The Crucifixion of Christ

Matthew 27:1-66

Key Verse: 27:

One of the symbols of Christianity is the cross. The cross symbolizes the crucifixion of Christ Jesus, who died in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. From a human point of view, the crucifixion of Christ was the execution of a Jewish rabbi charged with blasphemy and executed by the Roman authority. But from God’s point of view this is the fulfillment of God’s promise for men’s salvation and the completion of God’s redemptive work. Today’s passage covers the story of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, his crucifixion, and burial. May God help us to understand the meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death and appreciate God’s divine love for sinners like you and me.

First, the tragic end of the betrayer Judas Iscariot (1-10) Judas Iscariot sold his master Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. He led the religious leaders and Roman soldiers to the garden of Gethsemane for them to arrest Jesus. He witnessed how Jesus was arrested and taken by the soldiers. Soon, his conscience was pricked, and he came back to his senses. He was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, ***“I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood***.” (4) Judas regretted his betrayal of Jesus, but it was too late. Jesus was taken away by his enemies. The religious leaders replied Judas. “What is that to us? That’s your responsibility.” (5) So Judas threw the money into the temple court and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. He couldn’t bear his guilty feeling any more. The religious leaders took his money and bought a field to be used as a burial place for foreigners. (7)

In this way Judas ended his life. Let’s think about Judas Iscariot. What was wrong with him? He was one of the twelve disciples. He followed Jesus for three years. But he followed Jesus with wrong motivations. He loved money and wanted to fulfill his human ambition through Jesus. He was disappointed when Jesus would not satisfy his human dream. When he had wrong motivations, he was easily tempted by Satan. When Satan entered into him, he became a completely different person. He betrayed Jesus. He was spiritually blind when Satan came into him. He did not know what he was doing. He was just controlled by Satan. After Satan left him, he came back to his senses. He realized that he had betrayed innocent blood. But it was too late. In this way Satan used Judas and then dumped him to be destroyed. In the Garden of Eden, Satan tempted a woman, and after that he destroyed her and dumped her to die with her husband. Judas’ story was not only about him, but also it could be ours if we don’t repent, and if we are not awake to the temptations of Satan. We must not listen to Satan’s voice. We must say, “No!” to Satan and “Yes!” to Jesus. We must have right motivations in following Jesus. Amen!

Second, Jesus kept silent in order to take up the cross. (11-14) Jesus was brought to Pilate for trial. Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “You have said so.” (11) When Jesus was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you? (13) According to Luke’s gospel, the crowd accused Jesus, saying, “*We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.*” (Lk 23:2) To the great amazement of the governor, Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge. (14) If we are falsely accused, or sometimes rightly accused, we say many things in order to defend ourselves. Even when we get a speeding ticket, we have an excuse to defend ourselves. But Jesus did not open his mouth. He remained silent before Pilate. The prophet Isaiah prophesied about Jesus in this way, “*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth*.” (Is 53:7) Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. Why, then, did Jesus keep silent? Why did he not defend himself? Jesus kept silent in order to take up the cross. He did not need any excuse for himself because he was determined to obey the Father’s will and to take up the cross for the sins of the world. There was no need for words of pardon or excuses for the one who was determined to die. Thank you Jesus, who kept silent in order to take away the sins of the world! Thank you Jesus, who did not open his mouth in order to defend himself! Amen!

Third, Jesus bore mockery and insults in our place. (15-31) Pilate, the Roman governor, was a clever politician. He knew that Jesus was innocent and that the religious leaders charged him for their own self-interest. Pilate did not want to be involved in this Jewish religious conflict. He wanted to avoid that moment. His wife also sent a person to him to warn him that Jesus was innocent (19) So Pilate gave an option to the Jews to release one criminal during the festival, according to the governor’s custom. (15) He asked them to choose between Barabbas, the insurrectionist, and Jesus, the king of the Jews. (17) The crowd asked for Barabbas, not Jesus. Pilate asked them, “***What shall I do, then, with Jesus, who is called the Messiah***?” (22) They all answered, “***Crucify him!***” (23) When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. He said, “I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your responsibility!” Pilate declared that he was innocent of Jesus’ death by washing his hands. But he was not innocent. He was guilty of sentencing Jesus to death. He did not stand on the side of truth, but compromised with his political interest. He was negligent as a judge by practicing injustice in sentencing an innocent man to death. So his name was written in the Apostle’s Creed as the person who persecuted and executed Jesus. He was responsible for the death of Jesus. If we don’t listen to the word of truth and compromise with evil, we cannot avoid God’s divine judgment. We are responsible for not practicing God’s justice and truth. If we try to avoid responsibility as missionary, shepherd, parent, student, child, employee, or worker, we are guilty even though we don’t commit sin actively.

Jesus was handed over to the governor’s soldiers. The soldiers were senseless, brutal, and cruel. They stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (27-31) Jesus was innocent. He had no reason to be mocked or afflicted. He was a good shepherd. He loved sinners and healed the sick. He forgave and cared. He did not condemn anyone because he understood our weaknesses. Sin brought guilt and shame to us. But Jesus bore our guilt and shame in our place (Ro 5:8) Isaiah 53:3 says, “*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. …Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering*…” Jesus was mocked and insulted in our place. Praise Jesus!

Fourth, Jesus did not save himself in order to save us. (32-44) Now Jesus was carrying the cross to the hill called Golgotha (which means “the place of skull). The soldiers picked Simon from Cyrene from among the crowd and forced him to carry the cross. On the hill the soldiers offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink. Wine mixed with gall is a painkiller. But Jesus refused to take it in order to bear the pain fully. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” (37) The soldiers crucified Jesus on the hill. They nailed him to the cross, his two hands and feet. Blood gushed out from his body and flowed down to the ground. The blood of the innocent Son of God wet the cursed ground. His blood healed the cursed ground and brought peace to men. The prophet Isaiah prophesied about Jesus, “*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*” (Is 53:5)

But people were ignorant and wicked. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet they considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. (Is 53:4) Two rebels were crucified with Jesus, 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 built it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” (41) In the same way the chief priests, 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 now 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 rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him. (42-44) The crowds, the religious leaders, and the two criminals next to Jesus mocked him and hurled insults at him. What the religious leaders said was a quite true. Jesus saved others, but did not save himself. If Jesus wanted, he could have saved himself. He is the mighty God. He said to his disciples when he was arrested, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (26:53) If he wanted, he could have come down from the cross and destroyed all his enemies in a second. But Jesus didn’t do so. He didn’t save himself in order to save us. He did not come down from the cross, but endured the cross to the end for the sake of our salvation. Jesus was hung on the cross until the end and died for you and me. Jesus said, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*.” (Mk 10:45)

Fifth, Jesus opened the new and living way to God (45-56) It was noon when Jesus was crucified. Suddenly the sun lost its light and the world became dark until 3 pm. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) This outcry fulfilled David’s prophecy in Psalm 22:1. Jesus was in such pain because of his separation from God the Father. Jesus knew that the Father loved the Son and that he would raise him back from the dead. Still, the pain was too much for him to bear. People who had heard Jesus’ outcry thought that he was calling for Elijah. (47) They said, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” (49) Look at verse 50. “***And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit***.”

What happened when Jesus gave up his spirit? Look at verses 51-53. “***At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.***” In the temple of Jerusalem there was a curtain between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. (Ex 26:31-35;26:31) Sinners couldn’t enter into the Most Holy Place. Only the high priest entered into the Most Holy Place once a year for sacrifice. (He 9:7) The curtain made impossible for sinners to come to God. But the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died on the cross. The tearing of the curtain indicates that Jesus made possible for sinners come to the presence of God directly. Jesus opened the way for sinners to come to God with confidence. Jesus enabled us to call God ‘*Abba* Father’. Hebrews 10:19, 20 says, “*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*.”

When Jesus died, nature responded violently. The earth shook, the rocks split, and the tombs broke open. Nature responded this way when the Son of God, the Messiah, the Creator of the universe, gave up his spirit. Later, the author witnessed the resurrection of Christ Jesus and the resurrection of his followers. The death of Jesus brought about the resurrection of the bodies. How do you respond to the death of Jesus? Is your heart broken? Lamenting? Repentant? Redeemed? How do you feel when you watch the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion? The crucifixion of Jesus is the demonstration of God’s unconditional love for sinners like you and me. Paul said in Romans 5:8, “*But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*.” Do you remember what Jesus prayed on the cross? In Luke 23:34 Jesus said on the cross, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*” Jesus prayed to God to forgive us. He did not condemn us, but forgave us. He did not blame our wrongdoings against him. Rather, he forgave us and prayed for us. Forgiveness brings reconciliation. Reconciliation is the restoration of broken relationships. Sin broke the relationship between God and men. Jesus died for our sins so that we could have reconciliation with God. In this way Jesus opened the way for us to come to God.

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!” (54) The centurion was the captain of one hundred Roman soldiers. He was the one who had executed Jesus. But his heart was moved when he saw Jesus. He saw God in Jesus and confessed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” There were women who had followed Jesus to the cross. Among them there were Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. As the prophet Simeon had prophesied, their hearts were pierced by a sword when they saw Jesus being crucified on the cross. (Lk 2:35)

There was a man named Joseph Arimathea. He was one of Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling counsel. He was a hidden disciple of Jesus. In the evening he came to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body for burial. Joseph took Jesus’ body and put him in his own tomb. He showed his continuing love for Jesus by preparing for the burial of Jesus. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance so that no one could enter the tomb. (60) The religious leaders asked Pilate to put security guards in front of the tomb. They made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone. (66) In this way they finished the execution of Jesus Christ. In this way death seemed to win. But that was not the case. The crucifixion of Jesus is not the end of his story. It would be “to be continued”. The burial of Jesus is nothing but the prelude of Jesus’ resurrection. Death cannot stop the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus would rise again from the dead. “Vainly they watched his bed Jesus, my Savior. Vainly they seal the dead Jesus, my Lord! Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er His foes…” Amen!