

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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Matthew 27:31-53 (read vv.31-36) “The Sufferings & Significance of the Cross”

Intro. After both Jewish and Roman trials, Jesus Christ was unjustly condemned to death at the age of 33. And though He could have called legions of angels to His defense (26:53), He silently submitted to His persecutors. Then from the scene of the mocking and abuse by the soldiers, a large procession began to the hill of Golgotha. An armed troop on foot and on horseback would lead; then the three men who had been condemned to death would follow, carrying their crosses, pushed along by their executioners. Behind them, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities of the nation followed and then finally, a crowd of people would follow. The procession would make its way through the streets of Jerusalem, probably lined with onlookers, at least some of whom were mourning with sympathy for Jesus. Behold the bleeding man, who appears to be the guiltiest of the three! At first Jesus carries His own cross (Jn. 19:16, 17), but not for long. Loss of blood and sheer physical exhaustion made it impossible for Him to carry it very far. When Jesus succumbed beneath His load, the soldiers forced Simon, a man from Cyrene,¹ to carry Christ’s cross. Then, they all reached Golgotha, the place of the skull, where the execution was to take place.

This morning I want to share with you what happened when Jesus was crucified on the cross. Then we will see the meaning of that death. Yes, I will show you that the crucifixion of Jesus had a purpose. Through that sacrificial death Christ would meet the deepest need of our lives. You see, we have a sin problem. Sin results in human suffering and death. But Jesus came to save us from our sin. And I hope to show you the clear connection between the death of Christ and our salvation from sin, suffering, and death. No study of the gospel of Matthew would be complete without consideration of this important aspect of the gospel. So consider with me first of all:

I. THE SUFFERINGS OF THE CROSS

Back in Mt. 16:21 Jesus said He would “suffer many things” in Jerusalem. His suffering certainly included the fact that in v.35 Matthew simply reports, “Then they crucified Him.” In fact, none of the gospel writers describe the details of the crucifixion. They simply state that Jesus was crucified. It was hardly necessary to give the details for the readers of the first century. Crucifixion was deliberately done in high traffic public places as a deterrent. So everyone knew the gruesome details. Crucifixion made death as painful and slow as possible. Even the Romans regarded it as a horrible death. Cicero declared that it was, and I quote, “the most cruel and horrifying death.” So it was the dreaded death brought upon foreign slaves and foreign criminals, and never for Roman citizens. So with that background, we understand the main reason the Gospel writer was so brief in his description of the crucifixion. He seems to ask us to turn our eyes away for a moment; and when we look again, the deed is done, and there stands the cross, and the Lord hanging upon it.

Since we have never witnessed an actual crucifixion, I will describe to you in more detail what Jesus endured on that cross. First of all:

¹ In Cyrene there was a large colony of Jews (Acts 2:10).

A. He suffered Physically – As implied in the last of v.35, Jesus was stripped of His clothes. So He suffered the shame of public exposure. Then, they laid him down on the wood on which He was to be crucified. Jesus probably voluntarily stretched out His hands. Then with heavy strokes, the hammer would fall, driving the rough spikes through His hands or wrists. Oh, do you hear the sound? Then they drove a single spike through both feet. Can you imagine the pain He must have felt? Can you see the blood of the Holy One pouring forth around those nails? Then, they lifted Him up. If the vertical beam of the cross was on the ground, then they would have dropped the cross in a hole with a thud. Pain would again streak through the body of Jesus at that jolt. And while Jesus was on the cross He would have to push up with His legs in order to breathe well enough, and that probably caused more pain, especially when you consider that a nail was driven through His feet. As the hours dragged on, He would also suffer thirst, dehydration, and weakness from loss of blood. When He was too weak or tired to push up with His legs, He would simply hang by His arms, but that would cause temporary suffocation. So he would have to keep pushing up against the spike in his feet. Indeed, Jesus endured sheer torture on the cross.

He not only suffered physically, but:

B. He Also Suffered Fully - It is interesting to me that Jesus refused to lessen His sufferings. According to v.34, someone offered Jesus wine or vinegar mingled with gall.² It is believed based on a rabbinic tradition³ that this was offered before the crucifixion to help deaden the sense of pain. So Jesus refused to drink it. He was not going to suffer in a drugged condition. He knew that He had to suffer the full consciousness of the pain that He was to endure for our sin.

On the other hand, some believe that it was the soldiers that offered this drink, and what they did was not an act of mercy but an act of mockery. After the journey to Golgotha Jesus would have been very thirsty. Instead of offering him true refreshment, they offered him a drink that was very bitter. Jesus refused as soon as He tasted it. A.T. Robertson merges both thoughts, saying, “Women provided the drink to deaden the sense of pain and the soldiers may have added the gall to make it disagreeable.”

Furthermore:

C. He Also Suffered Emotionally – Most of those crucified would have been left to die in peace; but brutal laughter surged around the silent sufferer, and showers of barbed sarcasms were flung at Him from several different groups of people.

1. From the Bypassers – In vv.39-40 we read, “And those who passed by⁴ blasphemed Him, wagging their heads 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.’” Quite a few people passed by and witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. You see, Calvary was probably located at the conjunction of two busy roads. And remember that this was Passover time. Thousands would be arriving to Jerusalem that day. Some others probably passed by in order to see Jesus, for they heard what had happened. Then many shook their heads in contempt and arrogance. Believing the accusations of their religious leaders, they began to hurl abuse at Him. They picked up the slanderous misquotation and misinterpretation of Christ’s words about destroying the temple, and

² “Gall” refers to something bitter. According to Mark 15:23 the bitter substance was myrrh. In fact, Myrrh is an Arabic word meaning bitter.

³ *b. Sanh.* 43a, citing Prov. 31:6, cited by Wilkins, p.898.

⁴ The word translated “those who passed by” literally translates the Greek original.

hurled them at Jesus. They tested Him, demanding that He prove that He is the Son of God by coming down from the cross.

Then Christ also suffered emotionally from:

2. The Religious Leaders – You would think that after this pack of bloodhounds had succeeded in getting Him nailed to the cross, they would go home and let Him die in peace, but they didn't. In vv.41-43 we read, "Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, '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. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.''" The religious leaders also mock Christ. But there is a striking difference between them and the bypassers. The bypassers had addressed Jesus directly. But notice in the narrative that the religious leaders talk *about* Him, and not so much to Him. They charged that the Cross demonstrated the hollowness of Jesus' trust in God, and the rejection of Him by God. Surely religious teachers should have been slow to scoff at religious trust, and surely they should have known that disaster, and even death, were no sure signs of God's displeasure. But they interpreted the cross the way they wanted.

Jeers were coming from every angle. For we also read that Jesus suffered emotionally from:

3. The Robbers – In v.44 we read, "Even the robbers⁵ who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing." They saw or heard about the inscription above His head. They heard the many taunts regarding His claim that He was the King of Israel and Son of God. The robbers were carried away by the argument that if Jesus wanted to prove that He was indeed what He claimed, He should save Himself. And they must have added that He should save them as well! (cf. Lk. 23:39). Evidently both robbers were heaping abuse on Jesus in this manner at the beginning.⁶

Can you imagine what it must have been like to have been rejected to such an extent, and by so many people? Imagine being literally held up for ridicule. Haven't you suffered the pain of ridicule and rejection before? These days it can happen on social media. It hurts! Some have even committed suicide after being ridiculed on social media.

We can hardly imagine how much Jesus suffered. No small number in this room have suffered childbirth. Some have suffered from kidney stones, or gall stones. Some have suffered from a tragic car wreck. But I dare say that the suffering of Jesus far exceeded what you may have suffered.

So the Lord Jesus fully suffered both physically and emotionally. But that's not all. Furthermore:

D. He Suffered Death – In v.50 we read, "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice,⁷ and yielded up His spirit." In other words, He died, but unlike others, He chose to die (John 10:18). His life was not taken from Him. Yet my point here is that He experienced death, even at a young age. His body became lifeless, cold, and increasingly stiff. It seemed that never again those hands would touch the sick and heal them. It seemed that never again those lips would speak the wonderful words of life. The most wonderful life that has ever lived has come to a tragic end.

Now why would Jesus willingly suffer so much and die? After all, the evidence is clear. Jesus Christ did not resist or in any way seek to avoid the sufferings of the cross. Was there any

⁵ These were not common thieves but political insurrectionists (cf. v.16).

⁶ The soldiers join in on the mockings of Jesus, the so-called king of the despised Jewish nation (Lk. 23:36-37).

⁷ Neither Matthew nor Mark gives the content of Jesus final cry, but John stated that He cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

purpose in His suffering and death? Or was it simply an unfortunate miscarriage of justice? Was His death no more than the tragic result of envy and hatred? Did He die in vain? Does His death have anything to do with us today? Well to answer those questions, let's also consider:

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS

The people at the cross couldn't realize the depths of meaning in Christ's suffering and death. Even today, many do not realize the significance of the death of Jesus. Do you? But there are many reasons to believe that the death of Jesus was very significant, relevant, and full of meaning. Why did Jesus suffer and die?

A. To Pay the Penalty of Our Sin – I believe in the penal, substitutionary atonement of Christ. This has been the historic position of the Christian church. In stating the gospel, Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:3, “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” The religious leaders should have seen before their eyes a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53. Isa. 53:10 says that “it pleased the LORD to bruise Him....” Why? It was because He made “His soul an offering for sin...” Because Jesus was a sin offering, He received upon Himself the wrath of God upon sin in our place. Isa. 53:6 says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” He did not suffer and die for sins *He* had committed, but for *our* sins.

Many years ago, a judge here in America was called upon to try a prisoner who had been his companion in his early youth. It was a crime for which the penalty was a fine, more or less heavy. The judge did not diminish the fine; the case was clearly a bad one, and he fined the prisoner to the full. Some who knew the former relation to the offender thought him somewhat unkind thus to carry out the law, while others admired his impartiality. All were surprised when the judge relinquished the bench and paid the penalty in full. He had both shown his respect for the law *and* his goodwill to the man who had broken it. Even so God has done something similar in the Person of His dear Son. He has not canceled the punishment, but He Himself has endured it on our behalf.⁸

One confirmation that He suffered God's wrath is found in v.45, “Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land.”⁹ What happened? An eclipse of the sun would only last a few minutes, and since Passover occurs at full moon, a solar eclipse was not possible.¹⁰ I have seen a severe storm darkened the sky almost like night, so that is a more likely explanation. However, I believe what happened was simply a miracle. And when the darkness came, surely the mockery of the people was forced into a sudden, fearful silence. No human eyes were allowed to gaze on our Lord these last hours of His life. In the gospels, what happened between 12 and 3 o'clock is a blank. You see, darkness is one aspect of God's judgment. After all, Jesus described hell as “outer darkness.” So I believe that He suffered intense agony, indescribable woe, and terrible isolation. Surely, He was being “made sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21) and a curse (Gal. 3:13). I believe that Jesus endured the agony of hell during those 3 hours on the cross, including darkness and separation from God. This is indicated by His words in v.46, where we see that “Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, My God, why

⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Sermons on the Passion and Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971 reprint), 146.

⁹ Wilkins believes that the darkness was also due to God's displeasure at the unjust crucifixion of His son.

¹⁰ A solar eclipse occurs in the daytime at new moon while a lunar eclipse occurs only at full moon (Wikipedia)

have You forsaken Me?’’ This is a quotation from Psa. 22:1, another Psalm that accurately predicted the details of the crucifixion. He tasted the ultimate horror of a lost soul: to be abandoned by God. The context of Psa. 22 helps to explain part of what Jesus meant. The Psalmist went on to say, “Why are You so far from helping Me...? I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear....” His God and Father would not have abandoned Him to His tormentors if it had not been necessary. But it was necessary, in order that He might fully undergo the punishment due to His people’s sins.

An Old Testament type gives us a vivid picture of Christ’s despair. One of two goats taken on the Day of Atonement was known as the scapegoat. Over its head the high priest confessed the sins of the children of Israel. When the long catalog was finished, the goat was handed over to “a fit man,” who led it away into the desert; to “a land not inhabited” (Leviticus 16:21-22). There it was abandoned amid scenes of appalling desolation. There, with not a drop of water or blade of grass in sight, the goat suffered indescribable loneliness and isolation. Again and again it would raise its sad cry, which was answered with total and awful silence. Thus our Savior suffered. His orphan cry rang up to Heaven and the only answer in the darkness was impenetrable, imponderable, complete silence. It must have been very difficult for God the Father to so abandon His son in His time of greatest need.

Oh Jesus, why would you suffer so? Surely it was because You loved us so much that you will willing to suffer and die for our sin.

There are other reasons why Jesus suffered and died:

B. To Demonstrate the True Nature of our Sin – When a person tells a lie, he may say, “It was just a little white lie.” When a person commits adultery, he may call it “love.” We are constantly either justifying ourselves, or downplaying the seriousness or significance of our sin. But if our sin was insignificant, why would Jesus suffer so much when He bore our sin? The truth is the cross of Christ demonstrates the awful horror and ugliness of the sin that plagues every person.

Now when we perceive how bad sin really is, it should cause us to repent of our sin, and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. True confession of sin means to agree with God that sin is utterly wrong and worthy of condemnation.

Another reason Jesus suffered and died was:

C. To Fulfill the OT Sacrificial System and Provide Access to God - The Old Testament sacrificial system involved the bloody slaying of select animals that were without blemish. No one could approach God without sacrificial blood. But the sacrificial system was not really instituted to do away with sin. It simply pointed to the day when the perfect sacrifice would be offered. Jesus was the spotless Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29), sacrificed for our sin. So now, the Old Testament system of sacrifice was no longer needed. We have evidence of this in v.51. There we read that when Jesus died, “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom....”¹¹ At the very moment of Christ’s death, the curtain in front of where the sacrificial blood was applied was suddenly split in two, from top to bottom. The hand of man did not do that. If man had ripped the curtain, it would have been torn from bottom to top. But Matthew makes special mention of the fact that it was torn from top to bottom, showing that it was the hand of God that had done this. Josephus says the veil was 60 feet high! Besides, Edersheim says that the veil was thick and heavy. No man could have torn it anyway with his bare hands. So in a graphic way God was demonstrating that the death of

¹¹ Was this fact revealed to Matthew by converted priests (Acts 6:7b), or by direct inspiration from God?

His Son fulfilled the Old Testament sacrificial system and made it unnecessary. Besides, it was ended 40 years later with the destruction of the temple.

However, the tearing of the curtain graphically demonstrated another wonderful truth: that we now have access to God. Therefore, you and I don't have to have a priest or a preacher go into the presence of God on our behalf; we can go directly to the throne of God through Christ (Heb. 4:14-16). Just the night before Jesus told His disciples that His blood would be shed "for the remission of sins" (26:28). Real forgiveness is offered through the sacrificial death of Christ. Now, we can come to God through Jesus, and receive forgiveness of sins, and eternal life! We are no longer separated from God by our sin. We can go to heaven only because of what Jesus did at Calvary.

During the Civil War a soldier was dying. Another stopped and bathed his forehead with water. "What more can I do?" he asked. In reply the soldier said, "I would have you write a letter to my father, and I shall sign it." This he did. The request was that the letter should be taken to the father if the other soldier survived. The war was over, and the letter was taken to the home of the great judge, the father of the dead soldier. The soldier who carried the letter was in rags, and the servant refused to admit him. Yet he waited until the judge came out. Thinking him to be only a beggar the judge pushed him to one side. Then the ragged soldier showed the judge his son's signature, and it was then that he threw his arms about the soldier and asked him into his house saying, "You may have anything my money can buy and my influence can procure." What changed? It was the name of the son that unlocked the heart of the judge and opened the door of his home to the soldier.¹²

This is true in our case. It is the name of Jesus that opens the door of heaven to us. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." Do you have the key that unlocks the door of heaven?

Finally, I want to share with you one more purpose of the sacrificial death of Christ:

D. To Assure Us of Life after Death – Death is our greatest enemy. It takes loved ones from us. It brings our earthly life to an end all too soon. Salvation would be incomplete without providing victory over this powerful enemy. Well, Christ faced the Goliath of death and gained the victory for us by dying in our place. And the fact that His death has brought life to us is indicated in our text. Matthew is the only Gospel writer that reports another supernatural event that shows the significance of the death of Christ. According to vv.51-53, the earth quaked, rocks were split, and the graves were opened at the very moment of the death of Christ. Then some of the Old Testament saints were resurrected from the dead and later appeared to some in Jerusalem! Surely this shows that the death of Christ brings eternal life. Jesus changed the meaning of the cross. The cross of death has become the symbol of life! In Christ all will be made alive. What a hope we have concerning our loved ones who have believed in Christ! What a hope we have for the time when we ourselves face death. Christ has taken away the fear of death (Heb. 2:15). Oh, what a Savior!

Conclusion: Once again, will you join me in beholding Christ upon the cross? See Him suffer with nails in His hands and feet. Hear the ridicule coming from every side. Sense the anguish of His soul as He bears our sin and suffers God's wrath against sin. Finally, He tasted of death itself.

Why did He do it? Why didn't He flee from the arresting soldiers into the darkness of night? Why didn't He defend Himself at His trials? Why didn't He call 10,000 angels to rescue Him from further torture and death? It's because He was thinking of you. As the song says, "When

¹² Told by C. Wade Freeman, *New Life for You*.

He was on the cross, I was on His mind.” He knew that since you and I have sinned, we would suffer God’s holy wrath against sin. We would suffer outer darkness and eternal separation from God. He knew that otherwise Satan and Death would have the victory over us. So Christ suffered and died in our place, and satisfied God’s wrath against sin. Now we can be forgiven. Now we can have access to God. Now we can go to heaven.

Today you have seen the seriousness of sin. It’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a holy God while you hold on to your sin. Have you repented of your sin? Have you received God’s gift of eternal life? Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” If not, why not do so today! Don’t turn away from a Savior who love you so.

Most in my audience have already trusted Christ as Savior. Aren’t you glad that you have done that? In light of His great sacrifice, Jesus deserves your love, loyalty, and obedience. Do you need to recommit your life to Christ today? Do you need to follow His will and join our church today? Are you holding back any gifts or service from Him? If so, make it right today!

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Fred W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior* (New York: Carter & Bros., 1855); John MacArthur, Jr., *Crucifixion & Resurrection: Study Notes on John 18-20* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1986); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Dr. Jerry Vines *Great Events in the Life of Christ* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament: Mark*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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