesus is quoting scripture, like Eli in the temple in 1 Samuel, who couldn't recognise the prayer of Hannah. They can't recognise the voice of scripture and the words of the Psalms.

Hearing, they do not understand. And perhaps there's a further irony here in that they think that he's calling for Elijah. The coming of Elijah was associated with the arrival of the great and terrible day of the Lord in Malachi 4.

And here we're seeing that day take place in miniature in the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus is then given sour wine again. And this is in fulfilment of Psalm 69 verse 21 once more.

The scriptures and the Psalms, the suffering of the Davidic king, the fate of the city that's been destroyed and broken down, all of these lie behind the events of Christ's death.

[12 : 22] And as we hear such allusions, we're getting an insight into Matthew's theology of the cross. Jesus is the suffering Messiah. He's the suffering servant. He's the one that takes the fate of the unfaithful city upon himself.

Jesus cries out again with a loud voice and gives up his spirit. And some have seen this as perhaps an initial giving up of the spirit, delivering over of the spirit.

And there's a dramatic response to Jesus' death, a response that manifests its character as an event that shakes the whole world order. The curtain of the temple, the realm of God's dwelling, at the very heart of the religious order, is torn from top to bottom, a sign of God's action.

Now we don't know which curtain this was, whether it was the inner curtain between the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place, or whether it was the outer curtain. But one way or another, access into God's presence is being made open.

There's also an anticipation of the judgment upon Jerusalem's temple, an initial fulfillment of the destruction of the temple that Jesus speaks about, and the way in which he is the alternative temple, the place in which people meet with God, and whose body will be the place of God's residence as he forms his bride around himself.

[13 : 41] The realm of the creation is shaken by an earthquake, and rocks are split. The realm of death is shaken, and graves are opened. The appearance of the raised dead in the Holy City to many after Jesus' resurrection is proof of Christ as the firstfruits of the dead, and perhaps reminiscent of places like 2 Kings 13:20-21, where Elisha's bones revive a dead man.

God promises to shake the earth in Haggai chapter 2 verse 6, and the earthquake is evidence that the shaking of the earth is beginning. We see a similar thing in Ezekiel 37, where there's an earthquake, a rushing wind of the Spirit, graves are opened, and bodies come to life, and Israel is restored.

This is something that Christ is doing through his death, and a new world is coming into existence. The darkness of the original creation, before light has come, and now there's the new creation bursting into existence.

A new creation that will be seen most particularly with the light of resurrection morning, as that dawns. The centurion and those who were with him confessed that Jesus must be the Son of God.

Gentiles responding in faith. It's another faithful centurion, like the one in chapter 8, verses 5-13. And along with the centurion, Matthew draws our attention to the many women of Jesus' disciples who were present at a distance.

[15 : 08] While the male disciples had almost all forsaken him at the end, the women remained faithfully present. They had ministered to him, providing for his needs. We see this in Luke chapter 8, verses 1-3.

And we can see, I think, within the women, the importance of loving devotion to Christ's body. It's something that you see in the actions of the women throughout the Gospels. Just as Jesus draws attention to the importance of children as models of the kingdom, I think we should also see women as models of the kingdom.

Their commitment to Christ's body, and their loving devotion to it, is an example to follow. The male disciples are committed to Christ's mission and his teaching, and when those seem to fail, they are nowhere to be found.

While it is the women who are able to see the importance of Christ's presence himself, and provide a model for our devotion to Christ's body in terms of service of one another, tending for each other's needs, and being present to one another.

That is a form of faithfulness to Christ that can so often be neglected when we focus merely upon the mission and the teaching of Christ, and fail to be devoted in love to his body.

[16 : 17] A question to consider. There are several allusions to Psalm 22 within this passage. Go back and read Psalm 22.

How can we see the story of Christ within that psalm? How does that psalm help us to read the events of the Gospel? How does Psalm 22 shed light upon Jesus' use of its opening statement as his great expression of dereliction on the cross?