

Our Savior

JESUS ENDURED THE CROSS SO THAT WE MIGHT HAVE
ACCESS TO GOD.

Three of the most dreaded words in the English language are: Some assembly required. The instructions can be maddening, whether for a bicycle, BBQ grill, or bookshelf. The worst outcome is to have parts left over.

I've been amazed when the plans and instructions actually work. Some years ago, my wife decided we needed a new white cabinet for the bathroom. She found one online. The description included those three dreaded words: Some assembly required.

A box arrived a few days later. My wife separated all the hardware and put parts in a muffin tin. Guess what? The pieces of wood were numbered. She read the instructions. I started assembling. In less than an hour, our cabinet was standing tall. Amazingly, the cabinet ended up being sturdier than I ever imagined. It fits perfectly in the spot and looks great.

The people who designed the cabinet knew how to make all the pieces fit. They could see the end from the beginning. Apart from their vision and instructions, the cabinet would have never come together.

Today, we look at a story that is sad and tragic on the surface. Behind it, though, we remember that the Creator has seen the end from the beginning. He knew all along what He was doing. He had a plan. Trusting Him? Well, that's where faith comes in.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Matthew 27:1-66

John's Gospel alone records Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Afterward, the religious leaders increased their determination to kill Him. "Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews but departed from there to the countryside near the wilderness, to a town

called Ephraim, and he stayed there with the disciples” (11:54). Jesus likely remained there for about a month while He awaited the events of His final week.

On Sunday, Jesus made His triumphal entry (Matt. 21:1-11). Once in Jerusalem, Jesus looked over the temple courtyards; as evening approached He returned to Bethany with His disciples (Mark 11:11). On Monday, Jesus overturned the money changers’ tables in the Court of the Gentiles at the temple (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18). Afterwards, Jesus healed people in the temple precincts. He and the disciples returned to Bethany (Matt. 21:14,17). On Tuesday, Jesus spent the day teaching in the temple precincts and, later, on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 21:23-25:46). The Gospels do not record any activities on Wednesday. This was likely a day of rest for Jesus and the disciples.

On Thursday, after Peter and John prepared the upper room (Luke 22:7-13), Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples. Afterward, He and the Eleven left the upper room and went to Gethsemane—where He prayed. Here, Judas betrayed Him with a kiss, and the authorities arrested Jesus, likely about two in the morning. The disciples deserted Him and fled (Matt. 26:17-56).

Friday was the day of Jesus’s trial before the Jews and then the Romans—and of His crucifixion and burial (26:57–27:61). Hours before sunup, Jesus appeared before Annas, the former high priest. From there, He was led to Caiaphas’s house, where the Sanhedrin had gathered (Matt. 26:57-67; John 18:12-14,19-24). Under oath, Jesus was required to answer the questions of Caiaphas, the high priest. He confirmed He was the Son of God. Caiaphas declared Jesus was a blasphemer; the Sanhedrin said He was worthy of death. Peter listened from the courtyard, and when asked three times, he denied knowing Jesus. The Sanhedrin convened again after daybreak. Enough members were present to make their ruling official. Jesus was deserving of death. Yet, this Jewish body had no authority to impose the death penalty (John 18:31), so they decided to bring Jesus to Pilate and demand that he execute Jesus (Matt. 27:1-2).



Mocked (Matt. 27:27-31)

At daybreak, the chief priests and elders delivered Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate (vv. 1-2). Two questions reveal

Pilate's quondary. First, he asked Jesus if He was the king of the Jews (v. 11). This claim had enraged the Jews. Second, after the crowd demanded Pilate to crucify Jesus, he asked, "Why? What has he done wrong?" (Matt. 27:23; Luke 23:22). This question showed Pilate didn't care about Jesus's claims of divinity. He didn't care if the Jewish leaders thought Jesus was guilty of blasphemy. He was a Roman governor and unconcerned about someone's religious claims. He cared only about the Empire—and his position in it. Ultimately, finding no justifiable cause to execute Jesus and faced with a brewing riot, Pilate literally washed his hands of the matter. He declared himself innocent of Jesus's blood and handed Him over to be crucified (Matt. 27:24-26).

VERSE 27

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's residence and gathered the whole company around him.

The Romans commonly beat or flogged a criminal before crucifying him; the process hastened the person's death. Criminals were typically stripped for the flogging and then beaten within an inch of their lives. After beating Jesus, the soldiers put His clothes back on Him (vv. 26-31).

Jesus's mock trial and scourging occurred in the outer courtyard in full view of the mob. The soldiers then led Him **into the governor's residence**—meaning into an inner courtyard. The massive residence was known as the Antonia Tower, the Antonia Fortress, or the Praetorium. It towered over the northern corner of the Jerusalem temple. From here, Roman soldiers could scan the temple platform and keep an eye on the Jews. A Roman legion consisted of 6,000 soldiers. **The whole company**, a cohort (NASB) or battalion (ESV), was about a tenth of that, thus 600 men. These soldiers served as Pilate's bodyguards and likely accompanied him from his permanent dwelling in Caesarea Maritima. *The whole company* would have been those assigned to the Praetorium for that day.

VERSE 28

They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet robe.

Criminals condemned to crucifixion were commonly stripped before being placed on the cross, a way to add humiliation to their agony. Jesus, though, did not have to wait for this element of humiliation; the soldiers **stripped Him** again during this mocking phase. Jesus had foretold these events (20:19).

The **scarlet robe** would have been a cloak that one of the soldiers typically wore or maybe one that Pilate no longer wore. Because the dye was expensive to produce, only royalty, rulers, and members of the military wore a *scarlet robe*. Mark and John wrote the robe was purple (Mark 15:17; John 19:2). The color was likely a dark red—like crimson. It was a precursor to the fact that Jesus would have placed on Him the sins of the world, which are red like crimson (Isa. 1:18).

This would be the first of three elements that signified a king's status in Jesus's day. None given to Jesus that day though were of royal quality. Each was a substitute for the real thing.

VERSES 29-30

They twisted together a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and placed a staff in his right hand. And they knelt down before him and mocked him: “Hail, king of the Jews!” Then they spat on him, took the staff, and kept hitting him on the head.

Here, Jesus received the second and third accessories that indicated royal status—a **crown** and **staff**. Instead of the golden crown made to resemble laurel leaves and berries, Jesus's was made of a thorny bush or vine. Instead of a golden scepter, Jesus received a reed to hold in His right hand. Beaten and bloodied, Jesus wore the costume of a king in caricature.

The soldiers **mocked** Jesus. They **knelt down before Him** in derision and proclaimed, **“Hail, king of the Jews!”** Little did they know, they were mocking and bowing down to the King of kings and Lord of lords to whom one day every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is indeed Lord (Phil. 2:10-11; Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

As the soldiers **spat** on Jesus, He experienced what Isaiah had written of centuries earlier: “I gave my back to those who beat me . . . I did not hide my face from scorn and spitting” (Isa. 50:6). The soldiers' hitting Jesus with His mock scepter indicates it was not a flimsy reed that grew along the riverbanks. His **staff** was likely a wooden stick or cane.

VERSE 31

After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him.

Criminals who received a death sentence were typically paraded naked through the city to their crucifixion. Jesus, though, was clothed before

the Romans led Him into the streets. Some believe the Romans were concerned about the crowds' reaction. They knew the city was filled with people celebrating Passover and that the Jews had an aversion to public nudity. Thus, the Romans, not wanting to incite an uprising (v. 24), broke with tradition. Others believe the soldiers put Jesus's clothes back on Him because they knew He would not be scourged again. Once arriving at the place of crucifixion, criminals typically would receive a beating or scourging similar to the one Jesus endured. Knowing Jesus would have never survived a second beating, the Romans put His clothes back on Him before leading Him through the Jerusalem streets.

Having endured the scourge with a leather whip, the beating with the scepter and soldiers' hands, and the loss of blood due to the crown of thorns, Jesus had to be **led away**. Weakened, He was unable to walk through the streets and carry His cross's horizontal beam (see v. 32).



Explore Further

Read the article "Cross, Crucifixion" on pages 368–371 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does this article shed light on what Jesus was about to face? Having read this article, why

- are we prone to sanitize the cross and what Jesus endured?

Forsaken (Matt. 27:45-49)

At noon, darkness came across the land and lasted for three hours. Jesus cried out in Aramaic asking God why He had abandoned Him. Some of the onlookers mistakenly thought Jesus was calling out for the help of Elijah and offered Jesus a drink.

VERSE 45

From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over the whole land.

Jesus was crucified about nine in the morning (Mark 15:25). Jesus was in full daylight and thus full view for His first three hours on the cross. Yet, all of that changed at noon. **Darkness**, which signified the absence of light and the presence of evil and judgment, covered the land (Joel 2:1-2).

This darkness lasted three hours—far longer than an eclipse or other natural phenomenon.

VERSE 46

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “*Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?*” that is, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

The Jews started counting the hours of the day at sunrise, thus, about six in the morning. The ninth hour was about **three in the afternoon**. Jews prayed at the temple three times a day: in the morning, three in the afternoon, and at sunset. Priests offered sacrifices at the first and second of these times. Thus, *three in the afternoon* was the time of the final sacrifice of the day. At this point, Jesus had been on the cross for about six hours.

Why did Jesus cry out from the cross, **“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”** As He bore the sins of the world, He sensed that the closeness and divine fellowship He had enjoyed with the Father was temporarily broken. Psalm 22:1 can help clarify what Jesus was experiencing. Speaking to the Father, the psalmist cried out, “Why are you so far from my deliverance and from my words of groaning?” Certainly, Jesus felt that way as He hung on that Roman cross in the heat of the day.

VERSE 47

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling for Elijah.”

Who were among **those standing there?** The governor’s soldiers had beaten and humiliated Jesus and then brought Him to the place of crucifixion and guarded Him there (vv. 27-37). Unidentified pedestrians walked by; the chief priests, scribes, and elders were there, mocking. Two criminals crucified alongside Jesus were present, taunting Him (vv. 38-44). Many unnamed women from Galilee were there, along with Zebedee’s wife—whose sons were James and John. John, likely the beloved disciple, was there (John 19:26-27). Mary, the wife of Clopas, was present (v. 25). Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, was present; this may be the Mary whom Mark identified as the mother of James the younger and of Joses (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40). Jesus’s mother and her unnamed sister were there (John 19:25). A woman named Salome, who may have been known to Mark’s initial readers, was there (Mark 15:40). All four Gospels report that Mary Magdalene was at the cross.

The Old Testament taught that before the coming of the great day of the Lord, God would send the prophet **Elijah** (Mal. 4:5). Some thought Jesus was calling for him. Maybe people did not understand clearly what Jesus said because His mouth and throat were parched, and His lips were swollen and bloodied from being beaten and slapped.

VERSES 48-49

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered him a drink. But the rest said, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

This action was intended to torment and humiliate Jesus further. When Jesus arrived at Golgotha, the soldiers “gave him wine mixed with gall to drink. But when he tasted it, he refused to drink it” (v. 34). Gall was a bitter herb that could be poisonous if enough were ingested. The bitterness would have only added to Jesus’s agony. Now, hours later, Jesus was offered **sour wine**, likely the same as before. Drinking it would be torment, not refreshing. The mocking continued. Matthew did not identify who **the rest** were. He was likely referring to unidentified bystanders. Matthew earlier said that people passing by the site and those standing nearby hurled insults at Jesus: “‘You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!’ . . . In the same way the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him and said, ‘He saved others, but he cannot save himself! . . . He trusts in God; let God rescue him now’” (vv. 40-43). None of the revilers believed Jesus could or would save Himself—nor that God would intervene. While one person present offered Jesus a drink, the rest were waiting to see what would happen.

Neither the Romans nor the Jewish officials would rescue Jesus. His followers were powerless and unable to save Him. The Father had forsaken Him. The Son of God hung on the cross surrounded by people, yet abandoned and alone, seemingly without hope.

Explore Further

Read through Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Consider how these texts point to Jesus’s crucifixion. What elements do you see in these passages that foreshadow what Jesus experienced at His so-called trial and crucifixion that followed?

Son of God (Matt. 27:50-54)

Did Jesus die, as did most crucified criminals, of asphyxiation—unable to pull Himself up to catch His next breath? Did He die because of a loss of blood after all He had endured? Did the pleural cavity around His lungs or the pericardial sack around His heart hemorrhage and cause His death? These final possibilities would have explained the water and blood coming out when the soldier speared His side (John 19:34). Regardless, crucifixion was a horrific way to die—maybe the most excruciating means of execution ever devised. Knowing the agony caused Jesus to pray, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). Yet face the cross He must.

VERSE 50

But Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit.

Jesus had earlier **cried out** to the Father, “*Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?*” (v. 46). Here, He cried out again. Usually, at this point in a crucifixion, the dying person had no voice or strength; many were unconscious in their final moments. John stated that at the end, Jesus “said, ‘It is finished.’ Then bowing his head, he gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). That Jesus still had **a loud voice** and could cry out showed He was still in control.

One of the themes woven throughout Matthew’s Gospel focuses on the divine majesty of Christ. That Jesus **gave up His spirit** underscores His authority over His own life. Isaiah, foreshadowing Jesus as the Suffering Servant, said, “he willingly submitted to death . . . yet he bore the sin of many” (Isa. 53:12). This was yet another reminder that Jesus was giving His life willingly—no man was taking it from Him (John 10:18). He, not His accusers or executioners, determined when He would draw His last breath. A favorite Christmas carol, “Silent Night,” calls Him, “Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.” This verse in Matthew’s Gospel is a reminder that Jesus was also Lord at His death.

VERSE 51

Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, and the rocks were split.

Some translations render **Suddenly** as “And behold” (ESV, KJV). This highlighted the unexpected nature of these events. That this occurred *suddenly*, just as Jesus “gave up his spirit,” underscores that these

events were happening according to God’s divine orchestration and leading. None of what occurred in this verse (or the next two) was a natural phenomenon.

The curtain of the sanctuary separated the holy area from the most holy area in the Jerusalem temple. It was sixty feet tall, and the fabric was about as thick as a human hand is wide. The high priest was allowed inside the most holy area only once a year—on the Day of Atonement—when he obtained forgiveness for God’s people. Being torn **from top to bottom** meant the curtain was **torn in two** and thus beyond repair. Only God could have accomplished such a feat. The ripping signified that the old sacrificial system was obsolete; the promised new covenant was now in place (Jer. 31:31-34). No longer does a representative or intermediary have to enter God’s presence on our behalf; God’s children have full and direct access to Him.

Darkness covered the land. The earth **quaked**. The **rocks were split** apart. Seemingly, creation was convulsing at the evil that God’s Son was enduring. The “punishment for our peace was upon him . . . and the LORD has punished him [or, ‘laid on him’ (KJV)] for the iniquity of us all.” The only One who never sinned became sin for us (Isa. 53:5,6; 2 Cor. 5:21). Again, each aspect was according to God’s divine plan. He knew the ending from the beginning.

VERSE 52-53

The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And they came out of the tombs after his resurrection, entered the holy city, and appeared to many.

The supernatural occurrences continued. **The tombs were also opened**. Matthew did not identify who the **saints** were. Matthew reported their **bodies . . . were raised**. The scene recalls Ezekiel’s valley of the dry bones vision. Ezekiel had seen flesh and skin cover dried bones; “breath entered them, and they came to life and stood on their feet.” God’s message to His people was, “I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them, my people, and lead you into the land of Israel . . . I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live” (Ezek. 37:10, 12,14).

The saints did not come out of their tombs until after Jesus walked out of His tomb on that resurrection morning. In this way, Jesus is indeed “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). The miraculous event of Matthew 27:52-53 is a foreshadowing of what will occur “at his coming, [to all] those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:23).

VERSE 54

When the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

A **centurion** was a Roman soldier who was commander of 100 soldiers. This *centurion* would have been in charge at the cross; **those with him** would have been under his command. To be **keeping watch** meant this squad of four soldiers was assigned to carry out Jesus’s death sentence (John 19:23-24).

The Greek word used in this verse translated as **terrified** refers to something alarming that seizes someone with fear. These men, part of the mightiest military force on earth in the first century AD, were *terrified* because of what they had seen.

The Jews had hurled insults at Jesus. They had mocked Him and accused Him of blasphemy. They, who claimed to be eagerly awaiting the coming of the Messiah, had responded to Jesus with violence and vitriol. This centurion, who was a Gentile, astonishingly was the one who made a great pronouncement about Jesus’s identity. Both God the Father and Christ the Son had earlier made this same declaration (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; John 10:36).

The Romans regularly referred to a hero or their emperor as a son of god. This centurion’s assertion, though, was different. He based his statement on what God had done; He had darkened the earth for three hours and later caused it to quake. Thus, this Gentile soldier echoed the disciples’ earlier faith statement about Jesus’s identity (Matt. 14:33; 16:16). He did not declare that Jesus was “a son of god” but “**was the Son of God!**” The centurion’s confession would foreshadow the good news of Christ being received by both Jews and Gentiles in the days and years to come.



Explore Further

Many of the events surrounding Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection were unexpected: the three hours of darkness, the raising of the saints, the tearing of the temple curtain, and the profession of the centurion.

- In our lives, how does God use unexpected events to draw us to Him?
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MATTHEW 14–28

Turning points are key to any story. A character moving in one direction suddenly transitions to a new path. Overcoming obstacles, the hero wins in the end. Matthew 14–28 represents a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. After preaching and healing in Galilee, Christ turned His face toward Jerusalem. His steps ultimately took Him to a cross—and an empty tomb. As believers, we benefit from this turning point. Through His example, we learn how to face our fears, overcome opposition, sacrifice for others, and embrace the hope that only He provides. By studying Matthew 14–28, we gain a better understanding of what it means to live out our faith each day—and how we can move forward to make disciples of all nations.

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