

Matthew, Lecture 19: Matthew 27-28

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Abstract

This lecture examines the historical and theological dimensions of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 27-28. Dr. Craig Keener details the physical torment and profound shame of Roman crucifixion, highlighting Simon of Cyrene's role and the fulfillment of the "righteous sufferer" Psalms. He defends the historical reliability of Jesus' bodily resurrection by analyzing early eyewitness accounts—particularly the prominent role of women—and contrasting them with alternative secular reports. The session concludes by framing the Great Commission as a call for believers to champion truthful testimony over fear and greed.

Outline:

- **I. The Road to Golgotha and Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27)**
 - **A. The Roman draft of Simon of Cyrene**
 1. Jesus was unable to carry the horizontal beam due to severe scourging
 2. Simon was a bystander drafted under Roman military authority
 3. Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, known to Mark's Roman audience
 - **B. Simon's background and connection to Cyrene**
 1. Cyrene (located in Libya, North Africa) was a large city with a population estimated at one-third indigenous Libyans, one-third Greeks, and one-third Jews
 2. Simon's name is Greek but was highly popular among Jews as a Greek equivalent of the patriarchal name Simeon

3. His presence in Jerusalem during Passover indicates he was likely a Jewish pilgrim staying in the outskirts due to overcrowding

- **II. The Agony and Humiliation of Roman Crucifixion**

- **A. The shame of public execution**

1. Victims were stripped entirely naked, with no loincloths, maximizing public shame
2. Specifically reserved for slaves, revolutionaries, and the lowest class of criminals
3. Contrasted with other cruel Roman executions (e.g., sewing matricide/patricide offenders into a sack with scorpions, serpents, and cats)

- **B. The physiological reality of crucifixion as slow torture**

1. Death occurred slowly, often taking several days
2. Main causes of death were blood loss (from scourging and nails), extreme dehydration, or eventual asphyxiation
3. Asphyxiation occurred because the hanging position restricted the diaphragm; victims had to push up on nailed feet to breathe
4. Roman soldiers sometimes broke the victims' legs to prevent them from pushing up, accelerating death
5. Josephus's account of three friends taken down highlights the severity: despite immediate medical treatment, two out of three died

- **III. The Crucifixion Scene and Spoils of War**

- **A. The division of Jesus' clothing**

1. Carried out by a contubernium (a squad of eight soldiers who shared a tent, with four typically assigned to execution details)
2. Under Roman law, the execution squad claimed the possessions of the executed

3. Soldiers cast lots for Jesus' seamless garment, fulfilling the prophetic motif in Psalm 22/69

- **B. The Titulus (Causa Poenae)**

1. The wooden placard displaying the charge: "The King of the Jews"
2. Stated the official Roman reason for the execution

- **IV. The Mockers and the Righteous Sufferer Motifs**

- **A. Refusal of the painkiller**

1. Offered wine mixed with myrrh (Mark) or gall (Matthew)
2. Gall highlights the allusion to Psalm 69 (the righteous sufferer)
3. Jesus refused to drink the painkiller, choosing to experience the pain in full measure out of love

- **B. The mockery of the crowds and leaders**

1. Mockers repeated Satan's wilderness temptations: "If you are the Son of God, save yourself"
2. Words evoke the Wisdom of Solomon 2:18, where the wicked mock the righteous sufferer
3. Theological irony: Jesus could not save himself if he was to save others

- **C. The cry of abandonment**

1. Jesus cried out in the words of Psalm 22:1: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani" (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)
2. The cry fits the historical criterion of embarrassment, making it highly unlikely to be an invention
3. Psalm 22 begins with agony but ends on a triumphant note of vindication
4. Spectators misunderstood "Eli" (Hebrew) as a call for Elijah, mocking him based on the belief that Elijah rescues rabbis in distress

5. Elijah had already come as Jesus' forerunner in martyrdom through John the Baptist

- **V. Supernatural Signs Accompanying Jesus' Death**

- **A. The three hours of darkness**

1. Resembles the Egyptian plague and Old Testament judgments (e.g., Amos's darkness at noon)
2. Early historical mention by Thallus (Gentile writer) who tried to explain the darkness naturalistically as an eclipse

- **B. The earthquake and resurrection of saints**

1. Earthquakes were associated with divine judgment and eschatology
2. The raising of some dead saints demonstrates that Jesus' death is the theological basis of new life
3. Roman executioners (centurion and guards) were the first to acknowledge Jesus' divine identity

- **VI. The Burial and the Guardians of the Tomb**

- **A. The failure of the male disciples vs. the courage of the women**

1. Male disciples fled and hid in fear, their faith temporarily shattered
2. Women stayed, watched, and followed the body to the tomb, demonstrating superior courage despite minor risks of arrest

- **B. The role of Joseph of Arimathea**

1. A rich man who "made it through the eye of a needle"
2. Risked high treason (lese-majesty) and property confiscation to request the body from Pilate
3. Judaism strictly commanded burial of executed individuals before sunset (Deuteronomy 21:22-23)
4. Pilate granted the body, likely viewing Jesus as a harmless, politically irrelevant sage (similar to cynic philosophers)

- **C. The historical accuracy of the tomb site**
 1. The Holy Sepulcher is highly likely to be the authentic site
 2. Archaeology shows the site was outside the city walls in AD 30 but inside by AD 44 (Agrippa I's expansion)
 3. Nobody would invent a burial site inside the walls after AD 44 if the Gospels state he was buried outside; thus, the tradition is pre-AD 44
- **VII. The Historical Reality of the Bodily Resurrection**
 - **A. The distinctiveness of the Christian claim**
 1. No valid pagan parallels exist; pagan myths described seasonal, non-bodily, fertility-related revivifications which Greeks found repulsive
 2. Resurrection was a Jewish concept (Daniel 12:2) expecting a physical, corporeal transformation of all the righteous at the end of the age
 - **B. The historical evidence for the resurrection**
 1. 500 eyewitnesses, many of whom were alive and could be questioned when the creeds were circulated (1 Corinthians 15)
 2. Multi-sensory appearances to groups of people rule out psychological hallucinations
 3. Unprecedented early Christian consensus: no debates existed about whether Jesus rose bodily, despite major debates on other matters
 4. Disciples' willingness to suffer and die for their testimony (unlike political conspirators who turn on each other under pressure)
 - **C. The significance of women as the first witnesses**
 1. In both Jewish and Roman courts, the legal testimony of women was considered highly unreliable (e.g., Josephus)
 2. If the resurrection story was an invention, women would never have been cast as the primary witnesses

3. Demonstrates God's pattern of choosing the lowly and marginalized to bear witness

- **VIII. The Climax: The Three Reports and the Great Commission (Matthew 28)**

- **A. The three contrasting reports in Matthew 28**

1. The Report of the Women (Positive): Commissioned twice (by an angel and Jesus) to announce the resurrection to the male disciples
2. The Report of the Guards (Negative): Implausible secular narrative that disciples stole the body while they slept, driven by fear and greed (bribes)
3. The Great Commission (Ultimate): The command to proclaim the good news to all nations, make disciples, baptize, and teach obedience

- **B. The choice before the believer**

1. Followers must choose between the faithful testimony of the women or the deceptive reports of the guards
2. The commission promises Jesus' constant presence to the end of the age