

## **Kingdom: A Journey Through Matthew**

The Centerpiece of All History and the Determinant of Our Eternity

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### **THE CENTERPIECE OF ALL HISTORY AND THE DETERMINANT OF OUR ETERNITY Matthew 26-27**

If you have Bible and I hope you do. Let me invite you to turn with me to Matthew 26. Today we tread on some of the most holy ground in all of Scripture. As we prepare to enter into this Holy Week, the week when we remember the arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial of our Lord (the thought itself is stunning and sobering at the same time), I want us to pause where we are in Matthew and jump to the climax of the whole book. This week, we will be in Matthew 26-27, and then next week on Easter, we will be in the first part of Matthew 28.

But today, we look at the cross of Jesus Christ—the centerpiece of all history and the determinant of our eternity. The cross of Christ is *the* key to understanding everything in history and everything in our life forever. E. Stanley Jones said, “The cross is the key. If I lose this key I fumble. The universe will not open to me. But with this key in my hand I know I hold its secret.”

And today, I want to ask the question, “Why is what happened on this week two thousand years ago so significant?” Why is what we’re about to read today *the* key to understanding everything? And so what I want us to do is simply to read these two chapters – all at once – and then I want us to step back and consider the gravity of what we just read.

So I approach this text with a bit of a sense of trembling. Charles Spurgeon said of the Garden of Gethsemane these words, and I think they can apply to the whole of what we’re about to read – He said,

“Here we come to the Holy of Holies of our Lord’s life on earth. This is a mystery like that which Moses saw when the bush burned with fire, and was not consumed. No man can rightly expound such a passage as this; it is a subject for prayerful, heart-broken meditation, more than for human language.”

Another writer said, “Surely this is a passage we must approach on our knees.” And D.A. Carson, who wrote one of my favorite commentaries on Mathew, said, “As Jesus’ death was unique, so also was his anguish; and our best response to it is hushed worship.”

So let’s read this text that discloses the center of all history and the reality that determines every single one of our eternal destinies.

*When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.” Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas,*

*and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."*

*Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."*

*Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.*

*Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover. When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."*

*Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."*

*And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.*

*Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here,*

*and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."*

*While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled.*

*Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"*

*Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to*

*the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.*

*When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.*

*Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."*

*Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.*

*Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"*

*So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.*

*Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.*

*As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. 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. 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.'" 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 others 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, 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.*

*When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.*

*The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard. (Matt. 26-27)*

Let's pray. Lord, help us to understand, we pray, the wonder of what we have just read. Remind us today of its significance, apply its truth deeply to our hearts, that we might live and worship as we ought. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

If you were to ask me, "What is the significance of the cross? Why is the cross so important? How can you make the claim that the cross of Christ is *the* centerpiece of all history and *the* determinant of our eternity?" this would be my answer.

## **Remember the Holiness of God**

First, I would start by encouraging you to remember the holiness of God, because an understanding of God – and man in relation to God – is critical to understanding the cross. How we understand who God is will directly affect how we understand what the cross is about. Similarly, how we understand who we are will directly affect how we understand what the cross is about. If we are basically/spiritually in tact and just need some minor changes here and there in our lives, then with some effort on our part, salvation can happen. But if man is totally depraved apart from God no matter what he does, then something radical has to happen.

This is key – *Until we see God for who He is and ourselves for who we are, we'll never see the cross for what it means.* But when we see God for who He is and when we see ourselves for who we are, then the necessity and the wonder of the cross becomes so obvious that we are astonished we never saw it before. So let's look at the character of God – an overview of His holiness, His glorious uniqueness.

### **He is Sovereign Over All**

He is sovereign over all. Psalm 24:1-2 says, "*The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.*"

God created all things, knows all things, sustains all things, and God owns all things. Sovereignty means authority. God is the author of all things, which means He has authority over all things. He has authority to govern the world and He has authority to govern our lives. He has all the rights – *all* the rights. We belong to Him.

Yet, we have denounced His sovereignty. We have rebelled against the authority of God. This is the picture in Genesis 3 – Even though God said not to eat from the tree, we're going to do it anyway. He's not Lord over us. We can do what we want. And it's evident in every single one of our lives. He is sovereign, and we have denounced His sovereignty. He is Lord, and we have rejected His lordship.

### **He is Righteous Above All**

Second, God is righteous above all. He is right in all that He does. Look at Genesis and Psalms; Genesis 18:25 – *"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"* Psalm 145:17 – *"The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made."* God is right—righteous—in all His ways. He has never had a wrong thought, never done a wrong deed, never had a wrong motive, never said a wrong thing. He is totally right.

And we have despised His righteousness. Romans 3:10-12 – *"As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'*" We are the complete opposite of God in this. We have wrong thoughts, do wrong deeds, possess wrong motives, and say wrong things. He is totally right, and we have despised His righteousness—rebelled against His righteousness.

### **He is Just in All His Wrath**

Third characteristic of God: He is just in all His wrath. Because God is holy and righteous, He cannot stand sin. His justice flows from His righteousness. With God, a wrathful response to sin and evil is not just a possibility, it is an inevitability. Scripture uses more than 20 different words to describe God's wrath. There are over 580 different references to God's wrath in the Bible. The Old Testament makes clear that God's wrath is real, it is personal, it is intense, and it is steady. God's wrath is not mysterious or irrational. It is not unpredictable – it is always predictable. Evil provokes the wrath of God every time. This is the consistent response of a holy and righteous God. His wrath is pure, and His wrath is loving.

It is good for God to hate that which destroys you and me. The New Testament only deepens the picture of God's wrath, making clear that His wrath is continual, it is coming (remember Matthew 3 – John the Baptist announcing the King coming with the winnowing fork in His hand). Jesus comes into a world under the wrath of God – in John 3:36, John writes, *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."*

God's wrath is deserved, it is dreadful, it is final, and it is eternal. The reality is: because God is holy and righteous and infinitely honorable and infinitely worthy, one sin against Him is an infinite offense and infinite dishonor, deserving infinite punishment. I remind you that it was one sin alone—one sin—that led to the curse of God that affects the entire world today. It was one sin – eating a piece of fruit in disobedience to God. One sin, and we have the effects we see throughout history—world wars, holocaust, cancer, disease, tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, terrorism, pain, and suffering—all because of one sin. Romans 5 says that one sin brought condemnation to all men. That was one sin, and you and I have committed thousands and thousands of them. Which is why Romans 3:5-6 makes clear that God is just in bringing His wrath on us. He is just in all His wrath, and we have disregarded His wrath. We have pretended it is not there. We have questioned, mocked, and ultimately ignored the wrath of God.

### **He is Loving Toward All His Creation**

Fourth attribute of God I want you to remember: He is loving toward all His creation. First John 4:16 – *"And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him."* God is love. And we have denied His love. Meaning, we have turned from His love. We have, in the words of Romans 2:4, *"shown contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance, and patience toward us."* We have not believed that He loves us, and so we have turned aside to our own ways. In this way, we have denied His love.

## **So How Can A Righteous God Be Loving to Rebellious Sinners who are Due His Wrath?**

So, with that background, we now come face-to-face with *the* question that is at the center of all the Bible. If all this is true – if God is sovereign and we have denounced His sovereignty, if God is righteous and we have despised His righteousness, if God is just in all His wrath and we have disregarded His wrath, if God is loving toward all His creation, and we have denied His love, then how can a righteous God be loving to rebellious sinners who are due His wrath? If we are ever going to understand the cross, we must feel the weight of this question.

This is the problem with which Scripture is ultimately concerned and it is the ultimate question in all the universe: how can sinful man be righteous before God? Go to Proverbs 17:15. You've got to see this. You and I have got to feel the weight of this, and this is a verse that will help us feel the weight of this tension.

See Proverbs 17:15 with me...*"He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD."* Did you hear that? "He who justifies the wicked and condemns the righteous" – they are both an abomination to the Lord. So if a judge says to the wicked, "You are right/innocent," that is an abomination to the Lord. Likewise, if a judge says to the righteous, "You are wrong/condemned," that is an abomination to the Lord. That makes sense to us, right?

Now apply this to God and to us. If God were to look at you and me in our wickedness and say, "You are right/innocent," that would be an abomination to the Lord. That's a problem! As soon as God tells rebellious sinners that they are right before Him, God becomes an abomination to Himself. So do you see the tension here? How can a righteous God be loving toward rebellious sinners who are rightfully due His wrath? *That* is the fundamental problem in all the universe, but it's not the problem we normally identify.

Think about it. How many people in our culture are worried about how God can be just *and* kind to sinners at the same time? How many people are losing sleep at night because God is being kind to sinners? No, on the contrary, we are so warped in our thinking that we point the finger at God and we say, "How can you punish sinners? How can you let people go to hell?" But the question of the Bible is just the opposite: "God, how can you be just and right and let rebels into heaven?"

See this: God's forgiveness of our sin is a threat to His character. John Stott said, "Forgiveness is for God the profoundest of problems." Bishop Westcott said, "Nothing superficially seems simpler than forgiveness," but "nothing if we look deeply is more mysterious or more difficult." And this is Romans 3:25 is saying: the purpose of the cross was to show the righteousness of God, because in his divine forbearance/patience God had passed over former sins. That's the whole picture in the Bible—God is passing over sins.

Think about 2 Samuel 12. David is guilty of adultery, lying, and murder, and Nathan the prophet confronts him. Second Samuel 12:13: *Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die."* Did you hear that? Adultery and murder just passed over. Is that justice? No. If a judge today were to look at this case and say, "I put adultery and murder away," we would have him off the bench in a heartbeat. That judge is not right. Do we realize this? God's forgiveness of our sin; God's forgiveness of your sin is a threat to His character.

God cannot be just and yet acquit you and me in our sin and our rebellion and our belittling of His glory. He can't just pass over it. If God were to overlook sin, His justice and holiness

would be completely compromised, and He would no longer be God. And this is where we realize that before the cross is for anyone else's sake, the cross is for God's sake. This is God showing/displaying His justice and His righteousness toward sin.

Who did Christ die for? Me? You? Yes, but that is an incomplete answer. The nations? Still incomplete, and not ultimate. Ultimately, Christ died for God. Watchman Nee: "If I would appreciate the blood of Christ I must accept God's valuation of it, for the blood is not primarily for me but for God." We need to hear this. We have heard the gospel presented as God's answer to human problems – and it is that in many ways. But first and foremost, it is God's answer to a divine problem. It is God's vindication and declaration of His glory—God demonstrating His justice and His righteousness.

And this is what drove Jesus to the cross. The glory of God drove Jesus to the cross. Look in John 12. John 12:27-28: "*Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!*" Why did Jesus go to the cross? Don't be too quick to answer – "To save me from my sins." This is the byproduct, but not the purpose. We say things like, "You/I were on the Savior's mind when He went to the cross." Ladies and gentlemen, "The Father was on the Savior's mind when He went to the cross." The cross is good news for God before it is good news for us.

Christ died for God. Remember the holiness of God, otherwise, you'll never grasp the significance of the cross.

## **Tremble at the Horror of Wickedness**

Second key to understanding the magnitude of Matthew 26-27 – we must remember the holiness of God, and then we must tremble at the horror of wickedness. That we see here. One writer said:

"[For thousands of] years wickedness had been growing. It had wrought deeds of impiety and crime that had wrung the ages with agony, and often roused the justice of the universe to roll her fiery thunderbolts of retribution through the world. But now it had grown to full maturity; it stands around this cross in such gigantic proportions as had never been seen before; it works an enormity before which the mightiest of its past exploits dwindle into insignificance, and pale into dimness. It crucifies the Lord of life and glory."

And I've summarized the wickedness of man on display in different people at different times doing different things to the Son of God.

### **Jewish Leaders: Rejecting, Arresting, Accusing, and Judging the Son of God**

The height of wickedness as man takes God in the flesh and crucifies Him. See the Jewish leaders: rejecting, arresting, accusing, and judging the Son of God. Maybe one of the most telling sentences in all that we just read is in Matthew 26:63, where the high priest is sitting in judgment upon Jesus and he says, "*I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.*" And Jesus said to him, "*You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.*"

Wow! What a statement. Jesus says, "You are sitting now in judgment of me, but one day you will see Me sitting in judgment of you." This pushed the high priest over the edge: he tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What is the judgment?" And the Jewish leaders answered, "He deserves death." Then they spit in His face and struck Him. Jewish leaders judging the very Son of God.

### **Roman Leaders: Sentencing and Crucifying the Son of God**

Then He is taken to Roman leaders Pilate and Herod, where we see them sentencing and crucifying the Son of God. Pilate tries Jesus and in response gives the crowds the option of releasing either Barabbas, a murderous insurrectionist, or Jesus to them, and the crowds cry out for Barabbas, saying, "Crucify Jesus!" Pilate tried to absolve himself of responsibility, but there is no question that responsibility was on his hands, as well as the Jewish leaders' hands, as "he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified."

### **Soldiers: Stripping, Scourging, Mocking, Beating, and Spitting on the Son of God**

Which leads to the soldiers, whom we see stripping, scourging, mocking, beating, and spitting on the Son of God. Taking the dreaded whip full of bone or lead bound into leather thongs and lashing the victim's body to a bloody pulp. Tremble at the horror of wickedness as they twist a crown of thorns into His head, put a scepter in His hand and a robe around His naked body, and bow down in mockery, saying, "This is the King of the Jews." Then they spit in His face and lead Him away to a cross. The most degrading of all ways to die. One writer said,

"Crucifixion was unspeakably painful and degrading. Whether tied or nailed to the cross, the victim endured countless paroxysms as he pulled with his arms and pushed with his legs to keep his chest cavity open for breathing and then collapsed in exhaustion until the demand for oxygen demanded renewed paroxysms. The scourging, the loss of blood, the shock from the pain, all produced agony that could go on for days, ending at last by suffocation, cardiac arrest, or loss of blood. When there was reason to hasten death the execution squad would smash the victim's legs. Death followed almost immediately, either from shock or from collapse that cut off breathing."

### **Crowds: Ridiculing, Reviling, and Shouting at the Son of God.**

And while all of this is taking place, you have crowds: ridiculing, reviling, and shouting at the Son of God. "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself." "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." They derided Him, wagging their heads and yelling at Him, the text says. But sadly, it's not just the crowds.

### **Disciples: Betraying, Denying, Disobeying, Scattering, and Deserting the Son of God**

In the middle of all of this, what was potentially most disheartening were the disciples betraying, denying, disobeying, scattering, and deserting the Son of God. Judas and Peter and others, after three years of walking with Him, now desert Him? Oh, tremble at the horror of wickedness, and not just their wickedness, but our wickedness. Think about it.

When you think of the passion narrative, who do you identify with most? If you were in that story, who would you be? Peter – weeping as you realize the magnitude of your denial of Christ. Simon of Cyrene – carrying Jesus' cross for him. The women who stood at a distance watching those things. Mary – standing at the cross, looking up at her son. The thief – asking Jesus to remember him in His kingdom. The centurion, who after Jesus died, shouted out, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" You know who I identify with? I identify most

with the angry mob screaming, "Crucify Him!" It's who we all identify with. Because apart from the grace of God, we'd all be standing there, and in the words of C.J. Mahaney, "We're only flattering ourselves to think otherwise." The old Negro spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" And the answer is, "Yes, we were there." Not as spectators, but as participants, guilty participants, plotting, scheming, betraying, bargaining, and handing Him over to be crucified. This is key – John Stott said: "Until you see the cross as that which is done by you, you will never appreciate that it is done for you." A Scottish hymn writer wrote:

Tw'as I that shed the sacred blood; I nailed him to the tree;  
I crucified the Christ of God; I joined the mockery.  
Of all that shouting multitude, I feel that I am one;  
And in that din of voices rude I recognize my own.  
Around the cross the throng I see, Mocking the Sufferer's groan;  
Yet still my voice it seems to be, As if I mocked alone."

## **Behold the Humility of Christ**

When you read Matthew 26-27, tremble at the horror of wickedness in your own heart. And as you do behold the humility of Christ. Amidst all the externals in this scene, see what is happening internally. Amid the horror of all that is happening on the surface, see the humility of what is happening below the surface.

So most of us have probably seen the Passion movie, and we've got images of what the cross may have looked like in our minds. But what makes the cross significant is not ultimately all the physical things that come to your mind or mine. What makes the cross significant is ultimately all of the spiritual realities that are converging here in this one moment in history.

If all we think of when we think of the cross are images from the Passion, then we will have a very shallow understanding of the cross. There are depths to be explored and uncovered here, and I have tried to depict the depth of what is happening here at the cross with three key words based around three key events that we just read about – the Lord's Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus' cry from the cross.

### **Substitution: Jesus Died our Death**

So think with me about what Jesus did here – behold His humility - first key word is substitution. Scripture is clear from the start: the payment for sin is death. Yet Jesus had no sin. So why are we reading a story about His death? Because He is our substitute. When we read Mathew 26-27, we see Him dying in our place. And He tells His disciples this when He institutes the Lord's Supper in Matthew 27:26.

*Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"(Matt. 27:26-29)*

See the significance here. This is Jesus celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples, a meal they ate every year to remember the day in Egypt where all the Israelite homes took an innocent lamb and slaughtered it, and they put its blood above their doorposts, so that when God, in judgment on sin, came to each Israelite and Egyptian home, any home that did not have blood over the doorpost would see the firstborn son in that home die. It was the night when God provided the blood of a lamb, a substitute sacrifice, to save His people from the payment of sin. And every year they would celebrate this meal. They would take lambs to the temple, where they would be slaughtered, and their blood would spill out, and then they would gather together in their homes and remember that night, and in that backdrop Jesus says, "My blood will be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

He is the Passover lamb (Exodus 12) who saves us with His blood. So that when God in His wrath and judgment comes to you and me, if we hide under the blood of a substitute sacrifice—Jesus the Lamb of God—we are saved. He is the Passover lamb who saves us with His blood and He is the covenant keeper (Exodus 24) who seals us with His blood.

Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant" – and this is the only time in the entire book of Matthew that we see the word "covenant" - what does that mean? Well, it takes you all the way back to Exodus 24 where God had given His people (the Israelites) His law at Mount Sinai, and He entered into a covenant with them through blood, and Exodus 24:8 says, "*Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."* And it was a picture not only of God's forgiveness of His people but His binding of His people to Himself in relationship with them.

So that the picture here is a new covenant sealed not with the blood of an animal sacrifice, but sealed with the blood of the Son of God Himself. He is our substitute sacrifice. He died the death we deserve to die. So that before the cross, we were headed to eternal death; because of the cross, we now have eternal life.

We have the promise that one day we will drink again of the fruit of this vine in His Father's kingdom. That's a promise. Those who trust in the substitute sacrifice of Jesus will live forever!

And we even see a foretaste of that right after Jesus is crucified, and Matthew tells us about bodies of saints being raised. And there's all kinds of questions about what that means, and all kinds of articles written about that, which we don't have time to get into, but all agree that this was a clear picture that the death of Christ makes resurrection to life possible for all who trust in Him. See the wonder of what is happening here in the Lord's Supper and then at the cross – Jesus is our substitute, dying our death so that we might have eternal life! Substitution: Jesus died our death.

### **Propitiation: Jesus Endured our Condemnation**

Second word: propitiation. Now let me explain this word. It was read earlier in Romans 3:25 – *God put forward Christ Jesus as a propitiation by his blood...*what does that mean? Well, the word "propitiation" literally means "one who turns aside wrath by taking away sin." And that word only makes sense when you understand all the things we have covered.

God is holy, just in all His wrath, and we are sinful, deserving His wrath. And so when Jesus went to the cross, He endured the wrath that we deserve. This is key to understanding the cross: what is happening to Jesus is what we deserve. Go to Matthew 26:39. Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane, now preparing to be betrayed, arrested, and eventually crucified,

and what does He pray? *"Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."*

Obviously, that prayer begs the question, "What is this cup?" And this is where we must realize that the cup of the cross is not primarily physical suffering; it is predominantly spiritual suffering. What is causing Jesus such anguish here is not the prospect of what is about to happen to Him physically, but the prospect of what is about to happen to Him spiritually. And we know this because of the way Scripture talks about the cup before (and after this). Listen to Psalm 75:8: *"In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs."* Then hear Isaiah 51:17ff.:

*Awake, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger....They are filled with the wrath of the LORD and the rebuke of your God. Therefore hear this, you afflicted one, made drunk, but not with wine. This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people: "See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again."*

Or Jeremiah 25:15: *"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them."*

The cup in Scripture is a reference to the wrath of God. Later, Revelation 14:10 will talk of those who *"drink of the wine of God's fury which is poured full strength into the cup of His wrath."* Oh, remember this: when we see Jesus sorrowful and troubled here in the garden, realize Jesus was not a coward about to face Roman soldiers; He was a Savior about to experience divine wrath. And when Jesus went to the cross, the full cup of the wrath of God due your sin and my sin was poured out upon His Son. When you see the cross, as you contemplate the cross this week, consider the reality that Jesus was enduring your condemnation and my condemnation. Oh, the wonder and the beauty of the cross.

At the cross, God expresses His full judgment upon sin. At the cross, God endures Himself His full judgment against sin. And at the cross, God enables free salvation for sinners. Before the cross, we were afraid of God [objects of the wrath of God, deserving nothing but condemnation before God, but now...]; because of the cross, we are now friends of God. All because of His propitiation. He endured the wrath of the Father that we might experience the love of the Father.

### **Reconciliation: Jesus Suffered our Separation**

Third word, reconciliation. This one based on Matthew 27:46 – start in verse 45, *"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?"* (Matt. 27:45-46). What does it mean when Jesus cries out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?"*

It means reconciliation. Follow this with me, the cry on the cross is NOT a cry of unbelief, confusion, or despair. Jesus is not doubting the Father, He is not confused about what is happening, i.e., "Why are you doing this to me?" as if He doesn't understand. He knows

everything that is going on here. He had foretold this moment and He was willingly in this moment. There is no despair here. He is confident in the Father.

Instead, this is a cry of physical agony, spiritual anguish, and relational alienation. It's a quote from Psalm 22, and understanding that psalm is key to understanding this cry. We don't have time to turn there and compare it altogether, but I'll just quote some of the verses to you. Certainly this was a cry of physical agony as Jesus physically hung on the cross. And Psalm 22:14 says...

*I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.*

It's also a cry of spiritual anguish. Just like we talked about, Jesus is now, not anticipating the wrath of God; He is experiencing it. And not just for a moment, but for hours. Shrouded by darkness and seared with pain, He is experiencing the cup of God's wrath. But it's also a cry of relational alienation. Jesus is experiencing, in a mysterious way, alienation not only from His friends, but from the Father. This is the curse of the cross.

As Jesus came under the sentence of sin, which involves separation from the Father, we are seeing Jesus cut off from the Father's favorable presence. God's presence was real at the cross, but it was His presence in judgment and wrath toward sin. In a similar way, God's presence is real in hell, but it is His presence in judgment and wrath toward sinners. And on the cross, Jesus was experiencing separation from the favor of the Father's presence as He was given the full recompense of our disobedience.

This is the weight of 2 Corinthians 5:21 - *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*.

Martin Luther said:

"Our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law [so that] we could never be delivered from it by our own power, sent his only Son in the world and laid upon him all the sins of all men, saying: Be thou Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise; that thief which hanged upon the cross; and briefly, be thou the person which hath committed the sins of all men; see therefore that thou pay and satisfy for them [all]."

Experience the separation that they deserve, so that they might receive reconciliation. And that is the effect of the cross. For all who trust in Jesus...

Before the cross, we were cast out of God's presence [in the sense of being cut off from God's favorable presence, separated from His love and His mercy and His goodness, the Bible says that in our sin we were alienated from God, but now] because of the cross, we are [no longer cast out of God's presence, we are] now invited into God's presence.

Oh, the wonder of this! It's why, right after the cross, right after this cry, Matthew writes that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The barrier separating

man from God, was ripped away by God so that—just think of it—hell-deserving sinners could be welcomed safely into the presence of the infinitely holy God of the universe.

Oh, do you see it? Do you see now why the cross is so significant? What is happening here is so much more than a naked man dying on a wooden post on the side of the road in a nondescript part of the world. This is the holy God of the universe giving His Son to die our death, endure our condemnation, and suffer our separation so that wicked sinners can be declared righteous and welcome in the presence of God. All history revolves around this scene, and all your life is determined by what you do in response to this scene.

### **Surrender Your Heart To God**

Sinner, turn from your sin and trust in this Savior today! And when you do, Christian, do not toy with your sin, but trust in your Savior everyday!

### **Proclaim The Hope Of The Gospel**

Surrender your heart to God, AND proclaim the hope of the gospel. This is the greatest news in all the world. Let's make it known – all of it. Think about it. Most people (not all, but most people) in our city know that Jesus died on a cross somewhere around 2000 years ago. But so many people don't know why Jesus died. They don't know why that is the centerpiece of all history and the determinant of our eternity; but you do!

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