

“He Saved Others, He Cannot Save Himself”

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Matthew 27:32-44

Getting to Golgotha

³² As they went out, they found a man named **Simon, from Cyrene**. They **compelled** this man to carry his cross. ³³ When they came to a place called **Golgotha** (meaning Skull-place) ³⁴ they gave him a **drink of wine mixed with bitter gall**, but when he tasted, he didn't want to drink it.

Crucifixion

³⁵ And **when they had crucified him**, they **divided his garments** among them by casting lots. ³⁶ Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. ³⁷ And **over his head** they put the charge against him as it was written: **“This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”** ³⁸ Then **two insurrectionists** were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

Mockery and Insult

³⁹ And **those going by** started **blaspheming** him, wagging their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “The one who **destroys the temple** and rebuilds it in three days! **Save yourself!**” **“If you are God's Son, come down from the cross.”**

⁴¹ So also the **chief priests mocked**, along with the **scribes** and **elders**, saying, ⁴² “He **saved others; he cannot save himself.**” **“He's King of Israel!** Now, let him **come down from the cross**, and we'll believe in him.” ⁴³ “He puts his trust in God! Let **God deliver him now**, if he wants him. For he said, ‘I am **God's Son!**’”

⁴⁴ The **insurrectionists** who were crucified with him also **reviled him** in the same way.

Matthew 26:63

⁶³ ... And the **high priest** said to Jesus, “I command you under oath before the living God, that you tell us if you are **the Messiah, the Son of God.**”

Matthew 27:11

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before **the governor**. “Are you **the King of the Jews?**” the governor asked him.

Matthew 27:27-31

²⁷ Then the **soldiers of the governor** took Jesus into the governor's headquarters.... ²⁸ And they stripped him and put a **soldier's scarlet cloak** on him, ²⁹ and twisting together a **crown of thorns**, they put it on his head and put a **reed** in his right hand. And **kneeling** before him, they **mocked** him, saying, **“Hail, King of the Jews!”** ³⁰ And they **spit** on him and took the reed and **struck** him on the head. ³¹ And when they had **mocked** him, they **stripped** him ... and led him away to **crucify** him.

Psalm 22:7-8; 16-18 (LXX)

⁷ All who see me **mock** me; they make mouths at me; they **wag their heads**; ⁸ “He **trusts in the LORD**; let him deliver him; let him save him because he wants him!” ...

¹⁶ A gathering of evildoers encircles me; they've pierced my hands and feet ¹⁷ ... They stare and gloat over me; ¹⁸ they **divide my garments** among them, and **for my clothing they cast lots**.

Psalm 69:20-21

²⁰ Reproaches have broken my heart.... I looked for pity ... and for comforters, but I found none.

²¹ They gave me **bitter gall** for food, and for my thirst they made me drink **vinegar-wine**.

Matthew 4:3

³ And the tempter came and said to him, **“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”**

Matthew 5:39-41

³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would force you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone compels you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Philippians 2:5-9

⁵ Think this among yourselves, which also means in Messiah Jesus, ⁶ who, “Though he was in the form of God, | he did not consider that equality with God | a thing to be exploited, | ⁷ rather he emptied himself, | by taking the form of a slave, | being born in human likeness. | ⁸ And being found in human shape, | he humbled himself | by becoming obedient to the point of death, | even death on a cross. | ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him | and graced him with the name | that is above every name....”

The Skull of Death – The Missing Horror

Matthew leads us to the crucifixion of Jesus itself. We watch as they take him to Golgotha – “Skull” – symbol of death’s finality and hopelessness. We observe Simon of Cyrene, evidently later a disciple. We see the wine and gall. The clothes divided, the casting lots.

But where is the crucifixion itself? One word in a subordinate phrase. No nails or thudding hammers, no bloody, weak body, agonizing pain, deep groans, labored breathing. What would I have written? Think of *The Passion of the Christ (2004)*. Mt counts on his readers to know the horror, degradation, and prolonged torture of the cross. See N. T. Wright (*below).

Mt leaves out so much and includes such strange little things: Simon, the wine and gall, the clothes, the lots, the watching, the head wagging, the multiple mocking insults. Mt expects a lot of us. So much that he says depends for its power on us knowing the scriptures. He highlights little details in the often-told story that point us to scriptures (esp. Ps 22 & 69).

Mt is not writing for history, or even to move us emotionally. He juxtaposes scripture and mockery to force a quandary. What do you see? What’s happening? What would you say?

The End of Kingdom Hopes! Mockery all Around.

Mt want us to see how obvious it was to everyone that Jesus was a failure: 1. The people passing by (the crowds that cried “*Hosanna/ Save us, Son of David*” 21:9). What was most ridiculous was the idea that he/we thought he was a king! 2. The priests, scribes, elders, even 3. the anti-Roman insurrectionists crucified beside him. High priest, Pilate, soldiers all saw it. Death, the cross make it obvious. We know what kings look like, big and small. If he had any power he’d use it. He can’t even save himself! How could we have been so hopeful, so fooled!?

Jesus had announced the in-breaking of God’s kingdom. The mockery practically spells out the hopes people had for a king: Messiah, anointed king like David, God’s Son, God’s presence. Embodying his people as “King of the Jews,” “King of Israel.” The one who would renew the temple as the place where God and humanity meet, now reduced to temple destroyer. The one who would deliver/save his people in a new Exodus, overcoming the power of their sins that locked them in oppression under powerful, deadly empires. All ridiculous! It ends here.

The Undertow of God

Except! Scripture and the story of Jesus have been training us to look deeper. Within the story of mockery and defeat are the little echoes of Psalms pointing to God’s surprise deliverance. Even when Jesus is most powerless, his role in God’s great story is unfolding step by step.

Jesus is living out his own teachings, the way to which he called disciples. He is living and dying the astonishing way of God’s self-giving, self-emptying love. Can I see it? Do I mock or love?

[*N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion*, 2016. pp 54-55.]