

Jesus the Christ (5 BCE-30 CE)

The Crucifixion of Jesus

The Burial of Jesus

Readings: *Matthew 27:33-66; Mark 15:23-57; Luke 23:32-56; John 19:18-42*

Reflections:

- Jesus is crucified: Jesus is crucified with two other men. Luke describes them as criminals. Mark describes them as “revolutionaries” (or as it is often translated, “thieves” or “robbers”). It was not uncommon for criminals and particularly revolutionaries to be crucified. Jesus as a revolutionary is crucified with revolutionaries. The place he is crucified is called “the Skull” (in Aramaic it is “Golgotha” or transliterated from Latin “Calvary” from the word “Cranium” for skull). It was a protruding rock that looked like a skull on the north just outside Jerusalem. Jesus’ prayer for his Father to forgive his crucifiers reveals again the emphasis on loving your enemies. Some early manuscripts do not have this verse and so some scholars wonder if later scribes who copied this text added the words of Stephen from Acts 7:60 to Jesus’ death to demonstrate that Stephen doesn’t out do Jesus in demonstrating compassion on his enemies. On the other hand, everything else we know about Jesus aligns with this kind of prayer and it is very possible that Stephen was quoting Jesus at his death. For this reason, most scholars see this as original. Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh. This may have been offered to help ease the pain but he refuses. Jesus is crucified at 9:00 am in the morning, the third hour.
- Inscription on cross: Typically a little sign would be nailed to each cross so that people passing by would know why this person had been killed. It was to help intimidate people and instill fear into those who might consider revolting against Rome. Some religious leaders protest because of Pilate’s simple designation “King of the Jews”. In the text, we see that Pilate was simply being prophetic without knowing it. This is a reminder that God’s truth can be pronounced by people who actually reject that truth and God’s purposes can be accomplished by people who even in their hearts oppose God. God is sovereign in all things.
- Soldiers cast lots: It was the normal practice for the soldiers crucifying a person to keep his possessions. Apparently there were four soldiers, a small squad of Roman soldiers called a quaternion. Instead of ruining his undergarment they cast lots (similar to throwing dice). The writers see this as fulfilling Psalm 22:18. In fact, much of the crucifixion of Jesus follows

Psalm 22 very closely. This has led some scholars to think that much of Jesus' death narrative was figuratively drawn from Psalm 22. The account itself seems very reasonable and so it is more likely in hindsight that the writers saw the prophetic parallels and highlighted these to show yet again that Jesus was the Messiah.

- Crowd mocks Jesus: The shame and humiliation is at its height as religious leaders and soldiers mock and insult Jesus. The religious leaders challenge Jesus to triumph over death so that they can believe. What we will see after the resurrection is that they still won't believe. This time the soldiers offer him cheap wine as a way to mock and taunt him.
- Thief (or revolutionary) asks remembrance: One revolutionary mocks Jesus for saying he is the Messiah. The other sees Jesus as being innocent and falsely sentenced. He then asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom (or some manuscripts "in your kingly power"). This revolutionary in some unexpected way understands Jesus. He sees something in Jesus that causes him to view Jesus as a way to God, a different way to bring about revolution. Was this a dying man's last ditch attempt to get right with God? In any case, Jesus assures him that today he would be with Jesus in paradise. This affirms that once we die, all true believers are with Jesus' immediately (at least according to their experience). Paradise is only mentioned three times in the New Testament: Here, in 2 Corinthians 12:4 (the same as "the third heaven"), and in Revelations 2:7 (a reference to an Eden like place that fulfills the prophecies of Isaiah 51:3 and Ezekiel 36:35).
- Jesus provides for Mary: Only in John do we see Jesus' provision for his mother. Interestingly Mary his mother is there with Mary Magdalene. It suggests that these women were very close to each other. They are together again after Jesus' resurrection in the Upper Room in Acts 1:17. Jesus as the oldest son was responsible for his mother. Apparently Joseph had died prior to this. Jesus doesn't commit his mother to a brother but to John, the disciple that he apparently was closest too. John was likely in his early twenties.
- Jesus cries out: Jesus cries out the opening verse from Psalm 22:1. Jesus' cry of being forsaken is a mystery. Was this just how Jesus felt? Did his Father truly abandon him? Or was this Jesus' deep identification with the suffering of humanity? Jesus took all of our sin onto himself. He also took all of our brokenness and despair. His identification with fallen humanity was complete and in this, he experienced everything we experienced. This is why we can turn to him now because we know that he understands everything we could ever go through. Hebrews 4:14-16 states, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold unswervingly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Jesus was not abandoned by his Father but was miraculously raised from the grave triumphant over every sin and spiritual enemy! Jesus in his resurrected power and authority now can care for us with complete understanding and sympathy.

- Jesus is given drink: Finally Jesus is thirsty and nearing his death. He is given wine vinegar and he drinks it. A final mocking statement: "Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." It is not just Elijah but Elijah and the holy army of chariots of fire. This again is a clear Messianic reference as they anticipated the armies of heaven to come with the Messiah to bring divine deliverance.
- Jesus dies: The three most profound words in salvation history: "It is finished." Jesus has completed the task he was given and in his final breath declares an end to all sin and judgment. Nothing more must be paid. Jesus accomplished it all. He commits his Spirit to his father and dies.
- Miraculous events: Matthew records a bunch of crazy things now. The curtain either at the entrance of the temple or the one protecting the holy of holies is apparently split open symbolically suggesting anyone may now enter God's presence. There was an earthquake as a sign of God's power and apparently tombs were opened and a mini-resurrection happens with a number of people witnessing this. This reference in Matthew seems very strange as there are no other references to these events in the New Testament. This has led scholars to examine these verses more closely. Some believe that these verses were added later to Matthew to help bolster Jesus as the Messiah and demonstrate how he fulfilled Messianic expectations. There is an interesting ancient quote from one of the early Church leaders against this passage. "For neither did it happen at the death of any man among the ancients that the sun set at mid-day, nor was the veil of the temple rent, nor did the earth quake, nor were the rocks rent, nor did the dead rise up, nor was any one of these men [of old] raised up on the third day, nor received into heaven, nor at his assumption were the heavens opened, nor did the nations believe in the name of any other; nor did any from among them, having been dead and rising again, lay open the new covenant of liberty" (Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, Book 4, 34:4, In: Roberts and Donaldson's *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I, 512). This quote would suggest that some early church leaders saw this as false teaching and not accurately capturing the events around Jesus' death. God has the power to do these types of things without doubt. The question is simply did these things occur? What is ultimately important is that Jesus died, was raised to life and that a way has been open between us and God.
- People struck with awe: One of the centurions overseeing the crucifixion sees how Jesus dies and believes that he truly is a righteous man. This may have been a fearful thing as the Centurion could fear the divine consequences for killing an innocent man. The disciples have all run away but the women have remained faithful. We see again how women are clearly exalted in their faithfulness.
- Jesus is pierced: John records additional details around Jesus' death. The other revolutionaries are still alive and so the soldiers break their legs so that they suffocate to death. Jesus is already dead so they jab his side with a spear to make sure he is dead. Blood (symbolic of forgiveness from the blood of the lamb or in the Lord's Supper) and water (symbolic of cleansing waters in baptism) flow from the wound. 1 John 5:6-8 states, "This is

the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only (like John the Baptist), but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies (like the man in John 19:31-37 who also testified to this truth), because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.” John as the author of both texts obviously saw this significance of the water and blood flowing from Jesus’ side as representing the complete work of God’s grace through Christ and the fulfillment of Exodus 12:46, Number 9:12, Psalms 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10.

- The burial of Jesus: Here we see in this account a great amount of detail. The story of Jesus’ death is incredibly well documented and obviously central to the message of his life.
- Joseph asks for body: Joseph of Arimathea, a religious leader (prominent member of the Council, but secretly a disciple of Jesus – John 19:38) asks for Jesus’ body to ensure proper burial. It says that he was waiting for the kingdom of God. At some level, his heart was in the right place. He secures permission, connects with the Centurion and takes charge of the body. Here we see again that God does not categorize people. Here a religious leader and pagan soldier are honored for wanting to care for Jesus’ body. We are reminded that we can’t judge by appearances.
- Jesus buried: Nicodemus, the same religious leader we were introduced to earlier in John’s biography joins them. Nicodemus prepares a huge amount of spices to cover Jesus’ body. They obviously did not embalm but this allowed the body to decompose slowly and with minimal odor. Joseph and the others place Jesus in Joseph’s own tomb, one he had purchased for his own burial. This is an incredible act of identification and service. Joseph wanted to give Jesus the best. A stone covers the doorway and Jesus’ body is left there to decompose. Over time, once all the flesh was gone, they would re-enter the tomb, gather the bones and put them in a bone box ossuary.
- Women prepare anointment: The women continue their pursuit of Jesus. They wish as well to honor his body with perfume and spices. Their love is obvious.
- Soldiers guard tomb: Matthew outlines the decision of the religious leaders to ask for guards to protect the tomb. Matthew possibly wants to note this fact to quiet any rumor among the Jewish people that the story of Jesus’ resurrection was just the work of deceptive disciples who stole his body. This apparently was a rumor that was spread to deny the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus’ resurrection obviously goes way beyond anything the disciples or anyone of that time anticipated and so it is understandable if people wonder if his disciples staged the event. Now, the fact that the disciples, and even Paul, later die for their conviction that Jesus was raised underscores the fact that the disciples had absolutely nothing to gain and everything to lose by stealing Jesus’ body and fabricating such a myth.