

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 14: The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ

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And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink. And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, "They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots." And sitting down they watched him there; and set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, "He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth. (Mt. 27:33-44; cf. Mk. 24-32)

And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God." And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, and saying, "If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself." And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. (Lk. 23:33-38)

Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst. And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, "Write not, 'The King of the Jews;' but that he said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be:" that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, "They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots." These things therefore the soldiers did. Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, "Woman, behold thy son!" Then saith he to the disciple, "Behold thy mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (Jn. 19:18-27)

Introduction

We now come to the climax of the gospels and the central focus of the Scriptures—the crucifixion of Christ. As we examine this section of Scripture there are a number of things to keep in mind. First, we are considering a historical narrative that is concise, varied and rich in details. It is important that we focus our attention on every detail of His sorrows and every word from His dying lips. Therefore, we will examine each event or statement in chronological order.

Second, the gospels describe the crucifixion of our Lord in a historical, matter of fact manner. The accounts are economical, but powerful.¹

Among the astounding features of the Scriptures are the records of the supreme events—one word only to describe the scourging of God’s Son, one only for the crucifixion, one only for the resurrection. Events so tremendous, words so restrained! Who guided all these writers to write in such an astonishing manner? This is one of the plain marks of divine inspiration in the very product itself. Matthew uses only a participle as if the crucifixion were the minor act that was subsidiary to the apportioning of the clothes. Luke has a simple aorist to express the fact, John likewise. Mark alone has *staurousin auton* [‘they crucified Him’], the vivid, descriptive present tense. The intention of all the evangelists is evidently *not* to describe the awful act of crucifixion. The fact, not the details, is to fill the reader’s mind.²

Therefore, the gruesome details of the crucifixion and the physical suffering involved are omitted. The focus is on the humiliation of Christ (the placard, the mocking crowds, the two thieves); the fulfillment of prophecy (Ps. 22:1, 7, 8, 18; 69:21); the Savior’s utterances from the cross; and the agony of separation from God (e.g., the darkness, the cry of despair). The main purpose of the gospels at this point is not to go into an exposition of the meaning of Christ’s sacrificial death, but rather to set it forth as the concrete, historical foundation of redemption. It is the historical reality that undergirds all of redemptive history and is the focal point of the whole New Testament. The gospel writers record the facts without any attempt “to play on the heartstrings of their readers.”³ The witness as to who the Mediator was and the significance of these events is only told through the historical events themselves. The first confessors are a condemned criminal and a Gentile centurion (Lk. 23:41-42; Jn. 19:47). God’s commentary is only found in the miraculous events during the final three hours and immediately upon the death of Christ.

Third, although crucifixion is perhaps the most violent, shocking, terrifying, degrading and painful method of execution devised by man, the spiritual soul suffering that Jesus endured

¹ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 639.

² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, 704. William L. Lane writes, “The fact of Jesus’ crucifixion is recorded with utmost restraint. The details were too familiar in the Roman world to require extended comment” (*The Gospel of Mark*, 564). R. T. France adds, “The means of crucifixion varied and Mark does not specify.... Mark’s interest is not in describing the physical suffering so much as in tracing the fulfillment of Scripture in the disposal of Jesus’ clothes after he was stripped for the cross...” (*The Gospel of Mark*, 643). William Hendriksen’s comments are in a similar vein. He notes, “‘And having crucified him,’ writes Matthew, with marvelous restraint. There is no detailed description here of the manner in which the nails were driven through hand (or wrists) and feet, etc. In the original only two words are used, ‘having-crucified him.’ After all, Scripture does not place *all* the emphasis on that which Jesus suffered physically, but on the fact that he himself, in both soul and body, was made an offering for sin, laid down his life. See Isa. 53:10. Cf. Matt. 27:46; John 10:11, 15.” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 966).

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 805.

when He was separated from God the Father was almost infinitely greater than any physical suffering He endured.⁴ Roman Catholic writers, theologians and movie makers who spend a great deal of time focusing on every aspect of the physical sufferings of Jesus while neglecting the soul sufferings are guilty of distorting the gospel. Thousands upon thousands of Jews were tortured and crucified by the Romans in the first century. But, all of their suffering put together pales in comparison to what the Savior endured when He was abandoned by His Father and He descended into hell.

Sour Wine Mingled with Gall

After Jesus was brought to Golgotha and immediately before His crucifixion, He was offered “sour wine mingled with gall” (Mt. 27:34). The Greek word for “gall” (*chole*) refers to bile or a bitter substance. The same word is used in the LXX translation of Psalm 69:21: “They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” The word was used to describe narcotics and even poisons because of their bitter taste.

Mark identifies the substance as myrrh (Mk. 15:23). Among the ancients a little myrrh or other perfumes mixed with myrrh was considered a delicacy (cf. Pliny... ‘The finest wine in early days was spiced with the scent of myrrh’...)⁵ Myrrh is “a resinous gum used for perfume and flavouring (including wine) and as an embalming ointment.”⁶ The fact that the wine offered was bitter indicates that the amount used was not to flavor the wine, but to drug it. Cyril (cat. xiii. 29) notes that “gall and myrrh possess a common property... and Mt. with the prophecy in view [Ps. 69:21] may have [deliberately] described the myrrh as *chole*.”⁷ “In the first century A.D. the

⁴ A Dutch physician describes the intense physical suffering of crucifixion as follows: “The unnatural, constrained position of the body with its arms spread outwards for so long a time must have been a torture which cannot be described in words. This is especially true because not the slightest movement could be made without causing unbearable pain to the whole body but particularly to the impaled hands and feet and to the back, made raw as it had been by the scourging. The nails had been driven through the body at precisely the places where numerous sensitive nerves ran together. Some of these were excited, and others suppressed, a situation causing the severest pain, and one which must gradually have increased. The irritated parts of the body, gradually exposed to the influence of the air, must slowly have become swollen and bruised. The same result must have taken place in other parts where the liquids of the body were held back by the tremendous tension and consequently were frustrated. Now the pain of the inflammation in these parts could only increase from moment to moment. The blood which is carried to all parts of the body through the arteries by the left auricle could not find room enough in these badly inflamed and swollen parts, and consequently would have to flow to the head in greater proportions than usual, would have to distend and press hard on the arteries there, and thus cause ever increasing headache. However, because of this hindrance in the circulation of the blood the left auricle would be unable to send out all of its blood, and consequently would be unable to receive all of the blood coming to it from the right auricle. There was, therefore, no free circulation of the blood in the lungs. This would cause the heart itself to be oppressed; all the arteries would necessarily feel the added pressure; and an unspeakable sense of oppression had to result.

Add to these considerations the fact that the person could never turn or adjust himself amid all his pain, inasmuch as the head alone was free. The body was persistently in an unnatural position. This meant that a gradual stiffening of nerves, arteries, and muscles had to result. Nor must we forget that a burning oriental sun beat down upon the condemned man. There was not a blade of grass to cast its shadow upon the cross. Fiendishly annoying insects hummed around him, and settled upon the open wounds, aggravating the pains.” (P. Biesterveld as quoted by Klaas Schilder in *Christ Crucified*, 109-110).

⁵ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 501.

⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 642.

⁷ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark*, 379.

army physician, Dioscorides Pedanius, who made an intensive study of almost 600 plants and 1,000 drugs, observed the narcotic properties of myrrh (*Materia Medica* I. lxiv.3).⁸

This offer of a stupefying drink raises two questions. First, who offered our Lord this drink? And, second why did Jesus refuse to drink it?

The Scriptures do not give us any information regarding who offered the drugged sour wine to Christ. Therefore, one can only offer an educated guess regarding this act. Most commentators believe that the drink was offered by a group of women from Jerusalem who had formed a sort of society for this purpose. “This possibility is supported by the mention in *b. Sanh. 43a* that women from Jerusalem...used to provide for those being led out to execution a drink of ‘wine containing a grain of frankincense’ in order to dull the pain.”⁹ These women may have based their actions on Proverbs 31:6. “Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those who are bitter of heart.” These may be the same women who wept over Christ as He walked through the streets of Jerusalem.

There is a remote possibility that the Roman soldiers themselves offered the drug to the Savior either on orders from Pilate who knew that Jesus was innocent or perhaps to make their job of crucifixion a little easier. A drugged man would be easier to nail to a cross and would be less liable to spend his time on the cross screaming in agony. Given the Roman reputation for brutality and the lack of historical evidence for such a practice, the first view is much more likely.

Whoever offered the Savior this drink did not succeed in getting Him to take the liquid. The verb Matthew uses (*ethele*) indicates that the drink was repeatedly offered to Christ, “but he kept refusing...and so refused decisively (Mark, the aorist).”¹⁰ Why did our Lord emphatically reject this drugged sour wine? There are a number of important reasons.

First, the Mediator had to reject the drugged cup in order faithfully to drink the cup of God’s wrath set before Him. As soon as He tasted the drink mingled with gall he refused it (Mt. 27:34). We know He refused it when He tasted the narcotic because He did not refuse the non-drugged vinegar offered to Him a few hours later (Mt. 27:48). Jesus knew that He was about to suffer and die as a substitutionary sacrifice for His people. He knew that all the pain, terror, humiliation, suffering and horror that they deserved would be experienced by Him on the cross. Our Lord understood that a crucial aspect of the curse of the law and the suffering in hell was both the sensation of pain and the great psychological torment. Therefore, anything that would deaden the senses, alleviate the pain, ease the terror or calm the psychological torment must be rejected. If Christ had drunk of this drugged cup He would have been guilty of setting aside His Father’s will. He would have abandoned His people to an eternal curse. Therefore, the moment He tasted of it He emphatically set it aside.

It is important to understand that this drugged cup was a temptation of the devil. It was a strong, clever, devious temptation in that the Savior was very thirsty as a result of the blood loss from flogging. Further, the temptation came without any warning whatsoever. He did not know it was drugged until it was placed upon His lips. What man would reject a drink while literally dying of thirst? What kind of person would reject a pain killer who knew he was about to be nailed to a cross with spikes and suspended in agony? Who could refuse a mind-numbing elixir when he knew he was about to enter the pit of hell itself with all of its terrors magnified millions of times over? Only Jesus, the second Adam, could and did offer unto God such a perfect

⁸ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 564.

⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 643.

¹⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, 703.

obedience. The Mediator knew that this was a temptation and He knew what was at stake. If He drank that narcotic drink, then the whole incarnation, the whole 33 and a half years of perfect obedience, humiliation and suffering would be completely wasted and brought to nothing. The multitudes of people chosen by the Father and given to the Son as a gift of love and compassion would all die in their sins. Therefore, without so much as a split second of forethought, Christ spurns the drugged cup.

The second Adam is faithful. The blessed Son of God will bear the curse and the pain of hell for us. With His mind perfectly clear, He of His own volition walks into the curse and hell for us. He refused the drug. He refused it spontaneously. Even in His weakened state He understood what was happening and immediately rejected it. The second Adam—God’s obedient Son—withstood the most rapid and stealthy attack of Satan. Nothing would drive a wedge between Him and His Father *except* the imputed sins of the elect.

Second, Jesus had to reject the drugged cup in order to be a faithful high priest. We must not forget the fact that our Lord was the One in charge of His own sacrifice. The author of Hebrews says that Christ “does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices first for his own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered Himself” (7:27). The Old Testament teaches that the priests were responsible before God to go about their work with alertness, sobriety or a clear mind. Leviticus 10:9-11 reads, “Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.”

If the Savior had accepted the drugged cup He would have violated God’s law and would not have been in a position to offer Himself up or minister to others while on the cross. Schilder writes,

Because He is the *Mediator*, the Mediator of God and men. If in this most momentous hour He should deaden His spirit, then He, overagainst God as well as overagainst His people, would be doing wrong. Then He could not have represented God overagainst the people and could not have represented the people overagainst God. Then He would not have been the minister of the Word who in what He says and what He does not say, rightly proclaims the truth and justice of God to men. Then He would not have been the intercessor for His people, even though the hour now demands that He be that. Then we would have lost the seven utterances on the cross, voicing as they do a great love and a great passion.¹¹

The Title on the Cross

After telling us that Jesus is crucified all the gospel writers mention the title on the cross over the Savior’s head. The reason for this is the unusual nature of the sign, the events surrounding it (cf. Jn. 19:19ff.) and its significance. While it was customary for the Romans to place a placard around the neck of the condemned and then affix the tablet to the cross, the placard above Christ is very unusual. The Savior is not accused of being a revolutionary, murderer or brigand but is said to be a King. Pilate deliberately used the wording that emanated from the chief priests, except he stated it as a fact, not as the delusion of a mad man or imposter. Why did the governor do this? Did he believe that the Mediator was truly a king? It is likely that

¹¹ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 96.

Pilate was very angry at the Jewish leaders for forcing his hand against Jesus and made the sign as an act of revenge. He knew that such a statement would infuriate the leaders of Israel.

John's more full account of the inscription and the events surrounding it indicates that the Jewish leaders did not learn of the contents of the sign until after the Messiah was crucified. As soon as they saw the inscription they went or sent emissaries to Pilate demanding that the contents of the sign be changed from a statement of fact "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" to a statement indicating that Jesus was a liar, a fraud, an imposter ("Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'He said, I am the King of the Jews'" [Jn. 19:21]). Pilate, however, finally got some backbone and emphatically refused to change the inscription ("What I have written, I have written" [Jn. 19:22]). God did not allow the governor "to change the truth into a lie; the Kingship of Jesus stands unalterably fast."¹²

There are a number of important things to note regarding the significance of this inscription. First, God by His special providence wants the world to know that His Son was crucified as King. As the divine-human Mediator there is an inseparable connection between the kingship of Christ and His sacrificial death. Obviously, as God, the second person of the trinity, the Messiah is both LORD and King over all creation. The triune God (the eternal Son included) has dominion over all as an aspect of His nature (read Ps. 10:16; 24:8; 29:10; 47:2; 95:3). Even before the crucifixion the Savior was a King with a kingdom (cf. Jn. 18:36; Mt. 12:28; Lk. 16:16; 17:21). However, as the divine-human Mediator His kingdom is established with power as a result of His crucifixion (Mt. 28:18-20; Rom. 1:4; Mk. 9:1; Eph. 1:20-21; Ac. 2:36; 5:31; Rev. 3:21; etc.). It is ironic that Satan, the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities secured Christ's victory by nailing Him to the cross. The cross established Jesus as the King with power and authority over all, forever (cf. Dan. 7:9-14). The blood-stained title is the announcement to the world that the Nazarene is eliminating sin and is dealing a death-crushing blow to Satan and his kingdom. By His death He conquered death and established the kingdom of grace.

Second, John's account says that the inscription was written in Hebrew (i.e. Aramaic), Latin and Greek. These were the languages of the civilized world. The Mediator was, indeed, the King of the Jews; but He was crucified in order that he may be the king of a spiritual and universal kingdom. In this kingdom established by the blood of Christ there will be no racial, national or ethnic distinctions. It is a kingdom for the whole world (Jn. 3:16); for the Latin-speaking Roman, the Aramaic-speaking Jew and Samaritan; and, the Greek-speaking peoples from Asia Minor, Greece and the far-off colonies—"yes, the elect from every 'tribe, tongue, people, and nation' (Rev. 5:9)—are the citizens."¹³ God is declaring "that Jesus is a King for everyone. He is not merely a Jewish Savior, though he is that. He is the Savior of the Greeks and Romans as well. He is the Savior of the world."¹⁴

John says that our Lord was crucified near the city. Being Passover week, there were many people from different nations who would have witnessed the crucifixion and seen the inscription. The educated Greeks, proselytes and Hellenistic Jews; the Roman soldiers, officials and Latin-speaking Jews; and the Aramaic-speaking Jews would all have understood the title over the Savior's battered and bleeding head. John even observes that many of the Jews read the title (Jn. 19:20). God was proclaiming His Son as the King before many witnesses and was preparing the nation for the great salvation of souls at Pentecost. "All would go away to spread the tidings that one Jesus, the King of the Jews, had been put to death by crucifixion at the

¹² Dauer as quoted by George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 347.

¹³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 428.

¹⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, 1999), 5:1502.

Passover feast.”¹⁵ “The Lord thus declared that the time was at hand when He would make everywhere known the name of His Son.”¹⁶ The sacrifice of Christ forever secured the salvific title of King for the theanthropic Mediator and guaranteed that all men would bow the knee to Jesus as Lord either in this world or in the world to come (Phil. 2:8-11). It was the handwriting nailed to that cross spiritually that made the handwriting on that placard so significant. As Peter would soon say, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:36).

The title by way of implication says that the Savior is the King or Lord over every sphere of life. “Hebrew was the language of *religion*; Greek of *science, culture* and *philosophy*; Latin of *law*. In each of these realms Christ is ‘king.’ In the religious, He is the final revelation of the true God (Heb. 1:2; John 14:9). In science He is the Force behind all things. ‘By him all things consist’ (Col. 1:17). ‘Upholding all things by the word of his power’ (Heb. 1:3); so, too, in Him are hid ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:3). In jurisprudence, He is supreme; the Law-giver and Law-administrator (1 Cor. 9:21).”¹⁷ God is a witness that His Son, affixed to the gibbet of execution, dying and bleeding for sinners, will by His sacrifice achieve a complete victory and preeminence in all things. The cross is the centerpiece of all human history. Everything from science to music and architecture must be done with an eye to the glory of the crucified King.

Third, John’s account which tells us that the inscription was written in three different languages helps us answer enemies of the truth who seek contradictions in Scripture. Some unbelieving scholars view the minor differences between the titles in the gospels as mistakes. This type of thinking is easily refuted if we keep in mind a few pertinent points. a) The gospel writers could have been moved by the Holy Spirit to translate one or another of the different languages (e.g., Matthew—Hebrew; Luke—Greek). It is likely that the Hebrew, Greek and Latin titles were not identical. b) An even more likely explanation is that some gospel writers were not moved to record every word, but selected only the words they thought necessary to tell the story. “The full text would have been: This is [translated by Matthew and Luke] Jesus [given by Matthew and John], of Nazareth [added by John alone], the King of the Jews [provided by all four writers].”¹⁸

Jesus’ Prayer of Forgiveness

While Christ was being nailed to the cross or immediately after, our Lord spoke the first words uttered during the crucifixion. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk. 23:34). This is one of the seven sayings from the cross. This prayer is amazing when we consider the timing of it, the people for whom the Mediator prayed and the contents of the prayer.

(1) The Savior had just been nailed to the cross. The severe pain of the spikes in His broken and torn flesh was greatly accentuated when He was suspended above the earth. His executioners were below dividing up His clothes, while the mob mocked Him and laughed. As His sacrificial blood began to flow freely the great High Priest begins to intercede for His foes. One could reasonably expect a man unjustly sentenced to death, brutally scourged, and

¹⁵ John Calvin as quoted by E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:410.

¹⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:340-341.

¹⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:231.

¹⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5:1502.

heartlessly mocked to call down the wrath of God on his enemies. But Jesus does the opposite. He asks His Father to forgive them. No doubt the Holy Spirit would pierce the soul of many people with these words when the time for their conversion came.

The timing of this prayer indicates the intimate relationship between the death of Christ and His high priestly work of intercession. The moment He begins dying, He starts praying. The blessed Savior was not thinking about Himself on the cross at this point, but was thinking about His people. While His body was nailed to the gibbet unable to move, His soul was very active in loving His own. What love is this that a Man would die and even pray for His enemies during His agonizing death (cf. Rom. 5:10)? This, beloved, is concrete proof of our Lord's infinite love toward unworthy, vile sinners. No one is too wicked or too enslaved to sin for Him to reach with His intercession of love and wash with His precious blood. "He found time to pray for His murderers on the cross. Love like this is a love that passeth knowledge. The vilest of sinners have no cause to be afraid of applying to a Savior like this. If we want warrant and encouragement to repent and believe, the passage before us surely supplies enough."¹⁹

(2) The passage says, "Father forgive them." This raises the question. For whom is our Lord praying? Does the word "them" refer to everyone involved in His crucifixion including the chief priests and elders as well as Pilate? Since the word "them" is not specific, the best way to understand this prayer is to interpret it within the broad context of Scripture. This will help us interpret the Savior's prayer without contradicting other clear sections of the Bible. There are a number of things we can learn about this prayer from the analogy of Scripture.

First, this prayer is a prayer of intercession. What does the Bible teach regarding the intercession of Christ? a) It teaches that Jesus only intercedes for the elect and does not pray for the salvation of the non-elect. In the great high priestly prayer of John 17, our Lord said, "They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.... I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given me, for they are Yours.... Keep them from the evil one.... Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.... And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one..." (Jn. 17:6, 9, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21). In this prayer the Savior only prays for those who belong to the Father; He does not pray indiscriminately for everyone in the world. He singles out those who are the objects of God's sovereign grace—the elect—those chosen before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). The Mediator also prays for everyone who in the future will believe in the Word of God and be saved. The Lord does not intercede for reprobates.

b) The Bible teaches that the intercession of Jesus is always efficacious. It cannot fail. "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 Jn. 2:1). "He continues forever [and] has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). In other words, His people cannot perish because He continually prays for them and His prayers cannot fail. Jesus prayed for Peter and he repented and was restored. Our Lord did not pray for Judas and he committed suicide. The difference between these two men is found in the Mediator's words to Peter: "I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail" (Lk. 22:32). If the Savior's intercessory prayers are efficacious when He was in His state of weakness and humiliation, then obviously now that He is exalted at the right hand of God, He never pleads in vain. As Spurgeon notes,

¹⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:464.

With bleeding hands, he yet won the day; with feet fastened to the wood; he was yet triumphant in his pleas; how much more so now the tiara is about his brow, his hand grasps the universal scepter, and his feet are shod with silver sandals, and he is crowned King of kings, and Lord of lords! If tears and cries out of weakness were omnipotent, even more mighty if possible must be that sacred authority which as the risen Priest he claims when he stands before the Father's throne to mention the covenant which the Father made with him. O ye trembling believers, trust him with your concerns!²⁰

c) The prayer of the Savior on the cross is a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12, "And He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." Our Lord's prayer was not an afterthought but was part of His saving work. As Young notes,

Finally, the servant will make intercession for the transgressors. The conjunction suggests a gradation; in addition to having borne the sins of many, the servant will also make intercession for the transgressors. Here again there is a reflection upon a priestly work of the servant, who pleads before God the merit and virtue of his atoning work as the only ground of acceptance of the transgressors for whom he dies. The basis of the intercession is the substitutionary expiation of the servant. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (Rev. 5:12).²¹

On the cross the sacrifice for sin and intercession are brought intimately together. The intimate connection of these priestly acts rules out the idea that He dies for the elect while praying for the non-elect.

Some Reformed writers who believe that Christ was praying for everyone involved in the crucifixion without exception argue that this prayer was not offered according to His mediatorial office, but rather was simply a request made as a human. After all, they assert, did not the Redeemer tell us to pray for our enemies and for those who persecute us (Mt. 5:44)? While it is true that we are to abstain from revenge not returning evil for evil (1 Pet. 3:9) and are to pray for our enemies (Mt. 5:44; cf. Rom. 12:20), there is no basis in Scripture for arguing that at times the Savior laid aside His mediatorial or priestly office. Further, (as noted) Isaiah connects the two as part of one work of redemption. Another strong objection to this interpretation is that it has the Father refusing to answer a request of His beloved Son.

Second, the Bible explicitly teaches that forgiveness is only given to people who repent and believe in Christ. Jesus said, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3). "Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity" (Lk. 13:27); "who practice lawlessness" (Mt. 7:23). "Go and sin no more" (Jn. 8:11). He told believers that forgiveness and reconciliation are only to be given to people who first admit their sin and repent. "If he [the sinning brother] hears you [i.e. he acknowledges his sin and repents], you have gained your brother" (Mt. 18:15). "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you saying 'I repent,' you shall forgive him" (Lk. 17:3-4). When the wicked Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John the Baptist, he said "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Mt. 3:8). Forgiveness without repentance would contradict the whole Bible and the very message of redemption as taught by John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul. But, forgiveness after true faith and repentance, when the truth would be applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit, as we repeatedly see in the book of

²⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The First Cry from the Cross," 15:596.

²¹ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:359.

Acts, is thoroughly scriptural. The Redeemer prays that the Father would give His people, who out of ignorance were guilty of murdering the author of life, the time, knowledge and special grace necessary for their salvation.

It is important to keep in mind that our Lord did not extend forgiveness, but rather He prayed for it. The only person to whom He gave absolution that day was the penitent criminal. The idea that is rather common today that a good Christian must extend forgiveness to people who are impenitent (e.g., adulterers, murderers, robbers, rapists, etc) has absolutely no support in Scripture. It is a wicked, antinomian, humanistic doctrine that only encourages people to continue in their sins. Therefore, we must pray that God would do a work of sovereign grace upon people's hearts so that they would be brought to a saving knowledge of Christ and repent of their sins. A prayer for forgiveness presupposes faith as a prior condition of pardon. Therefore, when the Savior prayed to the Father to forgive His enemies, He was praying for God to save them so that they could receive forgiveness. It cannot be doubted "that this prayer was heard by the heavenly Father, and that this was the cause why many of the people afterwards drank by faith the blood which they had shed."²²

Third, it is a fact of history that many of the people involved in the crucifixion of the redeemer never repented, were never forgiven, but rather were hardened by God and perished in their sins. In the book of Acts we see the same Jewish leadership with few exceptions persecuting the church of God. Jesus earlier had even prophesied that God would bring vengeance upon these wicked men. Are we to believe that the Redeemer asked God to forgive the very people that he knew would be crushed as reprobates? Obviously, our Lord would not pray for the Father to do something that He knew was contrary to His will.

(3) The contents of Jesus' prayer support our previous consideration. What does the dying Savior ask God to do? He says, "Forgive them." What does the word forgive refer to? It refers to the forgiveness of their sins. "It means 'Blot out their transgressions completely. In thy sovereign grace cause them to repent truly, so that they can be and will be pardoned fully.'"²³ One could argue that our Lord is simply asking God to forgive them for this one act of ignorance. In other words, the Mediator in different words is saying essentially the same thing as Stephen in the book of Acts, "Lord do not charge them with this sin" (7:60). Although such a view is possible, it is not likely. Stephen is essentially saying, "Do not reckon this sin to their account when You mete out your judgment upon them." It is not a petition for the complete pardon of sins, but a request for mercy in judgment. Jesus in His role as Mediator is interceding for complete redemption. For a whole generation the gospel of salvation was preached to the Jews and many thousands were converted and had their sins washed in the Lamb's blood. "On the day of Pentecost three thousand were converted (Acts 2:31, 42); a little later thousands more (Acts 4:4). Even 'a large number of priests became obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7)."²⁴ God answered the Savior's prayer. He could have justly destroyed the whole nation of Israel immediately for what the people did. But instead He carefully and lovingly gathered in the elect.

Note also that Jesus addressed God as Father. It was as Son that He both atoned and interceded for His people. Because Christ interceded on our behalf with the Father (the first person of the Godhead) we have eternal life and can address God as Father by adoption (cf. Gal. 4:6). The Mediator in His work of intercession addressed God as Father because in the economy of grace the Father is presented in Scripture as originating and bestowing all saving benefits

²² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:301.

²³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1028.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

(Eph. 1:3-5).²⁵ The Father chose the elect in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); and, they are spoken of as possessions of the Father that are given as a love gift to the Son (Jn. 17:6). The Son atones and intercedes for the elect and is the door or way to the Father. He enables us to go unto God by His merits and His intercession. Our Lord addresses the Father as Father by nature. We are to address the Father by grace. In imitation of Jesus, yet with an eye to our adoption, “we must in prayer call God Father, and come to Him with reverence and confidence, as children to a Father.”²⁶

Interestingly, this is the last time the Savior addresses God as Father before His death. In all the gospels the Mediator always addresses God as Father, except during the three hours of darkness while hanging on the cross. During this great eclipse of God’s love and fellowship between the Father and Christ, Jesus will address the Father as God (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34).

In this prayer the Mediator gives a reason during His appeal for mercy. After He says, “Father forgive them,” He adds, “For they do not know what they do.” “The persons for whom the prayer was offered were those who were ignorant of the real nature of the act they were performing.”²⁷ The people involved believed they were putting to death an imposter, a false Messiah. In other words, their sin was not a high-handed sin. They did not knowingly and deliberately trample underfoot the Son of God and blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Their sin was not a sin unto death (1 Jn. 5:16) and thus there was still hope for them.

We must be careful not to misconstrue our Lord’s statement and turn ignorance into a virtue. Although the Bible teaches that sins of ignorance are not as grievous and wicked as sins done with knowledge, we must recognize that Christ is not making an excuse for their behavior. Sins of ignorance are still sins and are hated by God. If ignorance were an excuse for sin then lack of knowledge would be a desirable thing. Indeed, ignorance is a frequent contributor to sin and all sorts of wicked thoughts and deeds. Spiritual ignorance is a fountain of heresy. “To use the words of John Gill on this place, our Lord ‘does not mention the ignorance of those He prays for as a plea for pardon, but as a description of their state.’ As Clarke observes, ‘If ignorance does not excuse a crime, at least it diminishes the intensity of it.’”²⁸

The reason ignorance is sometimes mentioned in these types of contexts is that, obviously, there is much more hope for a person who thinks and does evil out of ignorance than for someone who knows the truth and doesn’t care. Thus, before Peter tells the people who were guilty of rejecting and crucifying the Lord to repent he says, “Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did your rulers” (Ac. 3:17). “Let it be noted that the union of clear head-knowledge of Christ with willful heart-rejection of Him, is the nearest approach that can be made to the unpardonable sin. St. Paul seems to teach this in the sixth chapter of Hebrews. Above all, he seems to point to this when he says of himself, ‘I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly

²⁵ “[T]his is the reason why most frequently, and indeed almost always, in Scripture, we find worship addressed to the Father; rarely to the Son; very rarely to the Holy Spirit” (Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Holy Spirit* [Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Foundation, 1994], 155). Thomas Watson notes that in addressing our prayers to the Father we are addressing all three persons of the Godhead: “Though the Father only be named in the Lord’s prayer, yet the other two Persons are not excluded. The Father is mentioned because he is first in order; but the Son and Holy Ghost are included because they are the same in essence. As all the three Persons subsist in one Godhead, so, in our prayers, though we name but one Person, we must pray to all” (*The Lord’s Prayer* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (1692) 1960, 2). Note, Stephen prays directly to Christ in Acts 7:59.

²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:827.

²⁷ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 663.

²⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:467.

in unbelief.’ (1 Tim. i. 13)”²⁹ Thus Jesus’ prayer is not based on an excuse, but instead founded upon the mercy of God. Ignorant persons do not *deserve* to be forgiven. However, once they know the truth they can plead for mercy out of sincere sorrow for such ignorance. “Forgive me Lord, for I was an ignorant fool. I acknowledge the sinfulness of my ignorance and plead for Your tender mercy.”

Our Lord’s prayer on the cross teaches us that it is appropriate to pity and pray for people who out of ignorance serve their false gods and even persecute Christians. We are to have the mind of Christ and pray for our enemies; treat them lawfully and compassionately. After all, many of us at one time were ignorant idolaters who were at war with God. We who have received undeserved favor and mercy must extend mercy to others. The imitation of the Redeemer in this area is often very difficult. However, if we remember that at one time we were blind and full of rage against the truth, praying for such people will be much easier.

The imitation of Jesus in this area must not be misconstrued so that believers make excuses for sin, overlook sin or refuse to condemn it. The Savior prayed for His enemies, yet never compromised His message in the name of compassion. This example also does not conflict with the use of imprecatory prayers for the wicked. We pray that God would save even our adversaries. But, if that is not God’s will, we also pray that God would subdue the enemies of the church. Our great Mediator rules over men either by changing their hearts or by crushing them in His vengeance. As Calvin notes, “For when Christ was moved by a feeling of compassion to ask forgiveness from God for his persecutors, this did not hinder him from acquiescing in the righteous judgment of God, which he knew to be ordained for reprobate and obstinate men.”³⁰ We can pray like our Lord only because we trust in His sovereign power and perfect justice.

The Parting of the Garments

All of the gospels mention the soldiers’ division of Jesus’ clothing (Mt. 27:35-36; Mk. 15:24; Lk. 23:34; Jn. 19:23-24). The synoptic gospels are very brief and do not give any detailed account of the soldiers’ actions. They basically paraphrase the words of Psalm 22:18 (which no doubt was their reason for inscripturating this event) that the soldiers divided the clothes, casting lots. The apostle John, an eyewitness of this event, gives a fuller testimony. He writes, “Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore among themselves, ‘Let us not tear it,’³¹ but cast lots for it, whose it shall be,’ that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: ‘They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.’ Therefore the soldiers did these things” (19:23-24).

It was the practice of the Romans to crucify the condemned naked. According to Roman law the possessions of the person executed became the property of the execution squad. Therefore, when the soldiers were finished crucifying our Lord, they proceeded to do what they probably always did at this time. They began dividing the spoil in a manner that all the soldiers would consider to be fair to each. Although the synoptic gospels’ abbreviated account gives the impression that lots were drawn for each piece of clothing, John’s more detailed description

²⁹ Ibid, 2:468.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:300.

³¹ “The division of the crucifixion victim’s property, including his clothing was apparently customary (*Digest of Justinian* 48.20.1; Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.29: ‘people sentenced to death forfeited their property’)...” (Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 502).

implies that it was only the seamless inner garment (*chiton*). During the days of our Lord Jewish men normally wore five pieces of clothing: sandals, head gear (for protection from the intense Middle Eastern sun), belt (girdle), outer garment (robe) and an inner garment (tunic).³² Apparently the four soldiers of the execution squad came to an amiable agreement as to how to divide four of the items. The idea that these items were torn in pieces to make a fair division is unnecessary and unlikely.

The fifth item, the seamless tunic, was left over and was too valuable to cut into four pieces. Therefore, the soldiers decided to cast lots for it. We do not know just how the soldiers cast lots. Some commentators believe the soldiers used a form of dice for gambling while on duty. Lenski thinks that in “the case of the valuable tunic of Jesus three lots would be blank, and the other would be marked to win.”³³ The soldiers would either reach into a helmet to grab their lot or the helmet would be shaken in turn until a lot fell out.

The removal of Christ’s clothes and the casting of lots over the division of the tunic are significant for two reasons. First, this event which appeared to be inconsequential and purely circumstantial was an explicit fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. That is one reason why all the gospels mention this incident and John’s account even quotes the appropriate passage. There was a conviction among the evangelists that the Scriptures were inspired by God and that these Scriptures testified of the Messiah, especially the specific prophecies. The fulfillment of these prophecies is very important (especially to the Jews) because they prove beyond a shadow of doubt that Jesus is the Christ.

The apostles and evangelists who wrote the New Testament took great care in recording every prophecy as it found fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth for a number of important reasons. For one, it was conclusive proof of the divine inspiration of the prophets who spoke and wrote these prophecies. Consequently T. H. Horne was compelled to assert, “The book which contains these predictions is stamped with the seal of heaven: a rich vein of evidence runs through the volume of the OT; the Bible is true; infidelity is confounded for ever; and we may address its patrons in the language of Saint Paul, ‘Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish!’”³⁴

The main purpose (which is intimately connected to the previous one) was apologetical in relation to the Messiah. The Bible, both in its general outline and its specific details, point us to Jesus as the Messianic King, Savior, Son of God and Judge of all mankind. The coming Messiah was the main trunk of the prophetic tree. Even the branches of the tree relate to the main trunk in some sense. Thus, at the very end of the New Testament canon we read, “Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10). Thus, it was very important that each and every fulfillment be recorded in the Scriptures of the New Testament as a *cumulative testimony* of Christ.

If we look at only one or two remarkable fulfillments of detailed predictions we are impressed. The adversaries of the faith and skeptics, however, may look at a few fulfillments as no more than an interesting coincidence. But when we examine the whole or complete picture of Christ and prophetic fulfillment we must stand in awe of the perfection of the Bible and bow the knee to Christ as the literal fulfillment of “three hundred thirty-two distinct prophecies in the Old

³² The idea of five separate items raises the problem of the turban or head gear and the crown of thorns. If Jesus wore the crown of thorns to the cross what happened to the head gear? It may be that the head gear was carried by one of the soldiers to Golgotha with the intention of dividing it with the other garments. If the head gear was not present there is the possibility that lots were used for all the items; Mark 15:24 may imply this.

³³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, 705.

³⁴ T. H. Horne as quoted in J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Raids: Baker, 1973), 15.

Testament.”³⁵ “Hence to use the words of Bishop Hurd, ‘though the evidence be but small from the completion of any one prophecy, taken separately, the amount of the whole evidence, resulting from the great number of prophecies, all relative to the same design may be considerable: like many scattered rays, which, though each be weak in itself, yet concentrated into one point, shall form a strong light, and strike the sense very powerfully.’”³⁶ Thus the Savior Himself, after the resurrection, used the fulfillment of Scripture to bolster the faith of the doubting disciples. “Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me’” (Lk. 24:44). “And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe” (Jn. 14:29). “The use and intent of prophecy, then, was to raise expectation, and to soothe the mind with hope—to maintain the faith of a particular providence, and the assurance of the Redeemer promised, and particularly to attest the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.”³⁷

Another purpose of prophecy that is neglected in our day is to motivate the people of God to a greater holiness. After speaking of the final day of the Lord when Jesus will return and “the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat,” Peter writes, “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness...” (2 Pet. 3:11). “Some [prophecies], were aids to devotion and ritual observance: the fulfillment of Nahum’s predictions against Nineveh was designed to promote the keeping of feasts and the performance of vows (Nah. 1:15). Some, if not most, were aids to moral living. Both the promises of divine blessing and the threats of impending judgment constituted urgent motivations to ethical conduct.”³⁸ Contrary to popular opinion the object of prophecy is not to entertain and excite the masses with some new theory or fantasy regarding the end times, but rather to stimulate our faith in Christ and spur us to a more fervent service to Him and His kingdom. As John tells us in the book of Revelation, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (1:3). If one does not find the Redeemer in prophecy, believe in Him and bow the knee to Him as King, then one’s study of prophecy is worthless.

The gospel writers focus on the fulfillments of prophecy during the crucifixion to prove certain things. (1) God was in control of these events. They were planned and carried out according to the Father’s sovereign will. (2) The Old Testament Scriptures, which are the very Word of God, find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. (3) The prophecies testify to the reality of all the claims of Christ. He is most certainly the Son of God, the Messiah, and the King of Israel. The rejection of the Savior and the gospel is not rooted in a lack of evidence, but rather is founded upon ethical autonomy and depravity.

Second, the removal of the Redeemer’s clothes so that He could be crucified naked was significant as an aspect of His humiliation. “The heathen take our Lord’s garments from Him and distribute the booty among themselves. In this act we not only observe the great shame and

³⁵ Cannon Liddon as quoted in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 430. J. Barton Payne in his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* lists only one hundred and thirteen distinct O. T. prophecies concerning Christ (667-668). His list, however, is very conservative and leaves out a number of prophecies in the Psalms (e.g., 69). Interestingly, a number of Jewish scholars who went to the Old Testament Scriptures to disprove Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah became dedicated Bible-believing Christians (e.g., Alfred Edersheim).

³⁶ Bishop Hurd as quoted in Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy Viewed in Respect to Its Distinct Nature, Its Special Function and Proper Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press [1865] 1976), 198-199.

³⁷ T. H. Horne as quoted by J. Barton Payne, 16.

³⁸ J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, 14.

humiliation of being executed publicly without any clothes but also the suffering King must watch as His garments are divided as spoil. The Savior appears both humiliated and conquered. The shame of nakedness is fitted into the framework of Christ's whole Suretyship. This shame of nakedness constitutes *punishment*.³⁹ After Adam had violated God's law-Word he associated his nakedness with a feeling of guilt. This sense of guilt brought fear in relation to God. Thus, Adam struggled to hide his sin and nakedness from Jehovah, for his guilt brought on the sense of impending judgment (Gen. 3:8-11).

Nakedness, in fact will become a sign of shame associated with the exposing of sin and the degradation of judgment throughout Scripture. In the parable of Oholah (Israel) and Oholibah (Judah) Jehovah tells Ezekiel, "They [the Assyrians] uncovered her nakedness, took away her sons and daughters, and slew her with the sword; she became a by-word among women, for they had executed judgment on her" (23:10; cf. v. 29). Similarly Isaiah writes, "Your [nakedness] shall be uncovered, yes, your shame will be seen; I will take vengeance, and I will not arbitrate with a man" (47:3). Also, God warned Israel through Hosea saying, "Let her put away her harlotries from her sight.... Lest I strip her naked and expose her, as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness..." (2:2, 3; cf. Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 16:36-39; Am. 2:16; 2 Chron. 28:15; Mic. 1:9, 11).

The first Adam, knowing His guilt, attempted to conceal himself before God. The second Adam could not hide Himself for He was hanging on the cross exposed to the jeers and mocking of the world and the satanic hosts. In order to undo what the first Adam had done, it was necessary for the Son to die naked in order to endure the shame of judgment and the suffering of hell. "For the curse is descending upon Him. Now we know that the expressions of shame, also in their bodily manifestations, await the accursed after death.... [T]he disrobing of the Savior...was a part of the shame of hell."⁴⁰ It was a shameful, humiliating punishment for the sinless Messiah to be made a naked, bloody exhibition of the curse and judgment. Ironically, God could put a covering on the *first* Adam "only because he would one day take it off the *second* Adam."⁴¹ For Adam clothing represented the grace of the Mediator to come. For Christ the absence of clothing was part of the curse.

In the stripping of Jesus as an act of judgment, we observe another aspect of our Lord's substitutionary work. The Savior was treated as a guilty sinner; stripped naked as an accursed lawbreaker; and set apart for the shame of judgment and the curse of hell. This was all done so that our sins would be cleansed and we could be clothed with the spotless garment of His perfect righteousness. He was stripped on the precipice of hell as one abandoned by God and lost forever in order that we might be forgiven, accepted and adopted into God's family forever. What a blessed salvation! The Savior did all this so that we would "not stand naked before God on the last day. It was done so that we, who are all defiled with sin, might have a wedding garment to wear as we sit down by the side of the angels, and not be ashamed."⁴² "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15)!

The stripping of Jesus at the cross is the culmination of the laying aside of His glory at the incarnation. In these final hours Christ's last possessions are taken from Him and He faces

³⁹ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 172. "The shame of nakedness came in with sin. He therefore who was made sin for us bore that shame, to roll away our reproach. He was stripped, that we might be clothed with *white raiment* (Rev. iii. 18), and that when we are unclothed *we may not be found naked*" (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1198).

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 170.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 172.

⁴² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Mark*, 252.

the wrath of God with nothing but His naked, bleeding Self. The glories of the throne room of Jehovah are in the distant past as He gives Himself to the death of the cross.

The Savior Mocked and Blasphemed

And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth. (Mt. 27:39-44; cf. Mk. 15:29-32; Lk. 23:35-39)

After the soldiers divide Jesus' garments, the synoptic gospels focus their attention on the taunting of Christ on the cross. This will be that last indignity from men before His death. Like the division of the garments, this section is a direct fulfillment of Psalm 22. "All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head saying, 'He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him, since He delights in Him'" (v. 7). As we study the aspects of this public humiliation, we will consider: (1) the persons involved in the mockery; and (2) the nature of the mockery itself.

(1) The gospels emphasize that our Lord was hated and mocked by the whole of Jewish society and even the Roman soldiers as He suffered on Golgotha. The synoptics identify four different groups of people.

First, there are the ordinary people of Jerusalem (Lk. 23:35, "the people stood beholding") or "those who passed by" (Mt. 27:39; Mk. 15:19). The Redeemer was crucified near the city by a major road (Jn. 19:20). Therefore, the expression "those who passed by" refers not merely to travelers who happened to be on the road when the crucifixion took place, but also to the crowds from Jerusalem who gathered to watch this spectacle. The people walked back and forth before the suffering Savior to express their contempt for Him while He was in agony.

Second, there are the rulers (Lk. 23:35) or the Sanhedrin establishment as a whole: the chief priests with the scribes and elders (Mt. 27:41; cf. Mk. 15:31). It was not enough for the Jewish leaders to falsely accuse and condemn the Messiah. They went out to Golgotha to revel in their triumph and mock their enemy as He writhes in pain. The rulers, "forgetting their high station and rank, joined the ribald crew in mocking Jesus in his death pangs. Every word was emphatic; every syllable cut and pierced our Lord to the heart."⁴³ The leaders of the people had such a hatred and contempt for Christ that, unlike the people of Jerusalem who address the Redeemer directly (the common people use the second person singular [Mt. 27:39, 40]), they never directly address Jesus. In Matthew, Mark and Luke the leaders "talk about him to each other. They never talk to him. So thoroughly do they hate him."⁴⁴ They, of course, made sure that the crowd and the Mediator could hear their verbal venom.

Third, there are the robbers who join the crowd in deriding Christ (Mt. 27:44; Mk. 15:32; Lk. 23:39). From the leaders, to the common people, to even the criminals the Lord is ridiculed. The word used (*oneidizon*) means to insult (cf. Mt. 5:11), reproach (cf. Mt. 11:20), rebuke (cf. Mk. 16:14), revile (cf. Lk. 6:22) or find fault with. The Savior was rejected and hated by all

⁴³ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 405.

⁴⁴ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 967.

classes in Israel. The rejection of the Mediator extended to every aspect of Jewish society. Truly, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (Jn. 1:11). Our Lord died utterly alone, without any comfort by friends or consolation from angels. As Isaiah says, “He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him: He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (53:2-3). This is a sad and tragic picture. “The servant dwelt in the midst of His own people, and behind his physical form the eye of faith should have seen the true glory; but looking upon his outward appearance, Israel found nothing to delight its eye.”⁴⁵

Fourth, Luke records the fact that even the Roman soldiers, the execution squad, joined in the attacks upon the Redeemer. “The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself’” (23:36-37). The soldiers likely knew little if anything about Jesus of Nazareth; yet, they appear to have been caught up in the jeering spirit of the crowd. “The soldiers, rather from the natural inclinations of persons of their profession to join in any popular excitement and clamor, than from deep feelings of hatred, like that which rankled in the bosom of the priests and rulers, left their previously composed demeanor, and approached Jesus, pretending to share with Him their stimulating drink.”⁴⁶ The vinegar offered in jest was not the sour wine mingled with gall mentioned earlier, nor was it the vinegar offered during the final moments of the three hours of darkness (Jn. 19:29-30). (Wine vinegar was the ordinary drink of soldiers, laborers and everyday people at this time. It was mixed with water and had very negligible alcohol content.) “The mocking that preceded and followed this (23:36a, 37) suggests Luke says this as a negative gesture.”⁴⁷

The extent of the mocking and hatred of Jesus teaches a number of things by way of application. a) It teaches that total depravity and the hatred of God extend to all classes of men. The innate pollution of sin that all men inherit from Adam is universal. Because of the evil within man there is a continual suppression of the truth regarding God. This sad reality is ultimately why the crowd so “naturally” mocked and laughed at the dying Savior. The idea that is common in our day that man is born naturally good, or that he is a blank slate is contrary to Scripture and human experience. The sinless Son of God, whom the angels adored with veiled faces, is treated by fallen man as the scum of the earth.

b) The hatred and mockery of the Redeemer is an expression of unbelief. There can be no neutrality when it comes to one’s opinion of the Messiah. Unbelief seeks to justify itself by attacking the truth. People who are wedded to their sins and do not want to repent lash out against Truth incarnate. Unbelief requires the development of an anti-Christian worldview in order to suppress the truth. This evil crowd, which is frothing at the mouth in anger toward the Mediator, is a fitting picture of the unbelieving world. When we tell people about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must be prepared for an attack on the gospel as well as upon ourselves.

c) The mockery of the crowd is part of the extreme abasement of the Son of God. Our Lord endured the cruelest of all tortures when He was surrounded by the reviling, upbraiding and blaspheming of His covenant people. The Old Testament comes to an end with the greatest of unfaithfulness. God sends His only Son to Israel and the covenant nation treats Him with harsh persecution unto death.

⁴⁵ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:342.

⁴⁶ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 665.

⁴⁷ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, 590.

(2) The nature of the mockery of Jesus can be seen in the gestures of the people, the biblical words used to describe their behavior and their statements made to Christ or to each other. Mark and Matthew describe the people wagging their heads in contempt of the Redeemer. The people were shaking their heads back and forth in a scornful, disapproving manner. Their gesture signifies their hatred of His person and their triumph over His destruction. It is an explicit fulfillment of the derision heaped upon the poor—righteous sufferers in the Psalms (Ps. 22:7; 109:25)—and calls to mind the reviling of Jerusalem in her hour of abject humiliation (Lam. 2:15; cf. Jer. 18:16).⁴⁸ Further, the verb (*echemukterizon*) translated as “they sneered” or “they scoffed” means literally “they turned up their noses at him.”⁴⁹ This means that the rulers were exulting in their perceived superiority over the Savior. These men were very arrogant and were saturated with self-righteousness and the love of raw power. Their wicked gestures toward God’s Son reflected their darkened, perverted hearts.

The biblical words used to describe the verbal torment of Jesus are very strong. All the synoptic gospels say that our Lord was mocked (Mt. 27:41; Mk. 15:31; Lk. 23:36). “The word for mocking (*empaizontes*, *en* and *paizo*, from *pais* child) means acting like immature children who are making fun of each other.”⁵⁰ The mocking of Christ is nothing less than verbal violence. The intent is to humiliate the Savior and cause Him as much emotional pain as possible.

The other word used (*eblasphemoun* Mk. 15:29; Mt. 27:39) translated as blasphemed or reviled can have a lower sense of railing or reviling or a higher sense of blaspheming when used against God. In the case of the Mediator, it refers to both in that the leaders and the people did not believe that Jesus was divine. They were reviling Him and their reviling was blasphemous because they were speaking against God. They were mocking God in the person of His own Son. Their hatred of the Messiah, expressed by their blatant and repeated verbal abuse of Him, reflects their hatred and rejection of the covenant God of Israel. The best barometer of how a person regards God is to examine his attitude toward Christ. If a person does not believe in the Mediator, but rather rejects, mocks and abuses His holy name, then that person is an unbeliever who hates God. The modern pluralistic notion that Judaism and Islam worship the same God as Bible-believing Christians is completely untrue. Christ and the Father are One (Jn. 10:30, 38). “He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son” (1 Jn. 5:10).

The mockery of Jesus comes in three episodes. In the first incident our Lord is mocked by the false accusation that He claimed He could destroy and rebuild the temple in three days. Our Lord’s statement about His resurrection had been misconstrued and perverted at His trial and this slanderous misinterpretation had alienated a large part of the population of Jerusalem. Therefore, the populace joins the false witnesses (Mt. 26:60, 61) and the corrupt Sanhedrin in their contempt of the Messiah. “Perhaps the most painful part of ridicule is to have one’s most solemn sayings turned to scorn, as were our Lord’s words about the temple of His body.”⁵¹ In Mark’s account the mockery begins with the word “ah” (Greek, *oua*), “a sort of applauding acclamation (like huzza or bravo) used in ancient games, and here applied ironically to our Lord,

⁴⁸ See William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 569.

⁴⁹ See Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 71. William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 967.

⁵⁰ See A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:232.

⁵¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 404.

as one who had promised or threatened more than he was able to perform.”⁵² The people were treating the crucifixion of the Son of God as a sporting event, an entertaining spectacle. The jeering of the crowd was all part of the demonic “fun” and “excitement.”

The mocking regarding the destruction and rebuilding of the temple is connected to a demand for Jesus to save Himself. To paraphrase, “You are a great miracle worker. You even claimed that You could destroy this temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, save yourself by coming down from the cross and go do it. Go prove yourself, then we will believe in You.” The mocking idea behind this is, “if you promised to do something so big and dramatic, then why can’t you do something so small as come down from the cross?” “[T]he one who talked so big is now able to do nothing for Himself.”⁵³ With no proper understanding of the necessity for the Messiah to suffer and die for the sins of His people, the cross is the great stumbling block to the Jews. They saw this helplessness and utter abandonment by God as proof that the Nazarene was an imposter. They saw it as totally inconsistent with the power of the Messiah.

In Matthew’s account the people say, “If You are the Son of God come down from the cross.” This indicates that the proceedings of the Sanhedrin and the trial before Pilate (Jn. 18:7) had made public the Savior’s claim that He was God’s Son. Thus, the mockery of the crowd reveals that they saw the Nazarene as a false Messiah, an imposter, a charlatan. If this dying Galilean is truly the Son of God and can do amazing miracles, then certainly He can save Himself. Interestingly, the phrase, “if you are the Son of God” echoes verbatim the repeated clause in the temptation narrative (cf. 4:3, 6) as well as the question of the high priest (26:63)...”⁵⁴ Behind the mockery lies a temptation from Satan. Ironically, it is precisely because Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God that He cannot come down from the cross and save Himself. To do so would violate His Father’s will, destroy His mission and doom His beloved people.

Little did the blasphemers realize that the pain, humiliation and curse of the cross had to be endured to the full if the Mediator was to conquer sin, death and hell and sit on His throne of glory. The wicked crowd engaged in a premature victory. In only three days as the Savior had promised, His crucified, dead and buried body would arise from its destruction victorious. The demonic mob acted as the tempter in the garden who demanded that Eve go for God’s blessing in her own way and own time. We must submit to God’s Word and learn to “allow God to conceal His power, whenever it pleases Him to do so, that he may afterwards display it at his pleasure at the proper time and place.”⁵⁵

The members of the Sanhedrin who attended the crucifixion pick up on the taunts of the crowd and begin to mock the Savior with challenges that presuppose that His mission was a complete failure. The same men who made a mockery of justice at the ecclesiastical trial and inflamed the crowd against Jesus at the Pavement were now gloating in triumph. As we examine the mockery of the leaders, we must keep in mind that their statements are not made directly to Christ. The Jewish authorities are speaking to each other. Mark says, “Likewise the chief priests also mocking among themselves with the scribes said...” (15:31); they, however, were *indirectly* addressing Jesus and the crowd. On the one hand, they wanted these words to pierce their enemy

⁵² J. A. Alexander, *Mark*, 423. “The contemptuous challenge for Jesus to rescue himself and come down from the cross is intelligible in the light of an early Jewish dictum preserved in Midrash Tannaim III.23: ‘Before a man puts his trust in flesh and blood, (i.e. another man) and asks him to save him, let him (i.e. the other) save himself from death’” (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 569).

⁵³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1111.

⁵⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 838-839.

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3:305.

in the heart. They wanted to hurt the Savior as much as possible (cf. Lk. 23:35). “They cannot spit on him and strike him but they can certainly wound him with their cowardly and insulting tongues.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, they were speaking with the full intention of being heard by and influencing the motley crowd. At one time the Redeemer had been popular with the people. The leaders had envied the Lord regarding this and previously they had been afraid that they were losing their grip on the people. But now with the events of Friday morning, the populace had thoroughly taken sides with the Jewish authorities. Therefore, in their mockery of the Messiah they were setting forth their reasons why the Nazarene could not be the Messiah, the King of Israel. They were cementing their ungodly, unbelieving relationship with the people.

There are two separate taunts or mocking challenges made before the people and Christ by the religious establishment. The first challenges our Lord’s claim to be the Messianic King. The second was His claim to be the Son of God. Each verbal taunt will be considered in turn.

The chief priests, with the scribes and elders sneered at Jesus (Lk. 23:35) as they said to each other, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him.” Luke’s account tells us that our Lord’s Messianic Kingship was being challenged. He adds, “Let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God” (Lk. 23:35). There are a number of things to note regarding the Jewish leadership’s mockery.

First, what do the leaders mean by the word save (Greek, *sozo*)? The leaders are referring here to the Lord’s many works of healing throughout Israel. While the statement “He saved others” seems to be an admission that Jesus had the ability to heal the sick, blind, deaf, and lame (cf. Mt. 9:21-22), the following statement is meant to call those healings into question: “Himself He cannot save.” They are speaking sarcastically. They are using His crucifixion and helplessness as a reason to call into question His whole ministry. The general gist of what they are implying is: “If this man cannot even preserve his own life, then can we really trust in all the so-called miracles?” Earlier, the religious establishment had ascribed His power to perform miracles to the devil (Mt. 9:34; cf. 10:25, 12:24). Perhaps, the members of the Sanhedrin are making the argument that since His works were accomplished through sorcery, God cannot come to His aid. He cannot be saved from death. The leaders want the people to interpret the ministry of Christ in light of what they regard as the massive failure of the crucifixion. The miracles, which had made the Mediator very popular and sought after, must be viewed (according to the Sanhedrin) as either spurious, demonic or both.

Second, because of their unbelief, they presuppose that Jesus cannot save Himself. They assume that if the Nazarene had the power to save Himself, then He most certainly would. If they believed in the Mediator, yet did not understand the importance and meaning to the crucifixion, they would have reasoned: “He saved others. He can save Himself if He wants to. Therefore, there must be a good reason as to why He refuses to save Himself that I do not yet understand. Therefore, I need to go back to the sacred Scriptures and specifically look for passages that speak of a suffering Messiah. Obviously, the problem is not with Jesus, or with Scripture, but my own ignorance.”

The total blindness of the Jewish nation (including the Lord’s own disciples) on the necessity and purpose of the Messiah’s suffering is truly astounding. The sufferings and bloody death of the Mediator is clearly typified in the Old Testament sacrifices. The vicarious sufferings of the Redeemer and His glorious victory are repeatedly set forth in the Psalms (e.g., 2, 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 69, 72, 110). They reveal His divinity (Ps. 45:6; 110), eternal sonship (Ps. 2:7),

⁵⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1113.

incarnation (Ps. 8:5), mediatorial offices (prophet, Ps. 40:9-10; 22:22; priest, Ps. 110:4; king, Ps. 45:6) His betrayal (Ps. 41:9), agony in the garden (Ps. 22:2), trial (Ps. 22:6; 118:22), rejection (Ps. 22:6; 118:22), crucifixion (Ps. 22; 69), burial and resurrection (Ps. 16:9-11) and ascension (Ps. 47:5). The sufferings of Emmanuel are also plainly foretold in the prophets (e.g., Isa. 53; Dan. 9). Yet, the Jewish religious scholars, teachers and leaders did not have any discernable knowledge regarding this aspect of the Messiah's ministry. "The idea of Messiah 'saving others' by His own death seems never to have entered into their minds. The words before us are striking proof of the blindness of the rulers."⁵⁷

Third, this mocking by the Sanhedrin contains a very clever, satanically inspired temptation of Christ. In one sense, Jesus obviously could deliver Himself from the cross. The Mediator is God and could tear the earth in two if He so desired. Further, there was nothing external to God that forced Him to send His Son to the cross. The choice of the Mediator to go to the cross was not determined by any external necessity. God could have justly left the whole human race to perish in their sins if He so desired.

But because of "the good pleasure of His will" (Eph. 1:5) and the decision by the triune God to save a people from their sins (the covenant of redemption) there is a sense in which the Savior could not save Himself. Our Lord could not save Himself because: a) His death on the cross was the only possible way that God could save sinners (cf. Heb. 9:22; 10:4, 11-14; Jn. 10:9; 14:6; Ac. 4:12). b) The Son had promised perfectly to carry out the will of His Father and it is impossible for the Son of God to disobey that will. "O My Father, *if it is possible*, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Mt. 26:39; cf. Jn. 5:30, 36; Heb. 10:7). c) God decreed the death of Christ and prophesied that it would take place. Therefore, it *must* take place. "And He began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk. 8:31; cf. Lk. 9:22; 24:7). "But first, He *must* suffer many things and be rejected by this generation" (Lk. 17:25; cf. Jn. 3:14; 12:34; Ac. 17:3).

Consequently, the challenge of the Jewish leaders for the Nazarene to prove Himself by coming down from the cross was a temptation to disobey the will of God, overturn the prophetic Scriptures and leave the whole body of the elect to perish in their sins. Calvin writes,

Wicked men demand from Christ such a proof of his power that, by proving himself to be *the Son of God*, he may cease to be *the Son of God*. He had clothed himself with human flesh, and had descended into the world, on this condition, that, by the sacrifice of his death, he might reconcile men to God the Father. So then, in order to prove himself to be *the Son of God*, it was necessary that he should hang on the cross. And now those wicked men affirm that the Redeemer will not be recognized as the Son of God, unless he comes down from the cross, and thus disobey the command of his Father, and, leaving incomplete the expiation of sins, divest himself of the office which God had assigned to him. But let us learn from it to confirm our faith by considering that the Son of God determined to remain nailed to the cross for the sake of our salvation, until he had endured most cruel torments of the flesh, and dreadful anguish of soul, and even death itself.⁵⁸

Fourth, the Sanhedrin's demand for faith or belief only based on sight or empirical proof is a denial of one of the central features of biblical faith. The author of Hebrews writes, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (11:1). Faith believes

⁵⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:468.

⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:305.

the testimony of God's Word and does not demand or order God to prove Himself. Faith is convinced of the truth or reality of what God says or promises without empirical evidence. The religious leaders had so neglected God's Word and externalized their religion with human traditions that they trusted their own logic and senses more than Scripture. We must remember our Lord's words to Thomas which are a lesson both to him and Christians of every age. "Thomas because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn. 20:29). "What a precious word is this for our hearts. We have never seen Him in the flesh. Here then is a promise for us."⁵⁹ The Lord has given us His infallible Word which teaches us about the words, deeds, sacrifice and resurrection of the Savior that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have life in His name (Jn. 20:31). "Whoever at any time, past, present or future, believes without seeing is pronounced 'blessed' in the soteriological sense."⁶⁰ It is interesting that our Lord never appeared to unbelievers or non-disciples after His resurrection (with one exception, His confrontation with and *special calling* of Saul on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:3-6). The Mediator appeared to Thomas to help a disciple with weak faith in one particular area. He did not appear to rank unbelieving skeptics to satisfy their curiosity.

In our day when secular humanism, skepticism and atheistic naturalism reign supreme in the courts, capitals, state schools and universities we see the same type of mockery of Christ as that of the Jewish establishment. People say that they cannot believe in Jesus or the claims of the Bible without first proving such things by a scientific methodology. The Redeemer must first be proved by the senses, by empirical research or demonstrated by human reason. These people will assert: "Why should I believe what the Bible says about the Son of God without independent proof from scientific research?" Consequently, many people today mock the claims of the Messiah and use such arguments as a foundation of unbelief. Thus, universities today are centers of infidelity where most young people neglect the true Christian religion and indulge themselves in all sorts of debauchery. How is the Bible-believing Christian supposed to respond to such common objections to the faith? There are a number of things that believers can say to refute such unbelieving skepticism.

a) It is disingenuous for people to demand proof of Christ's claims as if Jesus were a rock that could be dug up and studied by scientists. The evidence for the truth claims of Scripture must obviously be different than the evidence for the mineral content of topsoil. The Bible's teaching regarding the Redeemer is theological, historical, spiritual and related to prophecy. Therefore, it is foolish and absurd to treat this topic in a simple, materialistic manner. Although the sacred Scriptures are unique because they come from God (who is truth itself) and, therefore, must be received by faith as the Word of God; nevertheless, there is abundant testimony that the Bible is exactly what it claims to be. There is the perfect fulfillment of prophecy; the logical consistency of every part of Scripture; the teaching on the only way of salvation (which is the only way revealed to man that is consistent with God's nature and man's predicament); the full purpose of Scripture which gives all glory to God; the findings of archeology (which when interpreted correctly are always consistent with biblical history); "[a]nd the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style...the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1:5). The only reason that people do not believe is because they are suppressing the truth about God. The

⁵⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of John*, 3:301.

⁶⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1392.

bottom line is that they do not want to repent. Consequently, *they are imposing their unbelieving presuppositions on the evidence.*

Like the Jewish establishment, their demands for proof are not really sincere. They are not reasonable requests, but rather feeble excuses for unbelief. Had not the Lord already repeatedly proved His claims before the nation by His amazing signs and miracles? But, the religious leaders rejected such indisputable proof because they filtered what they saw through their unbelieving, sinful presuppositions. Therefore, the miracles which were seen by all became for them, not evidence of His messianic kingship, but rather evidence that He was a sorcerer who did works by Satan's power. Unbelieving man has an axe to grind against God and His beloved Son. While the secular humanist proclaims himself the champion of reason and objectivity, he is in fact a slave of his own anti-Christian, anti-God presuppositions. He chooses his "data" and his "facts" according to his naturalistic, atheistic presuppositions. The infinite, personal God of the Bible is *a priori* (i.e. before the facts) ruled out of bounds.

b) People are hypocritical when they demand physical-empirical proof for the claims of Christ because people and even secular scientists believe in many things they have never and can never see. How many scientists have observed macro-evolution take place? How many astronomers have seen a black hole or a quasar? Yet, such things are accepted virtually as facts in the scientific community. How many historians have seen the battle of Waterloo or the conquests of Alexander the Great? Yet, does any competent historian doubt the reality of those historical events? If secular scientists, believe in absurd, irrational and non-provable theories regarding evolution and physics because they place their faith in the axioms of certain finite, fallible men (e.g., Charles Darwin), then why do they ridicule Christians for accepting as true the infallible Word of God?

In the Bible we are never asked to believe in anything contrary to evidence or reason. Christianity does not teach a blind, unreasoning faith, as if belief were a blind leap in the dark. On the contrary, the true biblical religion is the only worldview that can account for logic, true science, ethics, love, justice and meaning. Modern secular naturalists are the ones who begin with axioms and postulates that are irrational faith commitments. They believe that matter plus time plus chance can organize itself into planets and amazingly complex organisms. Such a view is not only ludicrous, but renders all human intellectual thought as no more than electro-chemical responses. Men are no more than complex machines and all love, meaning and thought are merely epiphenomena. In such a system man has no more significance than pond scum. Why does unbelieving man commit himself to such absurd theories that are contrary to all evidence? He does so because he rejects the only logical alternative. He does not want to repent of his sins and bow the knee to Jesus, the Son of God and messianic King.

Given the natural man's fallen state and his innate hostility to the God of the Bible and spiritual truth, there is a sense in which belief must precede understanding. When the Holy Spirit opens a man's eyes spiritually and illuminates his mind to the truth, then the abundant proofs become clear to him. Consequently, modern unbelieving skeptics (just like the unbelieving Jews who mocked Jesus on the cross) demand proof only because they have already rejected proof. Once we understand this, we will not become frustrated or angry when people we witness to repeatedly reject Christ for unreasonable, absurd and foolish reasons. Therefore, we must humbly and accurately speak the truth in love and pray that God would open their blind eyes and deaf ears.

Further, we must not be afraid to point out the non-Christian's unbelieving hostile axioms, starting points or presuppositions. "Let us beware of the danger of following our own

imaginings. A man may make one demand after another, till at last, nothing will satisfy him; and the next step is that he will not be content with what God shows him, he shall be left in darkness and perplexity.”⁶¹ “The most vile and wicked reprobates will offer to believe upon such conditions as they themselves shall prescribe to God, as here these men do, but they who will not believe upon the grounds of faith offered to them, shall not have any such grounds as they would be at.”⁶²

The third mocking statement is found only in Matthew’s account which reads, “He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (27:43). There are a number of things to note regarding this taunt.

First, the Sanhedrin’s taunt is unwittingly almost identical to Psalm 22:8 (LXX 21:9). The Jewish leaders were so caught up in their contempt of Jesus they allowed themselves to become the fulfillment of the enemies of the Messiah prophesied by David: “He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him since He delights in Him.”

Second, this mockery is the most blasphemous of all and the sharpest, in that Christ’s Sonship and relationship with His Father is called into question. “Nothing, no nothing, was dearer to him than the relationship of intimacy between himself and the Father (Matt. 11:27; John 10:30; 16:32; 17:5, 24). And now these adversaries, by [unknowingly] alluding to the words of Ps. 22:8b, are implying that his heavenly Father has lost all interest in him, and that his trust in God is now futile.”⁶³ Not understanding the necessity of the Messiah’s suffering and death, the Jewish leadership thinks they have proof that the Nazarene cannot be God’s Son. They assume that if Jesus really is the Son of God, then Jehovah would immediately deliver Him from His suffering. To the Sanhedrinists the cross of Christ proved that God did not delight in or favor Jesus at all. “The point of truth which the devil and reprobate men can least endure is the doctrine of the Godhead of Christ, which is the rock whereupon the elect are builded. Therefore, say they, *he said I am the Son of God*. This point among all did gall them most.”⁶⁴

Third, like the previous mockery, this taunt was a clever temptation of the devil. Satan is an expert at taking a biblical principle and twisting it to an unbiblical conclusion. It is a general principle of Scripture that people who trust in God can have confidence that Jehovah will deliver them. Note the words of the Psalmist: “Great deliverance He gives to His king, and shows mercy to His anointed.” (18:50). “The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.... The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles.... Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all” (37:7, 17, 19). Given these kinds of passages there is a sense in which this mockery appears to be very logical. The devil uses these promises and twists them and gives them a meaning never intended by God; then aims them as fiery darts right at the suffering Savior’s soul. Thus, the Sanhedrinists in conjunction with all the demons of hell are telling Jesus, “God does not love You. Your Father has failed You. Jehovah has forever forsaken You.”

This mockery of the devil seems plausible but contains three deadly perversions of Scripture. a) The mockery *assumes* that the reason for our Lord being forsaken is that He is a fraud who has a counterfeit faith. He is not God’s Son but a wicked sorcerer, a blasphemer.

⁶¹ Richard Cecil, as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:470.

⁶² David Dickson, *Matthew*, 395.

⁶³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 967-968. “Surely these priests and scribes had forgotten their psalter, or they would not have used the same words, so exactly to answer the type and prophecy: but the *scriptures must be fulfilled*” (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:427).

⁶⁴ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 394.

While it is true that Christ was forsaken by God on the cross, the Bible makes it very clear that the reason had absolutely nothing to do with His faith, person or character. The Mediator was forsaken because the sin of the elect was imputed to Him on the cross. Paul says, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sinful flesh: He condemned sin in the flesh." (Rom. 8:3). "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). If the Sanhedrinists knew and believed the Scriptures they would have understood that the suffering and death of Jesus was unique. The Father sent the Son into the world for the purpose of forsaking Him on the cross. God must turn away from His blessed, beloved Son because the Savior is the bearer of guilt, the sufferer who takes upon Himself the penalty for sin and the curse of hell itself.

What makes this mockery of Jesus so diabolical and painful was the fact that it was given as the Father was indeed abandoning His Son. Also, it contained an element of truth in that Christ would not immediately be delivered from this suffering unto death by God.

b) Another satanic aspect of this mockery regards the timing of the deliverance. The Sanhedrinists emphasize the present, demanding an immediate deliverance. They said, "Let Him deliver Him *now*." The implicit message behind this statement is that if deliverance is not instantaneous, then it will never, ever come. Satan asserts that if the Father does not save Christ now, then He will abandon Him forever. The religious leaders' taunt reveals that they held a very man-centered concept of God. They viewed God as existing to meet man's needs, when and where man wants his needs to be met. They apparently have no concept that God fulfills His promises according to His own sovereign timing and also does so in His own way. They had neglected the biblical teaching that Jehovah often places His own people in situations of suffering and tribulation for their own sanctification and benefit. We can rest assured that God watches over us, anticipates our spiritual and physical needs and only at certain times *appears* not to love us by withholding aid. God will indeed deliver us in His own good time and His own unique manner. We must submit to this truth and be assured of the love of God. People who demand instantaneous deliverance according to their own standard of justice, love and fairness do not know their Bible or understand God's providence.

Christ's perfect endurance of this diabolical temptation in the midst of intense physical and mental suffering sets the standard by which all believers must endure similar temptations. When believers endure suffering and hardship, the tempter will always hurl the accusation that God has abandoned us; that our faith was all for nothing; or, that our faith was always counterfeit; and, therefore, our prayers will never be heard. In these trying circumstances the devil says, "You see, all of your so-called faith and good works are for nothing. God has forsaken you. Therefore, stop wasting time following Christ and serving Him. Stop going to church. Go out and have fun. Live your life the way you want to, without regard for Jesus or the Bible." Our Lord teaches us by example not to bow down to such devious arguments from Satan and the world. As Calvin says,

Satan, therefore, attempts to drive us to despair by this logic, that it is in vain for us to feel assured of the love of God, when we do not clearly perceive his aid. And as he suggests to our minds this kind of imposition, so he employs his agents, who contend that God has sold and abandoned our salvation, because he delays to give his assistance. We ought, therefore, to reject as false this argument, that God does not love those whom he appears for a time to forsake; and, indeed, nothing is more unreasonable than to limit his love to any point of time. God has,

indeed, promised that he will be our Deliverer; but if he sometimes winks at our calamities, we ought patiently to endure the delay. It is, therefore, contrary to the nature of faith, that the word *now* should be insisted on by those whom God is training by the cross and by adversity to obedience, and whom he entreats to pray and to call on his name; for these are rather the testimonies of his fatherly love, as the apostle tells us, (Heb. xii. 6.)⁶⁵

Jesus endured this temptation and maintained His hope in God even though He knew He had to suffer and die because He knew that God would deliver Him from death at the resurrection. The objection of the mockers was exposed as unbelieving lies when the Savior walked out of the tomb with His glorified body. In fact the author of Hebrews tells us that God answered the prayers of the suffering Redeemer, that His hope in God was not in vain. Christ...“who in the days of His flesh, when He offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear.... And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (5:7, 9).

Let us learn from our Lord’s experience that God delivers in His own way, in His own time. If Jesus was tortured to death and yet was delivered by God, then we may rest and be content that God can and will deliver us from anything that the devil or this world throws our way. Spurgeon’s words about the deliverance of the only Begotten are applicable and very helpful. He writes,

Did the Father tear up the cross from the earth? Did he proceed to draw out the nails from the sacred hands and feet of his dear Son? Did he set him down upon that “green hill far away, beyond the city wall,” and place in his hand a sword of fire with which to smite his adversaries? Did he bid the earth open and swallow up all his foes? No; nothing of the kind. Jehovah did not interpose to spare his Son a single pang; but he let him die. He let him be taken as a dead man down from the cross and laid in a tomb. Jesus went through with his suffering to the bitter end. O brothers and sisters, this may be God’s way of delivering us. We have trusted in God that he would deliver us; and his rendering of his promise is, that he will enable us to go through with it; we shall suffer to the last, and triumph in so doing.⁶⁶

In times of severe trials we must believe that God’s method of deliverance is always what is best for us. In such circumstances we must learn to trust God with all our heart and not lean on our own understanding (Prov. 3:5). We must reject the taunts of Satan and his minions and take great comfort in the obedience of Christ during the mockery of the cross and the glorious way that God chose to deliver Him. God knows our pain during our severe trials. He promises to deliver us; but many times, for our own edification, He does so only after many difficulties and tears. “It is not God’s will that every mountain be leveled, but that we should be the stronger for climbing the Hill Difficulty. God will deliver; he must deliver, but he will do it our cases, as in the case of our Lord, in the best possible manner.”⁶⁷

The Jewish leadership mocked Jesus to vilify Him as an imposter because they believed He was more a sorcerer than a Savior. They wanted the people of Israel to spurn the Nazarene as a deceiver. The Sanhedrinists also said everything they possibly could to cause pain and suffering to the soul of the Redeemer. They were relishing their perceived victory. They were

⁶⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3:307.

⁶⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Let Him Deliver Him Now,” 34:346.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 34:347.

laughing with the devil and all the satanic hosts. Simultaneously, they were tempting Jesus. They were trying to shake His faith in God and bring Him to a state of despair and terror. But the Messiah obeyed and endured. He suffered unto death with the knowledge that God would deliver Him. "Salvation is from the LORD" (Jon. 2:9). Knowing that Jesus endured this mockery so that we could be spared the eternal mockery and despair of hell we must place our faith in Him and learn to endure suffering and temptation as He did.

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