

## Matthew 27:32-44

### Introduction

Last week we saw a crowd of Roman soldiers playing “dress up” with Jesus and kneeling down before Him as a pretend “king.” But it was precisely in this horrible scene of mockery and ridicule that Matthew saw the true honor, and glory, and majesty of the true King of kings. Here is the only King in all the history of the world who has *authority to lay down His life* so that He may take it up again (John 10:17-18). Here is the only king in all the history of the world who submits to the mockery of his claims to kingship in order to fulfill His own sovereign and *kingly* word (20:17-19). What Matthew wants us to see is that everything about this picture is exactly as it’s *supposed* to be – exactly as the *King* said it *must* be. And so the cheap scarlet cloak, and the twisted branches of a thorn bush, and the reed have all been transformed into the true symbols of royalty; a robe, and a crown, and a scepter *fit* for *our* King – a *King* who *suffers* for His people. To the world, the dressing up of Jesus was “proof” that He was no king at all. But to those with eyes to see, the dressing up of Jesus was “proof” that He actually was, and is the King that He claimed to be. The world stumbles over the apparent contradiction. But the church bows in awe at this unfathomable display of the wisdom of God. In the end, Jesus was stripped of His “costume,” His own clothes put back on Him, and then He was led away to be crucified. In the dressing up of Jesus, we saw clearly who Jesus really was. But what about now – after the robe, and the crown, and the scepter have all been taken away?

**I. Matthew 27:32–34** — As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross.

Normally, the victim was made to carry the crossbeam to the place of his execution (the upright post would already be in the ground). But it’s probably right to assume that Jesus was too weakened by His flogging and the abuse He had received to carry His cross beam the whole way. Jesus made it probably as far as the city gates before He could go no further (cf. Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26). So as they were going out, the Roman soldiers forced a passerby named Simon to carry the wooden beam.

At this point, every second is a horror and a nightmare for Jesus. But once again, Matthew doesn’t focus on the physical agony. He never offers any description of how Jesus fell under the weight of His cross. In fact, he never even says that it happened (that’s just an educated guess that we’ve made). The suffering is assumed, as it would be for any victim of crucifixion – including the two rebels who will be crucified with Jesus. For Matthew, the real question of this passage is much the same as the last. Not “*What* does Jesus suffer?” but “***Why*** does Jesus suffer?” What does this suffering of Jesus *mean*? What does it tell us about who Jesus really is?

**II. Matthew 27:33–34** — And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

We have no way of knowing if Golgotha was a hill or if it had the appearance of a skull. All we really know for sure is that it was not far from the city gates and it was situated along the main

thoroughfare where many people would be passing by (cf. 27:39). It may have been called the “Place of a Skull simply because it was a place of execution and death. But whatever the case, Matthew tells us that when they arrived at this place the soldiers offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall. Mark says that they tried to give Him wine mixed with *myrrh* (cf. Mark 15:23). Wine would help to quench the victim’s thirst and, *possibly*, dull the pain. But what was the point of the myrrh? Matthew tells us what the point was by calling it “gall.” Gall literally means “bile” (Job 16:13 LXX), but it can also refer to anything that is either poisonous (Job 20:14 LXX) or just very, very bitter tasting.

- ✓ Proverbs 5:4 — In the end she is *bitter as wormwood* [gall].
- ✓ Lamentations 3:15 — He has filled me with *bitterness*; he has sated me with *wormwood* [gall].

Add enough myrrh to any drink, and the drink becomes bitter and impossible to stomach. So the point of the wine mixed with “*gall*” was to torment and make fun of Jesus by pretending even the tiniest bit of civility, and then surprising Him with a drink that even in His parched condition He would not be able or willing to swallow (see Carson). When Jesus tasted it, Matthew tells us, He would not drink it. But why does Matthew tell us this? Is it just to arouse more “sympathy” for Jesus? If that were the case, then why not spend more time describing the scourging and the crucifixion? What is it that this scene tells us about Jesus? How does this scene enable us to “*behold*” Jesus?

Matthew calls the “myrrh,” “gall,” most of all to make sure we don’t miss the connection with Psalm sixty-nine. A theme repeated over and over again in the Psalms is that of the “*innocent sufferer*.” The Psalmist never claims that he is without any sin at all (Psalm 69:5). His only point is that he’s innocent of any wrongdoing that would make him deserving of the hatred and persecution that he receives. He’s hated and persecuted, sometimes even to the point of death. He suffers terribly, and yet he is innocent. He is the “innocent sufferer,” and so he cries out:

- ✓ Psalm 69:1–4, 7, 9-13, 16-17, 19-21 — Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me *without cause*; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me *with lies*. *What I did not steal* must I now restore? ... For *it is for your sake* that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face... For zeal for your house has consumed me, and *the reproaches of those who reproach you* have fallen on me... I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me. But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness... Hide not your face from your servant; for I am in distress; make haste to answer me... You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you. Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. *They gave me [gall; LXX] for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.*

In verse 48 of Matthew twenty-seven one of the soldiers will fill a sponge with “sour wine” and offer it to Jesus to drink. In verse thirty-four, “they offered Him wine to drink, mixed with gall.” So can you see it now! There have been multitudes of God’s “innocent” people who have been hated and persecuted throughout history. But *in Jesus* Matthew sees the final and ultimate *fulfillment* of the “innocent sufferer.” For the Jews, the simple fact that Jesus was being led down the street by a Roman execution squad was proof positive that he was guilty of *something* – whether it be a crime against Rome, or a crime against God. But Matthew is reminded from the Psalms that *not all* who suffer are guilty. *Not all* who die are worthy of death. And so when God sovereignly orchestrates this parallel with Psalm sixty-nine, He is powerfully, clearly testifying to the innocence of His beloved Son. In the mockery and cruelty of the soldiers – in the wine mixed with gall – God Himself was *speaking*. God was declaring to all the world that Jesus is the final, and ultimate, “innocent sufferer.”

**III. Matthew 27:35** — And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.

Matthew obviously didn’t feel any need to go into the details of crucifixion. The physical torments were all too well known. But there was also the religious significance. The Old Testament law said this:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 21:22–23 — “If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.

In Jesus’ day, these words were also applied to anyone who was crucified (cf. Carson). So in the eyes of the Jews, the simple fact that Jesus was hanging on a tree was proof positive that He was guilty of something. He was guilty enough, in fact, to be under the curse of God. Matthew knows all this. This is all assumed. And so he quickly moves past the fact of the crucifixion to describe something that was happening at the foot of the cross.

“And when they had crucified Him, they divided His garments among them by casting lots.” Could there possibly be a piece of information any more trivial and mundane than this? So then why has Matthew told us? What does this scene tell us about Jesus? How does this scene help us to “*behold*” Jesus? The theme of the innocent sufferer is a theme repeated *often* in the Psalms – not just in Psalm sixty-nine, but also in Psalm twenty-two. In Psalm twenty-two we hear the *innocent sufferer* crying out to God:

- ✓ Psalm 22:12–18 — Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have [torn my arms and legs; cf. NCV; most Hebrew manuscripts]— I can count all my bones— they stare and gloat over me; *they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*

This is *not* a direct prophecy of what was going to happen at Jesus' crucifixion. In other words, this is *not* the main point: "David predicted that the soldiers would divide up Jesus' clothes among themselves by casting lots... and David's prediction came true!" That would be to make biblical prophecy into nothing more than the prediction of bare facts (which all too many people have done). When David wrote Psalm twenty-two, he *himself* was the innocent sufferer, and so it was his *own* suffering that he was describing. He describes the violence of his persecutors by comparing them to bulls, and lions, and wolves that were biting and tearing at his arms and legs. He describes his own fear and pain by saying that all his bones are out of joint, and his heart melted like wax. His tongue was sticking to his jaws, and he was laid in the dust of death. And *then* he describes the callous, coldhearted indifference of his persecutors like this, "They stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." David writes all of this because it was his own *personal* experience – because this was how *he* felt, and how *he* had been treated. And yet he never ceases to maintain his innocence. He is an "innocent sufferer," and so his prayer becomes a *model* for *all* of God's children who should ever *suffer innocently*. And yet *in Jesus*, Matthew sees not just another innocent sufferer, but the ultimate *fulfillment* of the "innocent sufferer." For the Jews, the simple fact that Jesus was hanging from a cross was proof positive that he was guilty of something, and even cursed by God. But when God sovereignly orchestrates the parallel with Psalm twenty-two, He is testifying to the innocence of His beloved Son. When the soldiers divided Jesus' garments among themselves by casting lots, God Himself was *speaking*. God was declaring to all the world that Jesus is the final and ultimate "innocent sufferer."

**IV. Matthew 27:36–37** — 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."

For the Romans, this was a political charge of treason and rebellion. He claimed to be king when only Caesar was king. For the Jews, this was a religious charge of lies and blasphemy. He claimed to be Messiah and Son of God when obviously He wasn't. But if Jesus is truly the *innocent sufferer* (declared to be so by God Himself), then what does that make the charge against Him? Suddenly, the charge *against* Jesus can really only be a public proclamation of the *truth*. "This *is* Jesus, the *King* of the Jews." This is what Matthew sees. This is what Matthew wants us to see. It is precisely *in His suffering and in His persecution* that Jesus is *proved* to be exactly *who He said He is!* And so once again, even in the midst of what appears to all the world to be total defeat and humiliation, what we have been enabled to see is the total triumph of God's sovereign word. As we see Jesus hang there on the cross, we *behold* the one who suffers innocently, and who *is*, therefore, the true King of all kings and Lord of all lords.

**V. Matthew 27:38–40** — Then two [rebels; NIV] 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."

For the people passing by, the simple fact of the crucifixion was proof that Jesus was a liar and a fake. Add to this the fact that He was crucified in between two other rebels, and the claim to be

Israel's Messiah seemed more preposterous and more laughable than ever. If Jesus really could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, then He should have no trouble making an escape. If Jesus really was the Son of God, then He should have no trouble coming down from the cross. The logic seems unanswerable. It only makes *sense*. And so in this way those who passed by were deriding Him, "wagging their heads."

And why does Matthew tell us that they were wagging their heads? Because in Psalm twenty-two, it is the *innocent sufferer* who cries out to God:

- ✓ Psalm 22:4–7 — In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; *they wag their heads*.

This is what they did to David, *who was innocent*, and now this is what they do to Jesus. So now for the *third* time, it is precisely in the mockery of Jesus' tormenters that we hear God Himself speaking – testifying to the innocence of His beloved Son. But if the mockery is a testimony to Jesus' innocence, then it must also prove the *truth* of His words. Therefore, the temple *will* be destroyed, and Jesus *will* rebuild it in three days. That's why Jesus stays *on* the cross – because He *is* the temple of God, and in three days He *will* rise again – and when He has risen, He will build His church. Not only is it *true* that Jesus is the temple-builder, it must also be *true* that Jesus is the Son of God. Once again, this is why Jesus stays *on* the cross – because this is the will of His Father and He has already learned to pray these words, "not as I will, but as You will" (26:39). And so even in the midst of all the horrors and evils of the crucifixion, we see over and over again *not only* the testimony to His innocence, but also the unwitting testimony of His enemies to who He really and truly *is*. He *is* the King of Israel. He *is* the Temple Builder. He *is* the Son of God. They say it mockingly, but God is declaring it with *authority*. The more Jesus is mocked and ridiculed by His enemies, the more He is affirmed and *vindicated* by God. What to all the world is proof of Jesus' guilt is to us the proof of His innocence. What to all the world is proof of Jesus' foolishness and weakness is to us the proof of His wisdom and power to save. So I love what Bruner writes: "How many more truths can we handle from enemy lips?" Why not just a few more?

**VI. Matthew 27:41–44** — 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.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

The religious leaders were convinced that Jesus performed His mighty works of healing and deliverance by the power of Satan (12:24). So obviously their words are full of sarcasm. "He '*saved*' others; he cannot save himself." The fact that Jesus can't save Himself is obvious proof that all His previous miracles were nothing more than sorceries and frauds. And so they go on mocking, "He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Only if Jesus can save Himself will they believe that He can truly save others. Only if

Jesus can save Himself will they believe that He is truly the King of Israel. Once again, the logic seems irrefutable. It makes perfect *sense*.

But then something very strange happens – something very strange, and very wonderful. The religious leaders climax all their mockery and ridicule of Jesus by quoting from Psalm twenty-two. Did they *know* this? Were they really aware of what they were *doing*? Carson believes it must have been unconscious. Or maybe they knew, but they were so worked up into a frenzy that they just didn't care. They didn't care that their own words betrayed them – and vindicated Jesus. “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” It was the *innocent sufferer* of Psalm twenty-two who cried out:

- ✓ Psalm 22:6–11 — I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; *they wag their heads*; “**He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!**” Yet you are he who took me from the womb; *you made me trust you* at my mother's breasts. **On you was I cast** from my birth, and from my mother's womb *you have been my God. Be not far from me*, for trouble is near, and there is none to help.

So now for the fourth time, it is precisely in the mockery of Jesus' enemies that we hear God speaking – testifying to the innocence of His beloved Son. But if the mockery of the religious leaders proves His innocence, then it also proves and displays the *truth* about who Jesus really is. He *is* the Savior. He *is* the King. He *is* the Son of God. So now there's only one question left. *Why* does He not save Himself? *Why* does He not come down from the cross? Because if He comes down from the cross, He *cannot* be the Son of God. If He comes down from the cross, He *cannot* be the builder of a new temple. If He comes down from the cross, He *cannot* be the promised king of Israel. If He saves Himself, He cannot save *us*. So He hung there, and suffered, for you and for me. And as He hung there, suffering, God was *not* silent, as some might think. In the mouths of scoffers and mockers, God had prepared the vindication of His beloved Son. And if that be so, then how can we not see that even as He suffers there on the cross, His final *victory* is already being announced? It was the innocent sufferer of Psalm 69 and Psalm 22 who rejoiced in the end with these words:

- ✓ Psalm 69:30, 33 — I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving... For the LORD hears the needy...
- ✓ Psalm 22:22–24, 26 — I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the LORD, praise him! ... For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him... The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD!

## Conclusion

Are you beholding Him now? Are you seeing Him with the eyes of true *faith*? Jesus came to be the fulfillment of the innocent sufferer. And one thing this means is that ever since the cross, all of our own innocent sufferings are never really our own – they're a true and a real *sharing* in *His* (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 3:5; Phil. 3:10). So therefore:

- ✓ 1 Peter 4:12–16 — Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you *share* Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

We will never behold Jesus more clearly or know Jesus more deeply than when we have learned to rejoice insofar as we are *sharing in His sufferings*.