

The First Three Hours

📖 Matthew 27:32-44

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Last time we investigated Matthew 27:15-31, the third civil trial, which was the second before Pilate. Pilate was a finicky Roman ruler who was trying to balance ruling the Jews of Judea and not coming into conflict with Caesar. He had already made the Jews angry and Caesar had rebuked him. So the Jews had some leverage and they were using it to manipulate Pilate into giving them what they wanted. When Jesus was returned to him he had two options; he could scourge and release Jesus or he could fulfill an annual custom which gave the Jewish people a choice of which prisoner they would like to release. He thought if he made the decision the Jews would become angry and report him to Caesar. Therefore, he chose to fulfill the annual custom and put before them Jesus, called the Christ, and another Jesus, called Barabbas. In 27:16 This Barabbas is said to be a notorious prisoner. He had been involved in insurrection against Rome, the very same crime Jesus had been accused of. His name Bar Abba means "son of the father" but Jesus was the real "Son of the Father." In 27:17 when the Jewish people gathered, Pilate asked them, "Whom do you want me to release? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" He felt certain the people would choose Jesus who is called Christ because he knew, verse 18, that the religious leaders had turned Him over because of envy. Surely the people's sense of justice would prevail and Jesus would be released. In 27:19, while he sat waiting for their decision on the judgment seat, he received a note from his wife explaining that she had suffered greatly in a dream because of this Jesus and to have nothing to do with Him because He was a righteous Man. Pilate had many opportunities to do justice and release Jesus, but his fear of offending the Jews and coming into conflict with Caesar was too great. During the same time 27:20 says the chief priests convinced the crowds by deception to ask for the release of Barabbas and to put Him to death. In 27:21 Pilate was astonished at their decision. In 27:22 Pilate found himself in a predicament. On one hand, he had no just cause for condemning Jesus. On the other hand, he did not want to get sideways with the Jews and be accused of treason against Caesar. What should He do with Jesus? They all said, "Crucify Him!" In 27:23 he asked, "Why, what evil has He done?" Pilate seems to have wanted to do justice. But they only shouted all the more, saying "Crucify Him!" In 27:24 Pilate saw that he could not convince them and that a riot was forming. This was not desirable. He was already out of favor with Caesar. He decided to go along with the Jews. He washed his hands with water in front of the crowd in order to declare himself innocent of murder, but by doing so he admitted murder. He then turned the responsibility over to the Jews saying, "see to that yourselves."

In 27:25 they gladly accept responsibility. All the people, not just the religious leaders, said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children." In a case of divine irony, their blood did come upon them and their children in AD70. In 27:26 Pilate released Barabbas, a murderer, and scourged Jesus, an innocent man, and handed Him over to be crucified. This was Pilate's fatal mistake. He had committed a grave injustice and would be held culpable for the crucifixion of Christ. In 27:27 the Roman soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and in 27:28-30 were allowed to make sport of Him. They dressed him up like a king and imitated a mock coronation complete with royal robe, scepter and crown of thorns, they bowed and mocked His claim to be King of the Jews. They spat upon Him and beat Him with the scepter on the head until at last they had had enough fun with the Lord of glory. Then they led Him away to be crucified.

It is interesting to consider Jesus' physical condition at this time. The previous night He had not slept. He had walked from the Upper Room, to Gethsemane, and to the court of Caiaphas, a total of about 2.5 miles. He had been struck by a soldier when he refused to answer a question asked by Caiaphas. He was then mocked, blindfolded and struck in the face as each soldier walked by, spat on Him and taunted Him to identify them. Before Pilate the next morning He was scourged with the traditional forty minus one lashes with a cat-of-nine tails. For this treatment He would have been stripped of His clothing and His hands tied to a post above His head. The Roman legionnaire would take the short whip with several leather thongs, each with two small balls of lead attached to the ends. It would be brought across his shoulders, back and legs with full force again and again. In one physician's analysis of the crucifixion he said, "At first the weighted thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the blows continued, they cut deeper into the subcutaneous tissues, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin and finally spurting arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscles. The small balls of lead first produced large deep bruises that were broken open by subsequent blows. Finally, the skin of the back was hanging in long ribbons, and the entire area was an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue." He would have been untied and allowed to crumple to the stone pavement in a puddle of his own blood. This is when the Roman soldiers put the scarlet robe on His fresh wounds, twisted a crown of thorns together and pressed it upon His head causing bleeding from His highly vascular scalp. They took the mock reed they had given Him and beat Him on the head further pressing the thorns into His head causing more bleeding. After mocking and taunting Him for His claim to be a rival King to Caesar, they tore the robe from His bloody back which would have pulled at the wounds, reopening any that had clotted, causing them to bleed again. This fulfilled part of Jesus' own prophecy in Matt 20:19, "the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge...Him." It is at this point that Matt 27:31 reports that they **put His garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him**. The return of **his garments** was a Roman respect granted to the Jews who had strong reservations against nakedness.

And so you can see that as Jesus was **led...away to** be crucified, he was in no condition to carry the cross. Many died from the 40 minus one lashes alone. Yet, John 19:17 says Jesus "went out, bearing His own cross." Thus, we

know that He began His journey to Golgotha carrying the cross. Mark 15:25 says, "It was the third hour when they crucified Him." Mark was following the Jewish system of keeping time. The "third hour" was 9am. Mark is referring to the time when they led Him to be crucified. So they led Him from the Praetorium at 9am, and made their way to Golgotha where He was prepared for crucifixion. So 9am was the beginning of the first three hours. The last three hours will be from 12 noon to 3pm. Therefore, the time in verse 31 is about 9am. His arms would have been lashed to the cross. This is not the vertical and horizontal beam, as is commonly imagined, that would have weighed over 300 lbs, but the horizontal beam only. This beam was commonly between 5 and 6 feet long and weighed between 75 and 125lb. Even so, He could not carry this beam very far, for as Matt 27:32 says, **As they were coming out (of the Praetorium), they found a man Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.** This Simon was from **Cyrene**, of North Africa, and most likely a Jew of the Diaspora who had come to Jerusalem for Passover. The parallel in Mark 15:21 says that he was "a passer-by" in the streets and that he was "the father of Alexander and Rufus." This Rufus is very likely the one Paul greets in Romans 16:13, as well as his mother, who had served Paul as a mother, implying that Simon of Cyrene was influenced by Christ, came to believe in Him and passed this faith on to his wife and children, and Rufus had moved to Rome. Even more interesting is the possibility that an ossuary attesting to Alexander, may have survived. An ossuary is a small box containing the bones of the deceased after decomposition. In 1941 an ossuary was found in a tomb in the Kidron valley with the inscription, "Alexander of Cyrene" in Aramaic, and "Alexander, son of Simon" in Greek. It is possible, though not provable, that this box contained the bones of Alexander, son of the Simon who bore Christ's cross. If so we know something about four members of this family.¹ Indubitably the cross work had left an indelible print upon the heart of many as they witnessed His manner of treating His enemies, and therefore investigated His claims further, and came to believe upon Him. Never has anyone who was crucified done so in the way that Christ did, nor could anyone bearing a sinful nature. By this the Roman centurion, and others standing guard at the cross, will later state, "Surely this was the Son of God."

So as the upper cross beam was taken from Jesus and placed on Simon, they continued on toward Golgotha. The parallel in Luke 23:26 says Simon carried "the cross...behind Jesus." All four gospels report the location they went to, Matt 27:33, **they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull.** The word **Golgotha** is a transliteration of the Aramaic *gulgota* which means "skull." Its exact location is unknown. John 19:20 says it was "near the city." The earliest tradition was established during the reign of Emperor Constantine, in the 4th century AD. When the Emperor became a Christian the Bishop of Jerusalem took the opportunity at the Council of Nicea to ask the Emperor if they might make search for Golgotha and the tomb. This would require the removal of the pagan Temple of Aphrodite which had been built by Emperor Hadrian in AD135 because the early church historian, Eusebius, who lived in the land of Israel, reported that "this is the place of the skull where Christ was crucified." Of course, no one had visited the site for a long time because it was a pagan temple, and inaccessible. Macarius was granted the petition and the work began of destroying the pagan temple and

uncovering all the debris to find Golgotha and the tomb. To their surprise they found a tomb, a nearby rock quarry and evidence of a garden, all requirements of the text for the location. Without going on forever on this topic, the site was considered genuine and a Church called by Western Christians, *The Church of the Holy Sepulcher*, and by Eastern Christians, *The Church of the Resurrection*, was built over the site. Today if one visits they will climb steps to ascend upon a rock where it is thought the cross of Christ stood, and an Edicule built over the proposed tomb. This location was later questioned by scholars because it could not be determined whether it was outside the city walls at the time of Christ. Eventually archaeology uncovered the wall and determined that it was outside the city walls. However, before that was determined, British General Charles Gordon spent a significant amount of time in Jerusalem in 1883. He had read the mounting works of others who considered the reference to **Golgotha** as **Place of a Skull** to be a description of the rocky escarpment at the location. Many had already come to note a place north of the Damascus Road, and clearly outside the city walls, that looked like a **Skull**. Eventually this place became known as "Gordon's Calvary" and today it is known as "the Garden Tomb." General Gordon was an interesting individual and came to his conclusion by way of typology of Scripture and topography of Jerusalem. He thought that Jerusalem, viewed from a bird's eye view, resembled a human skeleton bent forward and facing West. The foot was at the Pool of Siloam, the hip at the Dome of the Rock and the Skull at the site of Golgotha and the empty tomb. Despite his strange line of reasoning, rejected by many, the site became very popular and other better arguments were made. It was near a quarry, a garden, a cistern, tombs and the face of the cliff appears like a skull. It came to be considered the true Golgotha by Alfred Edersheim, Messianic Jewish scholar, Lew Wallace, the author of *Ben-Hur*, and Dwight Moody. Nevertheless, there are very few today who consider the Garden Tomb to be the true Golgotha as many of these arguments have been shown false through further investigation. Nevertheless, it is still visited by many Protestants wanting to remember the finished work of Christ in a setting far more appealing than the overdone Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Ultimately, we may never know the exact location of Golgotha, but the Garden Tomb would be very far from the Praetorium, and on that count alone, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is much more likely. But it really matters very little. All that may be meant by the expression **Place of a Skull**, is that it was a very common place of crucifixion. This is where He walked to, battered, beaten and bloody, His cross being carried behind Him by **Simone of Cyrene**.

When they arrived at Golgotha, Matt 27:34 says **they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink**. This was a concoction mixed by the local women which served as a mild analgesic. Jesus rejected it, wanting to endure the whole affair with all of His senses. The fact they gave it to Him is not stated to fulfill prophecy but undoubtedly Matthew intended it. Ps 69:21 says, "They also gave me gall in my food And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." The preparation for crucifixion would have involved stripping Him once again, and leaving a loin cloth, in order to show respect to the Jews. Then they would nail His hands to the horizontal beam before hoisting it atop the vertical beam. Archaeological remains of a crucified body, found in an ossuary near Jerusalem dating from the time of Christ, indicate that the nails were tapered iron

spikes 5-7 inches long with a square shaft 3/8 in in diameter. These were driven through the wrist, not the hand, as the Greek word for "hand" includes the wrist and forearm. It would have been placed between the carpals in the wrist and the radius, crushing the median nerve which would have been excruciating, but they broke no bones. Jesus was then attached to the horizontal beam and hoisted atop the vertical beam. This, most likely, was a tau cross (τ), not a Latin cross (t), as the Romans preferred the tau cross, but it is difficult to be absolutely certain because the charge was nailed above His head. However, because of the slumped position on the cross, this is possible with a tau cross. If it was the tau cross the horizontal beam was lifted only a couple of feet off the ground and placed on top of the vertical beam. Then they would place the left foot on top of the right foot with toes down, and leaving the knees bent, they drove an iron spike through the arch of each foot and into the wood of the beam. Matthew passes by these details, as do the other gospel writers because that is not really the point of interest. In a movie like Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of the Christ*, so much is made of the agony from Gethsemane on to the beatings under Caiaphas and Pilate that one would think that it was part of the atonement. That is the Roman Catholic view. They tie the atonement to all of His sufferings in life and in death. That's why certain sects get involved in self-inflicted pain and flagellation. They are trying to atone for their sins by identifying with Jesus in these sufferings. But the atonement is tied up only in His death and the application of the atonement is only through faith. That is why the gospel writers skip the gory details and focus on two things; His rejection by the nation Israel and His accomplishment of providing salvation for the world. I have filled in some details so that you have the same picture that Matthew would have had of the historical events. But the atonement is tied up in His death, not in His sufferings.

Once He was nailed to the cross He was considered **crucified**. As Matt 27:35 says, **And when they had crucified Him**. By this time it is about 10-11 am. At this time all four gospels record what Matthew says in verse 35, that **they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots**. Matthew doesn't explicitly say that this was prophecy being fulfilled, but undoubtedly that is his point. Ps 22:18 says, "They divide my garments among them." The parallel in John 19:23-24 is more specific. It says they "took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier..." His outer garments had seams and they were able to divide them along the seams. Seeing as there were four soldiers assigned to a victim being crucified, the outer garments were divided into four parts. Then John adds, "and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be; "this was to fulfill the Scripture: "They divided my outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots. Therefore the soldiers did these things." Step by step Jesus was fulfilling Messianic prophecy.

In Matt 27:36 the Roman soldiers, **sitting down, began to keep watch over Him there**. This verse is unique to Matthew. History attests that sometimes people took criminals down from the cross to steal them away and prevent them from dying. The soldiers were guarding Jesus so that could not happen. This is pointed out to show that Jesus really did die. No one rescued Him. The verse is very specific. They were **sitting down...keeping**

watch over Him there. The tense of the verb **keeping watch** is imperfect, meaning ongoing action in past time. They continually kept watch so that no one could possibly steal His body and prevent His death.

In verse 37 we read, **And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS."** The charge was nailed to the cross **above His head.** Some think this indicates that He was crucified on a Latin cross, but because of the body's slumped position on the cross, it could have equally been a tau cross. The Romans usually used a tau cross, but each region had their own freedom to crucify on other crosses, so we don't know for sure. What we do know is **they put up the charge** that the Jewish leaders had made **against Him.** The parallel in John 19:19-27 gives more detail. It says, "Pilate...wrote the inscription" and "many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in" three languages, "Hebrew, Latin and Greek." That would mean that anyone could read it. The point is made that many Jews did read it. This raised the ire of the chief priests who said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; but that He said, 'I am the King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered them, "What I have written I have written." Pilate became an unconscious prophet. He stated who Jesus really was. He also became an unconscious witness. He proclaimed to many who Jesus really was. God will use anyone He wants to proclaim His message. He used Balaam, Caiaphas, Gamaliel and Pilate. All these were opposed to God but gave true testimony concerning God. The parallel in John also tells us that "standing by the cross...were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." When Jesus saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" From that hour the disciple took her into his own household." We may therefore gather, that Joseph had already died, and so John was given to Mary as son and Mary was given to John as mother.

In Matt 23:38 it is revealed that there were two others that were crucified. **At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left.** That put Jesus in between. The fact is, these men were not just **robbers** as one might imagine. Elsewhere they are said to be insurrectionists, and had committed murder, along with Barabbas. Matthew probably noted this because it is an allusion to a Messianic prophecy in Isa 53:12, "He was numbered with the transgressors." Jesus is fulfilling Messianic prophecy step by step.

In Matt 23:39 note is made that **those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads 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.** Jesus was crucified along the roadside so that many would see Him. It was a visible reminder not to commit treason against Rome. While they went by they **wagged** their heads and they uttered the charge of blasphemy about **destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days.** The irony is that the Greek word **hurling abuse** is *βλασφημew*. They were really the ones who had committed blasphemy, not Jesus. This is a picture of the extreme rejection of that generation. They saw things the world had never seen, and charged Him with what they were guilty of doing. Of course, they were fulfilling more prophecy. Ps 22:7, "All who see me sneer at me; They separate with the lip, they wag the head." Not

understanding what Jesus meant when He spoke of the temple as His body, they blasphemed even more by questioning His identity as the **Son of God**. They challenged Him to prove that He really was the **Son of God** by coming **down from the cross**. This was the same thing Satan had done when He tempted Him to prove He was the Son of God by throwing Himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple.

In verse 41, **In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, "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. "He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"** The **chief priests, scribes and elders** all probably uttered the same things about the Temple. The rejection permeated that entire generation. They also said that **He saved others**. This refers to Jesus healing others from all kinds of sickness, demon possession, etc... The fact they state that He saved others is an admission that Jesus' miracles were genuine. This is something they never questioned. What they did was claim that the source of His miracles was Satan. But if He could save others, why could He not **save Himself**. If **He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him**. This also is tempting Him to do something contrary to the will of God. He went to the cross because it is the will of God, not my will but Thy will be done. If he were to **come down from the cross**, He would not be doing the will of God. Then if they were to believe in Him they would not be saved, because salvation would not be provided for anyone. Jesus stayed on the cross in order to do the will of God and to provide salvation for the world. Ironically, in verse 42, the religious leaders quote Ps 22:8 and thereby fulfill more Messianic prophecy. "Commit yourself to the Lord; let Him deliver him; Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him." What they thought was that if God did not rescue Him then God was not pleased with Him and He was not the Son of God. But in reality they were stating exactly what God would do for Him three days later. Not in their way, or their time, but in His way, and His time, in fulfillment of more prophecy.

Since everyone was joining in, verse 44 says, **The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words**. Note is made that at this time, both the one on His left and the one on His right **were hurling insults at Him**. As we know, things will change in the next three hours for one of those criminals, thus illustrating that as long as someone is still alive they have an opportunity to believe and change their eternal destiny.

In summary, after a long night and a tortuous scourging, in 27:31, Jesus was led away to be crucified. He initially carried His own cross out of the Praetorium, but His condition left Him unable to carry it very far. In 27:32, a man of Cyrene named Simon, was pressed into service to bear His cross. This man had two sons, Rufus and Alexander, who seem to be well-known to Mark. Paul seems to have known Rufus and his mother. The ordeal will likely result in the salvation of this Simon, his wife and their sons. In 27:33, they arrived at the place called Golgotha, which is the Aramaic term meaning "Place of a Skull." This is probably not a topographical reference but simply a name for a common place of crucifixion, which may have been *The Church of the Holy Sepulcher*, and certainly

there is early tradition that this was the place, and it meets the textual requirements of being near the city, a quarry, a cistern, a garden and along a road, but we still do not know for sure. What we do know is that in verse 34 when they arrived they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall, and this fulfilled prophecy of Ps 69:21. After tasting it He was unwilling to drink it, but preferred to have all His senses while doing His work on the cross. They then stripped Him, pierced His wrists with 5-7" iron spikes, and hoisted Him up upon the vertical beam. Then they placed His left foot over His right and pierced both with a single 5-7" iron spike. He was thus crucified. In 27:35, they divided up His garments among themselves and cast lots for His tunic. This fulfilled prophecy of Ps 22:18. In 27:36 the soldiers sat down and continually kept watch over Him to ensure that no one stole His body and He died. In 27:37 Pilate had written the charge the Jews made against Him in three languages, which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." Many people read this and the Jewish leaders asked Pilate to take it down but he said, "What I have written I have written." In 27:38 two true criminals were crucified, one on either side of Him. This fulfilled prophecy of Isa 53:12 that He would be numbered with the transgressors. In 27:39 the mocking and wagging fulfilled prophecy of Ps 22:7. In 27:41-42 the mocking of the religious leaders fulfilled prophecy of Ps 22:8. And even further than this, in 27:44, even the two criminals crucified alongside of Him were hurling insults at Him at this time.

Alright, why did Matthew write this? What can we learn? First, Matthew wrote to show that Jesus fulfilled Messianic prophecy. This is a key because if Jesus did not fulfill Messianic prophecy then Jesus is not the Messiah. Interestingly Matthew does not use a fulfillment formula as is so common, but these OT prophecies would be so common to the average Israeli that their significance could not be missed. The mixture of wine mixed with gall as an analgesic to dull the pain fulfilled the prophecy of Ps 69:21. The division of Christ's garments and casting of lots was prophesied in Ps 22:18. The fact Jesus would be numbered with the transgressors as He was crucified between two criminals fulfilled Isa 53:12. The hurling of abuse and wagging the head fulfilled Ps 22:7. The very words uttered by the religious leaders to the effect that if God delighted in Him He would save Him fulfilled Ps 22:8. Jesus was on a mission to fulfill prophecy, and step-by-step, even through the crucifixion, He was fulfilling prophecy. This could not be missed by the average Israeli. Second, Matthew emphasized the extreme mocking of everyone except those closest to Him; the crowds, the religious leaders, the soldiers and both thieves. This demonstrates the sinful nature of men and their rebellion against God. And yet He continues to provide salvation for even them by His work on the cross. Third, Matthew mentions the inscription placed above His head on the cross, "Jesus the King of the Jews." This is the theme of this gospel. As Toussaint said, "...though here it is used in sheer derision. The scoffers blindly state in mockery what they shall one day acknowledge in truth, Jesus is the King of Israel." He will be King of Israel when Israel repents. Until that time His kingdom is in abeyance. At that time it will be manifest. That summarizes the first three hours from 9am to 12 noon. Next time we will look at the last three hours from 12 noon to 3pm.

¹ See Peter Walker, *The Weekend that Changed the World*, 33.