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Lecture 12A – Matthew 27: Jesus' Passion II: Roman Hearing, Crucifixion, and Death

Welcome to Matthew lecture 12a. In this lecture, our second lecture on the passion of our Lord, we're going to be covering in Matthew chapter 27 the hearing of Jesus before the Roman authorities, His crucifixion, and His death. We begin with the pathetic story of Judas coming to his conclusion with the suicide of Judas in Matthew 27, verses 1 through 10.

First, we'll expound on this passage briefly and then make some comments on Judas' betrayal compared to Peter's denial. Matthew 27:1 through 10, begins as the continuation of the trial story of 26:57 to 68, which was suspended by the story of Peter's denials in 26:69 to 75. But after 27:1 and 2, the subject changes to the story of Judas' suicide in 27:3 through 8, which is viewed by Matthew as a fulfillment of prophecy, 27:9 and 10.

The pattern of Matthew's narrative throughout the passion narrative has been to interweave stories about supporting characters and issues into the main story of the sufferings of Jesus. Some of these supporting characters and issues were covered in passages such as 26:6 to 13, 26:20 to 35, and 27:3 to 10. And these are just basically woven into the focus on Jesus and His passion.

In 27:9 and 10, Matthew's characteristic, typical understanding of the Old Testament, expressed with a fulfillment formula, occurs for the last time in his gospel. Matthew apparently understands the shepherd doomed to slaughter in Zechariah 11:7 as corresponding to Jesus, and the 30 pieces of silver thrown to the potter in the Lord's house in Zechariah 11:13 as corresponding to the money Judas threw down in the temple being used by the potter's field by the chief priests. Matthew does not make up this story to fit Zechariah, but he reads the prophets with a view to finding patterns in the Old Testament in which an Old Testament person or event anticipates something from the life and ministry of Jesus.

Now Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. It's interesting to compare and contrast the remorse of Peter after his temporary lapse, 26:75, with that of Judas after his act of ultimate treachery. Both acts were no doubt despicable, but Peter's pales in comparison with Judas'.

Peter returns to a life of following Jesus and is restored to his special office in the church, 28:18 through 20. Compare Gospel of John 21:15 and following. To mention Peter's prominent ministry in the early church is to belabor the obvious.

Peter changed. But the remorse of Judas does not amount to anything approaching genuine repentance unto salvation. This is clear not so much from the use of a different Greek word for repentance in 27:3, the word metamelomai, which is different from the word metanoia, repentance, or metanoeo, to repent.

Granted, Judas did acknowledge his sin and he did return his blood money. But Judas never attempts to seek Jesus' forgiveness or rejoin the disciples. His suicide is an indication of hopeless despair, not repentance.

In Matthew, repentance is shown by works portrayed as fruit. Passages such as 3:8 through 10:7, 16 through 20, and 13:38 to 40 make this clear. Judas is remembered for his suicide, which itself is a violation of the sixth commandment of Exodus 21:23.

In view of such passages as Matthew 26:24 and Gospel of John 6, verse 70 and 17:12, we may not entertain any hopes that Judas was a saved person. Rather, we must be warned because he was lost. Judas is sometimes looked upon by Christian scholars as a grave mistake, typical of the Jewish people as a whole.

Just as the corrupt Jewish scholars of Jesus' day do not represent the nation as a whole, let alone the Jewish people in any subsequent time, neither does Judas. Judas must not be viewed as typical of the Jewish people in his own time or in any other day. Jesus called twelve disciples, and all of them were Jews.

Only one of them betrayed Jesus and was lost. The eleven were restored to ministry for their Messiah, and they became the foundation for the church. That the church quickly became a predominantly Gentile body is a mystery of divine wisdom and sovereignty, according to Romans 9 through 11.

But Gentile believers must never forget the Jewish roots of their faith. And now we move on to the second stage of our Lord's trial, or his hearing before Pilate in 27, verses 11 through 26. First, to expound this passage briefly, Jesus' trial before Pilate involves two cycles of interrogating Jesus, 27:11, and 26:12, 14, followed by an explanation of the customary prisoner release at Passover and the availability of Barabbas in 27:15, and 16.

Then there are two cycles of Pilate asking the crowd whom they preferred to be released in 27:17 through 20, and 27:21, again followed by two protests of Jesus' innocence by Pilate in 27:23, and 27:24, and 25. These are followed by the delivery of Jesus for crucifixion in 27:26. Beside Pilate and the crowd, there are two other characters in this brief story, Pilate's wife, who is for Jesus, 27:19, and the leading priests and elders who, of course, are against Jesus, 27:12.

Unfortunately, both the crowd and Pilate are influenced by the Jewish leaders, not Pilate's wife. Pilate comes across in this story not, as some have said, in a positive

way, but in a pathetic way. He's willing to be complicit in something he knows to be unjust merely for the sake of avoiding hassles with the Jewish leaders.

In Matthew 27:20 to 25, there is another important issue regarding anti-Semitism. Matthew 27:20 through 25 takes its place alongside Matthew 23 as a passage frequently cited as blatantly anti-Semitic. Some conclude that Matthew portrays Pilate positively in order to exonerate or exculpate the Romans and indict or inculpate the Jews, Hill's commentary to that effect.

But Matthew's portrayal of Pilate is not really that positive. It coheres with the other ancient sources in presenting Pilate as insecure and unjust. Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent, but he does not intervene to stop the miscarriage of justice.

He knows that Jesus should be released instead of Barabbas, but he accedes to the wishes of the crowd because it's expedient to do so. His symbolic hand-washing is pathetically inadequate and hypocritical, coming from one charged by the Emperor with administering justice in Judea. The hand-washing is meant to show that Pilate does not consent to the crowd's wish.

But since when does the crowd call the shots? If Pilate does not consent, neither should he permit. Pilate comes across as a cowardly ruler who abdicates his responsibility. His only concern is with how all this impacts him.

He lacks sufficient fortitude even to take his wife's advice and to leave Jesus alone. Davies and Allison comment, Pilate's title is ironic. The governor leaves the governing to others.

Thus, Pilate has to share the guilt for permitting Jesus to be crucified. But what of Matthew's famous blood libel text, 27:25, where the crowd takes the blood of Jesus upon them and upon their descendants? Is this text intended to inculpate the Jews as a nation forever? In response to Pilate's washed hands and denial of responsibility for Jesus' death, the crowd clearly accepts that responsibility for themselves and for their children. This passage has frequently been understood during the church's history as teaching that the Jews as a nation are to be viewed as despicable Christ-killers.

Notice Baer's comments on that point. This interpretation is patently false on its surface, since all the founders of the church were Jewish and many Jews have believed in Jesus throughout the church's history. Matthew is a Jew writing to Christian Jews in conflict with non-Christian Jews over the identity of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.

One way Christians have disavowed the blood libel is to regard Matthew 27:25 as fiction. Baer is one who does this. But this merely adds a mistake about the historicity of the passage to the previous mistake about its meaning.

On its surface, the text is limited to those present before Pilate and their children, not the Jews as a nation at that time or at any other time. The comment is made in the heat of the moment, not as a carefully reasoned theological proposition. There is no guarantee that a God of grace would hold the crowd to its rash statement any more than the twelve disciples would be held unforgivable for deserting Jesus and Peter for denying Jesus three times.

And there is certainly no guarantee that a God of justice will pardon Pilate for his diffidence and empty show of cleansing his hands. If anything is clear in Matthew's gospel, it is that Jesus came to call sinners. They are exemplified by such notorious people as tax collectors and harlots in passages like 9:13 and 21:31. Sinners like these would likely be prevalent in the crowd that took responsibility for the blood of Jesus, and there is no doubt that, in Matthew's theology, such sinners would be forgiven upon repentance.

It's also clear in Matthew's gospel that Jesus saves his most severe criticism for the religious leaders whom he views as hypocrites. Perhaps this theme is an important part of the response to the blood libel of Matthew 27:25. One notes in 27:20 that it was the leading priests and elders who persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas. If Jesus' Jewish contemporaries were an especially wicked generation, as stated in 12:45 and 23:36, it was largely because their leaders were especially wicked themselves.

These corrupt leaders of Israel are the ones to blame for the crowd's unfortunate statement in 27:25, and thus for Pilate's unprincipled acquiescence to the crowd's inflamed request. This coheres perfectly with the Mithian theme of Jesus' conflicts with the leaders of Israel. In one sense, these leaders are responsible for the blood of Jesus, but in the most profound sense, all humans, Jews and Gentiles alike, are responsible for Jesus pouring out his blood to forgive sins and inaugurate the new covenant.

Ultimately, then, it is those who do not believe in Jesus, Jews and Gentiles alike, who will be held responsible for his blood. Now we move on to our next section, where we come at long last after much hinting by Matthew and direct predictions by Jesus of his crucifixion. First, we expound the passage, then we deal with some Old Testament allusions, again the question of anti-Semitism, and then we discuss crucifixion briefly.

The narrative of the crucifixion is a sequential story of each stage of the gruesome process. The story begins with the action of the soldiers in mocking Jesus in 27:27-31,

conscribing Simon to carry the cross in 27:32, arriving at Golgotha in 27:33, offering wine in 27:34, crucifying Jesus in 27:35, gambling for his garments also in that verse, observing the crucifixion afterwards in 27:36, and putting up a sign describing Jesus' identity. The next section is an inclusio framed by the mention of the revolutionaries who were crucified on both sides of Jesus in 27:38-44. The theme here is mockery, whether by the bystanders in 27:39-40, the Jewish leaders in 27:41-43, or the revolutionaries themselves in 27:44. As Jesus was tempted three times in Matthew 4, so here he is mocked three times.

But the temptation and the mockery focus on Jesus' sonship. Both the devil and the various mockers of Jesus confront him with the alternative of reigning without suffering, but both times, Jesus will have none of that. The mockery of this passage is especially ironic, since Jesus really is the son of God.

The temple will be destroyed within a generation. Jesus does, in fact, save others. He is the king of Israel.

He does trust in God, and God is supremely pleased with him. He does not come down from the cross, but he does overcome death. Each point of ridicule is, in fact, eventually shown to be true.

Thus, in a very strange way, the mockers are unwitting evangelists. The irony is never more pronounced than in the actions of the soldiers who dress Jesus as a king and pretend to do homage to him in 27:27-31. What the soldiers act out in cruel jest is prophetic of what will really happen someday. After his crucifixion, Jesus will be exalted as the glorious Son of Man and given all authority.

28:18. His message of the rule of God will win willing subjects from all the nations of the earth. At the end of the age, he will return as the king and be seated on his glorious throne, according to 25:31. Things are not always as they seem, and sometimes things are exactly the opposite of what they seem. We have listed for you the Old Testament allusions in this passage, which are quite prominent.

These are found in your supplemental materials, just on the next page from your outline of this lecture on page 50. Notice especially the repeated citation of Psalm 22 in these citations and allusions. And we won't take any more time in the lecture to look into those.

That's something that you might be interested in doing on your own. Again, we have to deal with the question of anti-Semitism here. It is significant that perhaps the most vicious mockers of Jesus in the crucifixion narrative are the Gentiles in 27:27-31. This calls into question the simplistic identification of the Jews with rejection of Jesus and of the Gentiles with reception of Jesus, which is found in some mistaken treatments of Matthew's theology.

There are examples in Matthew of Jews who love Jesus and of Gentiles who hate him. France, in his 1985 volume, goes too far in commenting on 27:44 when he says that the totality of Jesus' rejection by his people is complete. Rather, not all of the mockers in the crucifixion narrative are Jews, 27:27-31, and not all the Jews are mockers, according to 27:55-57. Therefore, Matthew should not be charged with an unqualifiedly negative view of the Jews nor a similarly unqualified positive view of the Gentiles.

Now, a few notes on crucifixion, which has got to be the most gruesome mode of execution ever imagined. First, a historical perspective. Crucifixion was cruel and unusual punishment, to say the least.

Josephus speaks of it along those lines, as do other ancient writers. The Romans used it in the cases of slaves, notorious criminals, and insurrectionists to make a political statement. Crucifixion asserted the dominion of Rome over conquered peoples by making a gruesome example of anyone who dared to upset the Roman peace, the Pax Romana.

According to Josephus, it was frequently utilized during the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. Although practices varied somewhat, crucifixion often involved driving a long nail through the victim's ankles into the vertical post of the cross and driving nails through the victim's outstretched hands or wrists into the horizontal beam of the cross. Notice Luke 24:39, John 20:25, and Colossians 2:14 regarding the nail.

The precise medical cause of death by crucifixion is not clear. It's commonly thought that victims would die of asphyxia, lack of breath. They would eventually have difficulty supporting their weight with their legs.

Then it would become increasingly difficult to breathe when hanging by the arms. This gruesome process could take days. At times, the executors would break the legs of the victims to hasten the process, but in the case of Jesus, this was not necessary, according to John 19:31-33. Another theory is that dehydration and loss of blood from pre-crucifixion flogging and nail wounds would cause death.

Now, a theological perspective on crucifixion. The crucifixion narrative in Matthew is the culmination of the story of Jesus' rejection. It stresses the way in which the various parties, the bystanders, the Jewish leaders, and the revolutionaries crucified with Jesus all taunt him.

Crucifixion in their thinking unmasks Jesus as an impotent pretender to the messianic office. But Jesus is not the type of military messiah they expect to remove Rome's oppressive yoke. Jesus and John before him demand individual Jewish repentance, not war against Rome.

Jesus' messianic values are epitomized most clearly in 12:14-21. There the Pharisees are planning to kill Jesus because his healing on the Sabbath amounts to work, in their view. But in response, Jesus withdraws from the conflict, and he counsels silence on the healing. This fulfills Isaiah 42:1-4, which speaks of the servant as the one who pleases the Father, who is endowed with the Spirit, who proclaims and does not promote insurrection in the streets, and who becomes the hope of the Gentiles.

The kingdom is built not by the sword, 26:52, but by one repentant disciple at a time. In this messianic model, justice is achieved not by military prowess but by individual repentance and humble service to others. But the Jewish religious establishment will have nothing of it.

In addition to modeling kingdom values, the crucifixion accomplishes the redemption needed in order for those values to be practiced. Jesus saves his people from their sins, 1:21, by giving his life as a ransom for them, 20:28. This ransom entails the sacrificial pouring out of his blood so that their sins may be forgiven, 26.28. The Torah pronounces a curse on anyone who is hung on a tree, Deuteronomy 21, verses 22 and 23. Compare Isaiah 53, verses 3-6.

Other New Testament authors developed this notion along the lines of vicarious sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus bore the curse and penalty for the sins of his people so that they would not have to bear that curse themselves. There are subtle allusions to Deuteronomy 21, verses 22 and 23 in passages such as Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29, and 1 Peter 2:24. Paul explicitly cites Deuteronomy 21, verses 22 and 23, and Galatians 3:13, both to the effect that Jesus took on himself the guilt of his people and their sin, and thereby achieve their forgiveness and redemption.

Look at such passages as Romans 3:24-26, 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, 2 Corinthians 5:21, and 1 Timothy 2:6. Paul develops the theology of crucifixion one even further, teaching that the believer in Jesus has himself or herself become vitally identified with Jesus in death to the old life of sin in solidarity with Adam, and resurrection to a new life in solidarity with Jesus. Therefore, Paul speaks of us having died with Christ and having been raised to a new life in passages such as Romans 5:12-6:11, 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, Galatians 2:20-6.14, Ephesians 2:1-6, and 4:22-24, Colossians 2:8-15, and 3:1-4. Paul's understanding of the redemptive effect of the cross also develops Matthew's stress on mission to Gentiles, since the new life in Christ is lived in community with all who believe in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. Look at Romans 15:7-12, Ephesians 2:11-22, and Colossians 3:9-11. Now to that most awesome of events in the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew's record of the death of Jesus in 27 verses 45-56.

The death of Jesus is the event toward which all of Matthew's narrative points. There is a sense in which Matthew 1:25 is the introduction to the passion narrative in 26-

28, and the centerpiece of the passion narrative is the death of Jesus. Matthew's narration of Jesus' death is much like his preceding material on the crucifixion.

He spares the details of the event itself and stresses instead the actions of others, which are full of irony and Old Testament illusions. Jesus' death is attended by darkness and results in a rock-splitting earthquake. Nature itself thus testifies to the ominous epochal significance of the event.

The direct haunting of Jesus ceases at 27:46, and Jesus' desolate cry there pierces the darkness with some of the most profound words in the whole Bible. How one who was uniquely God's Son in terms of such passages as 1:23, 3:17, 11:27, 16:16, and 17:5 could be forsaken by God is, according to Hagner, one of the most impenetrable mysteries of the entire gospel narrative. Amen.

This is not a loss of faith on Jesus' part, but the expression of the deepest imaginable pain at being abandoned by his Father. Yet the abandonment sensed by Jesus is only temporary, and vindication is coming soon. Jesus' cry of dereliction is misunderstood by those watching to the very end according to 27:47-49. Unaware of the true significance of what has transpired, they imagine that Jesus is calling for Elijah.

Although they have been mocking Jesus previously, some of them now appear half-seriously to expect Elijah to come miraculously to Jesus' rescue. But Jesus does miracles to help those in need, not to provide excitement. Besides, he must drink the dregs of the cup of suffering the Father has placed before him.

His death amounts to the sacrificial pouring out of his blood as a ransom which saves his people from their sins. Since those in 27:27-49 do not grasp the true significance of Jesus' suffering, their speculation about whether Elijah will come is just a more subtle form of mockery. The earthquake at Jesus' death in 27:51 of following rips the temple veil and even the very rocks so that the tombs are opened and the people are raised from the dead.

The tearing of the veil vindicates Jesus, demonstrating he was indeed one greater than the temple, 12:6. The splitting of the rocks and resulting opening of tombs is evidently a preview of the final resurrection guaranteed by the soon resurrection of Jesus. Look at Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 and Revelation 1:5 for a description of Jesus' resurrection as the firstfruits. Despite the rejection of Jesus by the leaders of Israel and his abandonment, albeit temporarily, by his own disciples, there are sympathetic witnesses to his death.

The Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus are transformed into believers of a sort when they witness the manner of Jesus' death and its results. They may not grasp all that Matthew means by the title Son of God, but their words indicate a positive

response to the light they have and openness to further witness by Jesus' disciples. It's likely that some of them became disciples.

Another largely unsung group watched the death of Jesus, no doubt in horror over the pain and taunting, but in awe over the subsequent earthquake. These are the women mentioned in 27:55 and 56, who in days to come are the first to learn of the resurrection of Jesus and then to meet the resurrected Jesus himself, and finally to tell the disciples about it. The preeminence of these faithful women in the account of Jesus' death, taken alongside the shameful absence of the disciples, is a powerful warning against chauvinism in the community of Jesus' disciples.

Matthew 23:8-12 and Galatians 3.28 are helpful there. Now the burial of our Lord in 27:57-65. This passage contains two sections. The first describes the burial of Jesus, 27:57-61, and the second, the fear of the Jewish leaders that the disciples will steal Jesus' body and make deceptive claims of his resurrection, 27:62-66. Both requests, both sections involve a request being made to Pilate and Pilate granting the request.

As a whole, this section sets up Matthew 28 in that the burial of Jesus and the guarding of the tomb are reversed by the resurrection and the flight of the guards. After all of the abuse Jesus has taken this day, the manner of his burial is surprising, to say the least. He spared the ignominy of having his body hang on a cross after sundown, a sundown which led to Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

This would have added insult to injury, to say the least. But Joseph steps in and brings the story of Jesus' horrible death to an end by giving him a decent burial. Fittingly, this is the kindest treatment Jesus has received since the unnamed woman anointed him for his burial in 26:6-13. The fear of the Jewish leaders that the disciples would steal Jesus' body and go on to deceive people with false resurrection claims seems to be irrational, even bordering on paranoia.

The Jewish leaders think too highly of disciples who were scattered, afraid, and hardly in a position to steal the body. But a far worse mistake is that the Jewish leaders think too little of Jesus. They appear to totally rule out any possibility that God would make good on Jesus' promised resurrection.

In any event, the post-resurrection appearances refute the stolen body theory of the resurrection in 28.9. The conspiracy that results from Jesus' resurrection shows the lengths to which unbelief will go in order to sustain its pretended autonomy. The Book of Acts portrays the ensuing confirmation of the worst fears of these Jewish leaders. Jesus, whom they crucified, had indeed risen from the dead and commissioned his followers to take this message to all the nations.

And the last deception, quote-unquote, certainly does turn out to be worse, quote-unquote, than the first. It was not a deception, and it turned out better. Now, a summary and transition into chapter 28.

Matthew 27 carries the drama of Jesus' arrest and trial before the Jewish leaders to its awful conclusion as Jesus is condemned by Pilate, crucified, and dies. He is buried in the Jewish leaders' attempt to nullify any possibility of his predicted resurrection by guarding the tomb and sealing the stone. Certainly, this is the low point of the gospel for followers of Jesus the Messiah.

But the seeming victory of Jesus' enemies is only temporary. Matthew develops in parallel fashion two contrasting themes in this chapter. On the one hand, the Jewish leaders continue their hard-hearted, cruel, mocking treatment of Jesus and admit their absolute responsibility for his execution.

To the bitter end, their amazing obstinacy in opposition to Jesus continues. On the other hand, Jesus is repeatedly vindicated in the midst of his mockery by the officials of Israel and Rome. Judas remorsefully admits that Jesus is innocent, and the Jewish leaders do not attempt to persuade him otherwise in 27:4. Even Pilate is aware of the ulterior motives of the Jewish leaders, and along with his wife, regards Jesus as innocent in 27:18 and 19, 23 and 24.

The Father's providence provides meteorological phenomena that befit the atrocity being committed as the sun goes dark and provides a sort of vindication as well in 27:51-53. A detachment of Roman soldiers is more perceptive than the Jewish leaders when they interpret these phenomena as demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God in 27:54. While it's debatable how much the soldiers understood of Jesus' divine sonship, their sincere confession contrasts starkly with the taunts of the multitudes and the Jewish leaders in 27:40 and 43. This confession paves the way for the resurrected Jesus to send his disciples to all the nations, who must likewise confess in baptism the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.