

## Matthew 27E

- As Jesus hung and died on the cross, the Father brought to completion His plan of redemption which He determined from before the foundations of the earth
  - Everything in the word of God and every action God has taken throughout human history has revolved around these few hours
    - So we're studying these events carefully, deliberately and with the intention of understanding all that we can about them
    - And that study begins to deepen today, as we consider the hours Jesus hung on the cross
  - Here again, we need to ask the question why is Jesus dying in this way? Why didn't the Father want His Son to die immediately?
    - We know He must die on Passover, since the Passover feast itself was given to Israel to picture the Messiah's sacrifice
    - But what did the hours He spent on the cross accomplish prior to His death
    - There are some challenging and important answers to those questions we need to consider
  - The Gospels divide Jesus' experience on this day into thirds and each third accomplishes something different in the plan of God
    - Jesus hangs alive on the cross from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM, a total of six hours
    - The number six is the number for sinful man, which reminds us that Jesus is taking our place in suffering for sin
    - These six hours are divided into two parts of three hours
- The first third from 9AM – 12PM happens in daylight, and during these three hours, Jesus suffers the curse of sin, sometimes called the wrath of man
  - We give it this name because this time on the cross was a period of suffering brought by the hands of men
    - During this time, Jesus experienced the painful consequences that are common to all mankind because we sin

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- Jesus' body was hurt, His pride was shamed, He was treated as a criminal, He was mocked, He was rejected
- Ultimately, Jesus experiences physical death, which is the final and ultimate consequence for sin
  - In fact, Jesus even had to make plans for His death like we do, telling John to care for Jesus' mother, Mary, after He died
  - So Jesus suffered at the hands of men taking the consequences of sin in our place
- After those first three hours of suffering, Jesus experienced an even deeper level of suffering called the wrath of God
  - During the second division of three hours, from noon until 3 PM, the world is plunged into complete darkness
    - And during this time Jesus experienced separation from God, a spiritual death, called the Second Death in the Bible
    - The Bible says the Second Death is existing in an eternal separation from the love of God and under the wrath of God
    - Jesus took our place in this judgment also, suffering separation from the Father on the cross as God's wrath was poured out
  - Finally, at 3 PM Jesus will give up His spirit, and His spirit will go down to the inner parts of the earth leaving behind a lifeless body to be buried
    - From 3 PM to 6 PM Jesus' body will be prepared for burial and placed in the tomb before sundown that day
    - And three days later, His spirit will return to resurrect His body and walk out of the tomb
  - These are the consequences that humanity suffers because of sin, first a physical death and then after the body dies, separation from God
    - Jesus suffered these consequences without cause in our place so that we might receive His perfection, as Paul taught the Church

**[2Cor. 5:21](#) He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**

- But did you notice, we experience physical death first followed by spiritual separation unless we have faith in Jesus

- But Jesus suffered them in reverse order: separation from the Father first, followed by physical death second
- In a future week, I will explain why it was necessary that Jesus experience these in reverse order
  - Today we return to v.37, and as I said last week Matthew's account of Jesus on the cross is very parsimonious
  - He explains major moments in just one or two verses, so we need to pause and unpack each verse thoughtfully

**Matt. 27:37 And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS."**

- Romans customarily placed a sign on each criminal's cross recording the condemned man's crime for all to see
  - The whole point of crucifixion was to be a deterrent, so Romans wanted passersby to connect the crime with the punishment
    - Matthew says the sign was posted "above" Jesus, which is a strong clue that Jesus was crucified on a "T" shaped cross
    - On other styles of Romans crosses, the inscription was posted below the person
  - Pilate recorded Jesus' crime in a way he knew would upset the Jewish leaders whom he detested for manipulating him
    - Rather than write Jesus *claimed* to be king of the Jews, Pilate simply stated Jesus *is* king of the Jews
    - He wrote it in three languages – Greek, Latin and Hebrew – so all who passed by could read it
  - If you compare the various Gospel accounts, we find different readings of what Pilate wrote, so we need to combine them all
    - Doing so we arrive at "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"
    - And predictably, Pilate's choice of words provoked the religious leaders to complain, but John tells us Pilate ignored them
    - So Pilate wrote the truth for all to see that day, that Jesus was dying because He was Israel's King, not for any sin or crime

- Now as you imagine this scene, don't imagine Jesus high off the ground while on His cross...this is another misconception
  - There was no advantage for the Romans in lifting a condemned man any higher off the ground than necessary to kill him
    - So Jesus' feet were probably nailed only a foot or two above the ground level
    - And with His knees bent, Jesus' head and the sign above it were probably only about 6-7 feet off the ground
  - Then Matthew moves to the final major event of Jesus' first three hours on the cross
    - But as usual, we begin with just one verse

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**[Matt. 27:38](#)** At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left.

- Matthew tells us there were two other men crucified with Jesus on that day
  - Crucifixions were a daily occurrence in Roman life, because Romans didn't hold criminals in penitentiaries for long periods
    - Romans only jailed a person temporarily while awaiting trial or an audience before an official like Caesar or a governor
    - But convicted criminals were never punished with confinement, because Romans viewed confinement as free living
    - Confining a man meant guarding and feeding and caring for the person for free, and Romans didn't operate that way
  - So punishments were divided into minor crimes and major crimes
    - Minor crimes were punished either with a fine or scourging
    - Major crimes were punished by death, either decapitation for Roman citizens or by crucifixion for non-citizens
    - So crucifixions were a common occurrence, therefore it's no surprise that Jesus would not be alone on Golgotha that day
  - Matthew says these men were robbers, but robbery was not a capital (i.e., death penalty) crime under Roman law

- If these men were just thieves, they would have been scourged, not crucified, so their crime must have been something greater
- The Greek word used here for robbery is sometimes used to describe insurgents, as in someone “stealing” power in a coup
- Josephus, an ancient historian of Jesus’ time, used this same word to refer to those trying to overthrow Rome
- And rebellion against Roman rule *was* punishable by death
- So these men were likely associates of Barabbas, who was also an insurgent, and had it not been for Jesus, all three of those men would have died today
  - Which means on either side of the king of the Jews were men who tried to bring a new Kingdom to Israel by force
    - Jesus came offering Israel a Kingdom from God, and these men tried to install their own version of that kingdom
    - They were thieves in the sense that they tried to take something that could only be obtained through the Messiah
    - And their presence was a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12, which says the Messiah will be numbered with transgressors in His death
  - It’s meaningful that God arranged for these men to join Jesus on this day, and understanding why is important
    - But first Matthew describes the scene taking place around Jesus and these men

[Matt. 27:39](#) And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads

[Matt. 27:40](#) and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

[Matt. 27:41](#) In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying,

[Matt. 27:42](#) “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him.

[Matt. 27:43](#) “HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET GOD RESCUE Him now, IF HE DELIGHTS IN HIM; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

- The Romans placed Golgotha directly outside a city gate so criminals were crucified in full view of travelers going in and out of the city

- Remember, the whole point of crucifixion was to deter crime, so the Romans wanted people to witness the process
  - And since this was Passover, the traffic at the city gate that day would have been especially heavy
  - As these passersby came and went, they stopped to read the inscriptions above each dying man out of curiosity
- When they read the sign above Jesus, many recognized this Man to be the One Who amazed Israel for months claiming to be Messiah
  - Maybe they heard Jesus teaching in the temple or on the hills of Galilee
  - Others saw Jesus curing people or raising people from the dead, or they heard the stories of His miraculous healing
  - One passerby even remembered Jesus said He could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days
- But all of them wondered the same thing...if this Man was the Messiah with power from God why doesn't He perform a miracle for Himself?
  - Save yourself, they demand...get yourself off that cross and prove your claims
  - If Jesus were truly the Son of God, then let Him be rescued by God
  - The religious leaders were also enjoying the moment, mocking Jesus by saying they would believe in Him if He left the cross
- These comments were deeply cynical and ignorant, and they miss the main point
  - If the test of messiahship was whether Jesus could save himself now, then he would still be a pretty pathetic Messiah
    - Because what kind of Messiah even allows himself to end up on the cross in the first place?
    - If saving Himself from the tyranny of men is a true test of His claims, wouldn't He have acted long before this point?
    - Wouldn't He have stopped His false trials? Wouldn't he have stopped the beatings and scourging?

- Wouldn't He have stopped the nails before they entered His hands and feet?
- So it's not even logical for these passersby to claim that Jesus could prove His claims by coming down from the cross
  - They are just a good example of how we misjudge God's purposes when we don't understand His plan
  - The crowd sees Jesus' predicament as a lack of power because they didn't understand Jesus was *voluntarily* dying on that cross
  - The Bible is clear in testifying that *no one* put Jesus on a cross... Jesus allowed Himself to be crucified, as Jesus Himself told us

[John 10:17](#) "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again.

[John 10:18](#) "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

- As many have observed, those nails did not hold Jesus to the cross... Jesus held Himself there by His determination to obey the Father
  - Jesus had the power to save Himself from the cross with only a word at any time during the entire process
  - But as we studied already, Jesus went silently, like a lamb to slaughter, because He wasn't going to use that power
  - And no one in the crowd considered that possibility, so out of ignorance they mocked God's plan to save humanity
- Had Jesus chosen to save Himself on that day, then He wouldn't be able to save us today, and knowing that explains everything
  - There are many times when we too mock or criticize or question God because we don't understand what He's doing in a set of circumstances
    - When things don't go our way, we may turn to blaming God or questioning His power or love for us
    - But instead of questioning God's power or intentions, we should question our understanding...because that's the problem

- Our ignorance is always the problem, and often you can't solve that problem, because our understanding of God's ways will always fall short
  - When it comes to God's plan for the world and for our lives, He's always way ahead of us, and we just can't comprehend it all
  - As the saying goes, God is playing chess while we're playing checkers...in fact, we're not even playing checkers
  - We're like a 6-month old babbling baby, drooling on checkers pieces
- That's why God tells us to place faith in Him and in His word, so that when He says He works all things to our good, that's enough for us
  - We can wait until Heaven, if necessary, to get the rest of the story from God directly
  - And when we have the full story, we'll understand why God did what He did and how it showed His love and wisdom
- This crowd mocked Jesus for being weak, when the reality was Jesus was acting in strength
  - Can you imagine how hard it would be for you to stay on a cross if you possessed the power to end it all with just one word?
  - That was Jesus' situation...mocked for weakness but displaying unequalled strength in securing salvation for us
  - As the Psalmist wrote, Jesus did it by His own strength

**Psa. 98:1** O sing to the LORD a new song,

For He has done wonderful things,

His right hand and His holy arm have gained the victory for Him.

**Psa. 98:2** The LORD has made known His salvation;

He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations.

- This crowd was ignorant of God's plan, so they doubted Jesus rather than their own understanding, and in the process, they were unknowingly serving Satan
  - Satan is always working to stop God's plan, especially His plan of redemption through Jesus, but he's also playing catch up with God
    - Initially, Satan thought it best to turn Israel against Jesus and to use Israel to put Jesus to death on the cross



- But now as Satan watches Jesus dying *willingly*, Satan starts to wonder if he's overplayed his hand
- He realizes that Jesus' death is part of God's plan to defeat sin, so now he scrambles to undo it
- He prompts the crowd to call for Jesus to come down from the cross in the hope he can tempt Jesus to give in to the pain and give up the plan
  - If Satan had been successful at this point, it would ruin God's plan of redemption, which would have been a disaster
  - So the crowd assumed Jesus was wrong, and in the process they played into the devil's hand
- That's what happens when we fall into despair or doubt in the midst of our trials and accuse God in some way or doubt in His plan
  - We do the devil's bidding and take his bait to respond to our trials in the wrong ways, but here's a simple tip to avoid the schemes of the enemy
    - Never assume God is wrong, never assume His word is wrong... always assume you're wrong
    - So when the Bible doesn't make sense to you, don't assume the Bible has error, assume your understanding is lacking
    - When you're sure God isn't speaking to you, assume you weren't listening when He was speaking
    - When you suffer the consequences of sin, recognize it's you who made the mistake, not God
  - When we don't understand God, let's not blame God....because it's not Him, it's us, and in time we will know the truth
    - As Paul told us

[1Cor. 13:9](#) For we know in part and we prophesy in part;

[1Cor. 13:10](#) but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

[1Cor. 13:11](#) When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

[1Cor. 13:12](#) For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

- When you get to that day when we know all, we'll appreciate what God was doing and why it was needed, and we will praise Him for it
  - Let reach that moment without regret
  - Knowing we will praise with understanding in that day, let's praise Him now for our trials even in our ignorance
- I'm sure these spectators looked back with regret for their mocking, and along with them were the other two thieves who joined in the mocking

**Matt. 27:44** The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words.

- Unbelievably, two men hanging painfully on crosses choose to use their dying breaths to mock a fellow sufferer
  - Their lives were essentially over at this point, because they knew they would not be rescued
  - Their death was only a matter of time, and in that way crucifixion was a unique form of execution
- In every other case, once the process starts, it ends quickly and the person has no time to reflect on their destiny
  - Even someone sitting on death row awaiting their day of reckoning can hold out some hope of a rescue
  - But once you were nailed to a cross, there was no doubt how it would end...a slow, painful death, but death nonetheless
  - And under those circumstances, you would think you would choose your final thoughts and words carefully
- But these men show no fear of God as they mock a fellow condemned man, and Matthew uses this moment to show a fulfillment of scripture
  - Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 foretold the Messiah would die utterly alone and without allies
  - Jesus truly had no friends...not even those who are suffering beside Him could resist the urge to mock Jesus
  - That illustrates powerfully how utterly alone Jesus was in that moment...truly the Creator of the Universe had no one

- But according to the other Gospel accounts one of the thieves stops mocking Jesus after a time, but Matthew doesn't record that part of the story
  - Had Matthew mentioned that thief's change of heart, it would have undermined his point, so he left it out
    - Nevertheless, the other Gospels tell us that although Jesus was alone in the beginning, He soon turned an enemy into a friend
    - As Matthew wrote, both these men mocked Jesus at first, but then the Spirit of God began to work in one man's heart
  - And Luke tells us that near the end of the first three hours, he suddenly stops rebuking Jesus and begins to rebuke his fellow thief

**[Luke 23:40](#) But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"**

**[Luke 23:41](#) "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."**

**[Luke 23:42](#) And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"**

- In this short passage, the thief rebukes his partner, confesses his own unrighteousness, acknowledges Jesus' righteousness, and asks to be saved
  - This is the most dramatic deathbed confession ever recorded
    - This thief was a dead man walking (or hanging)...as close to death as one can be while still conscious
    - And in his final hours, the man makes a turn so dramatic it's almost unbelievable and obviously a work of God
    - One minute he's mocking the Lord, and the next He's acknowledging Jesus by faith and calling out to Him
  - And I'm sure that most of us remember Jesus' response to this man... Luke records it this way

**[Luke 23:43](#) And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."**

- Speaking in gasps Jesus assures the man that He would be with Jesus in Paradise, meaning He would be saved

- If I were Jesus I think I might have been tempted to point out that a few minutes earlier He was demanding Jesus save Himself
- But much to everyone's relief I'm not Jesus, because that's not how the love and grace of God works
  - When a person repents and turns to Jesus in faith, He receives us in mercy and without a single mention of our past sins
  - As Jesus said:

[John 6:35](#) Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.

[John 6:37](#) "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.

[John 6:38](#) "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

- Jesus received this man without a moment's hesitation because He knew the man's repentant heart proved the Father's will
  - The Father sent this man to Jesus at this moment, and all who the Father gives Jesus, He will certainly not cast out
  - Jesus promised the man that on that very day, after both of them died, they would be in Paradise together
- Paul uses this same word, Paradise, to describe heaven in 2 Corinthians 12, and Jesus uses it again for Heaven in his letter to Ephesus in Revelation
  - In simple terms, Paradise means being in Jesus' presence in a state free from sin
  - This man entered that presence the moment he died because of his faith in Jesus which he expressed in his final hour on the cross
- And this moment is a perfect illustration of how new faith always comes...it starts with a heart of repentance
  - The thief said he was suffering justly and receiving what he deserved, yet Jesus was suffering though He had done nothing wrong

- True repentance recognizes that we lack the righteousness that God alone possesses, and that's the standard for Heaven
- Only perfection enters Paradise, and without God giving us that perfection, none of us can get there
- None of us are perfect, and therefore we all need God's mercy
- And the thief must have understood Jesus was dying as a sacrifice for his sins because how else could he explain His Savior dying next to him?
  - So with time running out, the thief asks Jesus to remember Him in the Kingdom
  - The words he used were not the same words we might use today, but the heart is the same...it's an appeal for mercy
- Whatever we say to God, He knows our heart, and when we reach out to Him with faith in Jesus' atoning death, He responds in mercy
  - That thief placed his faith in the sacrifice Jesus was making next to him, and he believed it was sufficient to bring Him to God
  - And Jesus assured him it was
- How did that man come to know all these things, especially in that short moment and without anyone explaining it?
  - He learned it the same way we all learn it...because the Father in Heaven revealed it to him by means of the Spirit of God
  - As Jesus told Peter after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Lord

**[Matt. 16:17](#)** And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

- Flesh and blood did not reveal this truth to the thief, but the Father in Heaven revealed it, and that's how all faith comes to everyone
  - Someone may preach the Gospel to us, or maybe no one does
  - We might read that Jesus is Lord somewhere or hear it on the internet, or we may hear it in a dream
  - The method God uses to reach us isn't important...the point is that message wasn't revealed by flesh and blood, not even our own

- It was revealed to us by God the Father
- This short exchange is as important to sound Christian doctrine as perhaps any other single conversation recording in the Gospels
  - Consider all the things we learn from this man, as well as all the false teaching we can quickly refute because of his experience
    - First, we know that faith alone saves, because if good works were required, then this man would have been toast
    - We know he was a criminal and certainly not a man of God, since he was even mocking Christ at the start of his own crucifixion
  - So if works were required for salvation...*even one work*...this man could not have gone to Paradise because he was in no position to do anything
    - This man did not keep the Law, or do any good works to make up for his sin, and yet he was saved
    - He didn't say a prayer, he didn't go to church (or a synagogue), he didn't make a tithe or sacrifice, and he never got baptized
  - So if you tell me I must belong to a certain church or denomination, or attend a special class, or possess some secret knowledge to be saved...
    - ...I will tell you to consider the thief on the cross
    - If anything of those were required to bring us into Heaven, this man could not have qualified to go
    - Yet based on his profession of faith alone, Jesus promised him paradise that very day...no works, no purgatory, no doubt
- Secondly, this man's experience proves that it's never too late for anyone to be saved nor is anyone too far gone to be reached with the Gospel
  - This man was so hardhearted that as he was being crucified he was willing to mock another man dying in the same way
    - That's hardhearted...that's the kind of person we might conclude can't be saved...especially so close to death
    - He was so close to death you could measure it in minutes, and then out of nowhere, he professes faith in Jesus
  - And what's more, he does so without anyone trying to persuade him to believe...well, that's not quite true actually

- One Person did persuade Him to believe...the only One Who *can* persuade anyone to believe
- God brought faith to this man's heart, and as God can do it for this man, He can do it for anyone
- Don't give up on that person in your life who hasn't believed... don't give up even when they are on their death bed
- And if that person confesses Christ with their dying breath, don't doubt that it could be a true conversion
  - If this man could turn at this point in his life, so could anyone, because when God gets hold of someone, miracles happen
  - The thief on the cross is our proof that it's never too late for anyone to believe and be saved
- Finally, the thief's experience reminds us of what we've been studying today... God can use the worst of circumstances to produce the most good
  - This man started his morning facing perhaps the worst experience any human being can face and knowing he would be dead in hours
    - From his point of view, this day was terror and disaster and the end of everything he knew
    - And yet on this day, the Father placed him a few feet away from his Messiah, his Savior
    - And to make sure this hard-hearted thief didn't leave too soon, God had him nailed to a cross
  - And because of that terrible experience and the pain done to his body, this man's soul was saved for all eternity
    - Once again I assure you that when you speak with this man in Heaven, as you will one day do, he will tell you it was so worth it
    - And we too should take confidence that in our darkest moments, the Lord is still there, next to us, working for our good
    - So when you don't understand why bad things are happening, don't blame God in your ignorance...just look to Him in faith