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Matthew 27:27 - 27:44



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Steve Gregg discusses the details of Jesus' crucifixion. He notes that Simon of Cyrene was likely forced to carry Jesus' cross and that the Romans used sour wine mixed with gall as a type of anesthesia. Additionally, Gregg suggests that the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus may have been partners of Barabbas and that their words and actions while on the cross were intended to mock and misquote Jesus. Overall, the passage provides insight into the historical and cultural context of Jesus' crucifixion.

Transcript

We're now studying the crucifixion of Jesus in Matthew chapter 27. As you know, there are four accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. There's that given by Matthew and there are three additional accounts given by Mark, Luke, and John, respectively.

And these accounts each give portions of the whole story, as is the case with many of the stories of Jesus' life. None of the Gospel writers give all the details, and we often get the fuller picture by consulting them all, because each one has selected which details to tell. And there's much overlapping in the accounts, but there are specific details given by one author that are often left out by another.

In Matthew 27, we're beginning our reading at verse 27. It says, Obviously, the scarlet robe was a mockery of a royal robe, because Jesus had been accused of calling himself the king of the Jews. They dressed him like a king in mockery.

Now, this was a way of dressing him up like a king. They put a crown and a scepter in his hand, a crown on his head. This crown was a crown of thorns.

I have seen, and perhaps you have also in certain places, the very thorns that are likely to have been used, that is the specie of thornbush that grows in that region, have been brought over to this country. Though I've not gone to Israel to see it, I have seen crowns of thorns woven today from the same thorns that were growing in that area. And they are very wicked thorns.

They are very long thorns, they're very sharp, they're needle sharp. Frankly, it hurts just to touch the thorns gingerly. To have such a thing shoved down on one's forehead so that those thorns pierce into the skin would be excruciating.

And in addition to all that, they put a reed, or a little, like a bamboo stick, in Jesus' right hand to represent a scepter. A scepter is the rod of a king's authority. Basically, his possession of the scepter is the emblem of his right to rule.

And they put that there because a king needs a scepter, but then they took it out of his hand and struck him with it, spat on him, and mocked him. And it says in verse 31, Then when they had mocked him, they took the robe off of him, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to be crucified. So, before they actually went to nail him to the cross, they decided to have their fun with him, mocking him and abusing him in these ways.

And it says, Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name, him they compelled to bear his cross. And when they had come to the place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, they gave him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when he had tasted it, he would not drink it.

Now, I need to stop here for a moment. This man, Simon of Cyrene, whom they compelled to carry his cross, was a man from a black African nation, no doubt was a black individual, who had the opportunity, the privilege really, to be the only man in history who actually carried Jesus' own cross. You know, Jesus said, If any man come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

And everyone must bear a cross of a sort, if they're going to be a disciple of Jesus. But this man literally carried Jesus' own cross. Now, the way that we usually understand it is that Jesus began carrying his own cross, but apparently stumbled under the weight of it, having spent a sleepless night, being beat up, being whipped, being struck with rods and so forth, being demoralized and humiliated.

He simply had no strength left in him. And he apparently fell under the cross, and this other man was compelled to carry it. Now, that scenario I just described is not given in the Bible.

All we have really is that in the Gospel of John, we're told that Jesus was led out carrying his own cross. Nothing more is said about who carried his cross in John. But the Synoptic Gospels, they don't mention Jesus carrying his cross, they mention this man being compelled to carry the cross.

Therefore, we have in the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, simply a record of this man, Simon of Cyrene, carrying his cross. There's no mention of Jesus carrying it at all. In John, there's the record of Jesus carrying his own cross and no mention of Simon.

So, we have two different accounts, and the best way to harmonize them would seem to

be that Jesus did leave Jerusalem with his cross beam on his own shoulder, but at some point and for some reason, this burden was transferred to this other man who was compelled to carry it. One small point of interest about this man, Simon of Cyrene, is that we are told in the Gospel of Mark that this man, Simon, was the father of a man named Rufus. And this Rufus is mentioned as a Christian in Romans chapter 16 and verse 13.

In Romans 16, 13, Paul says, Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother in mine. In other words, Paul had become acquainted with this family, and Rufus' mother had become like a mother to Paul himself. Rufus' mother would have been Simon's wife, Simon of Cyrene.

And we're told in Mark 15, 21, that this Simon who carried the cross was the father of this Rufus. And so, here we have a man who was just a bystander, apparently a pilgrim from a faraway country. In all likelihood, a black man, although he may not have been, he may have been a Jewish man who lived in that black African country.

But in any case, he was a man who was just standing, one might say, in the wrong place at the wrong time. And he was given this unpleasant task of carrying this cross. However, the man may have become a Christian, since it would appear that both his wife and his son Rufus became Christians, and thus Paul sends greetings to them.

Now, it says in verse 33 that the place they brought Jesus to was a place called Golgotha, that is to say, the place of a skull. Golgotha is a Hebrew word, or an Aramaic word, and it is the equivalent of the Greek word cavalry. Not cavalry, but calvary.

Those words are similar, but they're not the same. Calvary is the name of the mountain in Greek, and Golgotha is its name in Aramaic or in Hebrew. And both mean a place of a skull.

Now, the place of a skull is what this place is called. It's right outside Jerusalem. And some have wondered whether it might have been called that because it was a place of regular executions, and the skulls of men who had died were littering around the place, and therefore they simply called the place of the skull.

However, that doesn't seem likely, since the Romans, upon crucifying men, usually did not decapitate them. That is, it was not part of the Roman procedure to crucify a man and then cut his head off, and therefore there would not be any reason why skulls would be around there. However, there is a place which has been tentatively at least identified as Golgotha, which can be seen even today.

It is a mountain, a rocky mountain outside Jerusalem, and at certain times of the day when the sun's light hits it and shadows are a certain way, it actually appears to have a skull face on the side of the mountain. And it is very likely that this is the place that was referred to as the place of a skull. Or Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified.

It says in verse 34, They gave him sour wine mingled with gall to drink, but when he had tasted it he would not drink it. It would seem that this sour wine mingled with gall was, although very bitter to the taste, it was probably meant as something of a deadener of pain. It may have been that there was sort of a group of do-gooders in Jerusalem who wanted to help criminals who were going to be crucified to be somewhat anesthetized, or whatever you'd say, anesthetized, to in some ways deaden the pain with some wine.

Actually in Proverbs chapter 31, in the early verses of that chapter, there is a recommendation that wine be given to condemn people who are about ready to perish so they can forget their grief. It is a reference to using wine as an anesthesia. And probably the sour wine mixed with gall was used for that purpose.

Jesus, however, refused it and would not accept the anesthesia. The cup that his father gave him he would drink, which was a cup of suffering and death, but the cup that man offered him of comfort he would not take. Verse 35 says, Then they crucified him and divided his garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet.

They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. And sitting down they kept watch over him there. Now this was done by the four centurions who were given charge of Jesus to crucify him.

They found that he had a garment that was of some value. He had a robe that was woven seamlessly from the neck down and was apparently something that someone who loved him a great deal had made for him because it was a very expensive robe to have. And then he had an ordinary rough cloak that any Jewish man would wear to cover himself from the wind and so forth.

And the rough cloak was basically a piece of not very valuable cloth. And this they divided in four. They tore it into four pieces and each centurion took one piece.

The robe that Jesus wore was too valuable to tear up and so they gambled for it. And the soldier who won the casting of lots got to take the robe home and possibly either wear it or sell it and make some money. And this was fulfilling a prophecy that is found in the 22nd Psalm where it actually says they parted my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots.

Actually both of these things happened. They parted his cloak into four parts and then they cast lots for his robe. So the scripture was fulfilled literally in this case.

Somewhere along this time, according to Luke's Gospel, Jesus cried out, Father forgive them for they know not what they do. That statement of Jesus is not recorded in Matthew but Luke places it somewhere around this point chronologically in Luke 23 verse 34. So right from the very beginning when they were mocking him, crucifying him, and by the

way that passes over that without giving much gruesome detail.

You have to remember that crucified means that someone took some sharp nails and drove them right through his wrists and fastened him to a piece of wood and through his feet also and then yanked it up and dropped it into a hole where his body would be yanked on these pressure points and this is an extremely painful way to go. It was the way, by the way, that the Romans reserved for criminals of the worst type. You see if you were a Roman citizen, if you had Roman citizenship, you could be a criminal and do something worthy of death and you would be put to death but you would not be put to death by crucifixion.

A Roman citizen had the right, if he had to be executed, to be beheaded which might sound gruesome but at least it's quick and not very painful. Whereas someone who did not have Roman citizenship and didn't have any status in society, they'd have to be crucified. It was for the lower classes and for the condemned and despised ones to be treated thus because it was a very painful death.

It was not an easy death. It's not like our lethal injection or electric chair or some of those humane ways that Western society has found to do their executions or even like a firing squad. This is something where men would hang by their wrists and by their feet for hours, sometimes days.

It was not uncommon for a man to hang for days. You might think he'd bleed to death but he would not because usually the holes made by the nails were filled with the nails themselves and therefore the blood would coagulate around them and there would be some bleeding but it would not be so excessive as to cause a man to quickly bleed to death. The man would actually die of asphyxiation.

The position that he was hanging and the weight of his body hanging from his arms would cause eventually his lungs to malfunction and he would eventually just die of asphyxiation or of strangulation. And this sometimes could take a long time especially because the person could relieve the weight on his arms by lifting up with his legs. There was in fact a platform that his feet were nailed to and it was possible for him to by straightening his knees relieve some of the weight off of his arms and his chest and therefore to breathe.

However, when his legs became too tired to keep lifting his body and that might take days to get that tired, well then he'd just hang and die. And you might remember that they did break the legs of the thieves on the cross next to Jesus because they wanted to hasten the death and they knew that they would not be able to relieve the weight off their arms and their shoulders and their chest if they broke their legs. And so that hastened their death.

So this is how a man died, slowly and in great pain. And yet Jesus looked down on those

who had treated him that way and even as they gambled for his clothing at the foot of his cross he said, Father forgive them for they do not know what they do. And then it says in verse 37 And they put up over his head the accusation written against him.

This is Jesus, the king of the Jews. Now, it was customary to put an inscription over the head of the condemned man who was executed by crucifixion. And this inscription would tell what his crime was.

This would serve as a lesson to any others who might consider doing those crimes. Say, here's a man who tried to knock off a Roman garrison, who tried to lead a rebellion against Rome. Here's a man who did this crime or that crime.

Look what happened to him now. Look on and learn you who would do the same thing. And so the crime of the individual was inscribed and posted over the head of the man who was crucified.

Now, this inscription did not really state his crime. It simply said, this is Jesus, the king of the Jews. Now, this was not customary to do it this way.

And we're told in the Gospel of John that actually Pilate wrote this inscription. And the Jews objected to this. They came to Pilate and said, don't say this is the king of the Jews.

Say, he said, I am the king of the Jews. In other words, write it down like it's his crime. His crime is that he said he was the king of the Jews.

Don't say he is. Say, he said he is. And Pilate, in response to him, said, what I have written, I have written.

And he refused to change it. Now, this response of Pilate we could interpret two ways. On one hand, it could be that he was so positively impressed with Jesus that he wanted to let Jesus' claim stand as if it's valid.

After all, he was not so sure that Jesus wasn't everything that he claimed to be. And Pilate was, you know, angry with those who had accused Jesus of having blackmailed him into doing this whole thing. And it may have been also partly despite them that he left it the way it was.

In any case, we have this inscription over it. And we're told elsewhere that this was written in three languages, in Greek and Hebrew and Latin, so that all that went by would be able to read it, no matter what language they spoke. Now, it tells us in verse 38, Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right side and the other on the left.

And those who passed by blasphemed him, wagging their heads. Now, I might just comment on these two thieves that were crucified by his side. Why were they crucified

there then? I mean, it's not really that strange that the Romans would crucify more than one person at a time, since they were going out there to do the job anyway.

Might as well get rid of some other criminals. But why on this day? This was not a convenient day for a crucifixion, because that night at sundown, the Passover began, and they would not want to leave bodies on the crosses overnight. And so, whereas a man would usually suffer for days on a cross, these men would have to be dispatched early so that the Passover could be observed.

Now, it doesn't seem like it was a very good day for an execution, generally speaking. And while the Jews insisted on having Christ crucified on this day, they obviously didn't call for the crucifixion of these other two men. And so we wonder why Pilate decided at this time to also crucify these other two guys at the same time.

I have a guess. I will give it to you, but I can't be sure that I'm right. I'm going to guess that those two men were the partners of Barabbas.

We are told in the Scripture that Barabbas and some of his co-conspirators had been arrested together. And of course, Barabbas escaped because the people called for his release, and the Pilate had a custom of releasing one criminal at the feast day. And so he went ahead and released Barabbas.

And Barabbas, as it were, a real criminal, slipped through Pilate's fingers. It's possible that to spite the Jews over this, Pilate decided to take the two guys who were arrested with Barabbas and crucify them right there on the spot to make sure they didn't get away, and also to spite Barabbas that his two companions did not get away as he did. We can't be sure of this, but there's no explanation given other than this, necessarily, that would explain why these two men were crucified at the same time as Jesus.

In any case, the abuse of Jesus did not stop with his being crucified. The people who passed by continued to mock him and blaspheme him, wag their heads at him and say, 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.

Now, what's awfully hard is when people think you said something you didn't say and then make fun of you for having said it. And here they are misquoting Jesus. He never said he would destroy the temple and build it in three days.

He said that if they would destroy the temple, which they were doing right there, his body, the temple, was being destroyed on the cross, he said he would raise it in three days. But they misunderstood him, misquoted him, and then threw it in his face as if he had said what he didn't say. A man's pride is hurt badly enough if his own words come back to haunt him.

But if a misunderstanding of his own words are brought against him to mock him, that's

even harder. I mean, what a temptation that is for a man to say, Let me set the record straight here. I didn't say that.

Instead, however, Jesus, as through this whole ordeal, just absorbs it. He's just quiet. He just lets it happen.

And he lets the people mock. And others said, the chief priest also mocked him and the scribes and elders said, He saved others himself he cannot save. If he is the king of the Jews, let him now come down from the cross and we will believe him.

He trusted in God, let him deliver him now that if he will have him, for he said, I am the son of God. And even the robbers who were crucified with him reviled him with the same thing. We know from another account in Luke that one of these robbers changed his tune and did repent before the day was over.

But initially, even the robbers mocked him. He was mocked by the crowds who didn't even know him, who misquoted him. He was mocked by the religious leaders.

And he was mocked by even the thieves on both sides. He was forsaken by all and mocked by all. And, you know, this thing where the chief priest said, He trusted in God, let him deliver him now if he will have him.

They may or may not have realized what they were doing. They were quoting Psalm 22.8, which is what David says his enemies say to him. That's the same psalm that begins with the word, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It's the psalm that describes Jesus being crucified.

And the enemies of Christ say the very words to him that the psalm says David's enemies said to him. This may have been deliberate on their part, but if it was or if it wasn't, it's a remarkable fulfillment of that psalm. We'll take more on this next time.