

Matthew 27

In our readings in Matthew today and tomorrow (Matthew 26-27) we are at the centre point of all history. Most history is utterly meaningless and unimportant—the squabbles of animals in a jungle—but these chapters record the most important and meaningful event that ever happened.

If we read these two chapters every day, and meditated upon them, it could make the difference between acceptance and rejection at the judgment seat of Christ.

Let us never take acceptance for granted. It is only for the very few who give themselves *wholly* to God—who live and think, all the time, *entirely* differently from how they would naturally live and think apart from the Word of God.

The attainment of salvation and eternal life is not hard. It is very easy. It is actually the *easiest* possible way of life, because it is in harmony with truth and reality. Jesus said—

“My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30).

But easy as it is, it does not just happen. It requires a certain *specific* course of life—clearly explained in God’s Book of Life.

It may be very easy to get to a certain place—much easier than to get to some other place. But unless we actually put our feet on the right path, and move steadily along that path, we shall never get there, no matter how easy it is to do so.

Because God has made the way so easy, so sensible, so reasonable, is why the judgment for *neglect* is so severe—

“Cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30).

There is no middle ground. What he says is either, *“Come, ye BLESSED,”* or *“Depart, ye CURSED, into everlasting fire,”* the judgment fire of the terrible day of the Lord.

Why no middle ground? Because the way of life is so easy. There is absolutely no excuse for failure if new give ourselves completely to it. It is just a matter of finding out *exactly* what is required, and *doing* it.

Just very simple submission and obedience, as we expect and take for granted from any well-trained dog. A *child* can understand it—but who will *do* it?

The required obedience covers many aspects—actually every act and aspect of life—but none are too hard for the simplest of minds to grasp, such as—

“Love not the world” (1 John 2:15).

“Come out and be separate” (2 Corinthians 6:17).

“Always abound in the work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15: 58).

“Rejoice evermore” (1 Thessalonians 5: 16).

“Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

“In everything give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

“Present your bodies a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1).

“Be ye holy as God is holy” (1 Peter 1:16).

“Meditate on THESE things: give yourselves WHOLLY to them” (1 Timothy 4:15).

“Make NO provision for the flesh” (Romans 13:14).

“Let your speech be ALWAYS with grace” (Colossians 4:6).

“Put away ALL anger” (Ephesians 4:31).

“Be gentle to all men” (2 Timothy 2:24).

There are many, many more, and they are all easy. It’s just a matter of being sensible enough to get *doing* them instead of doing something else. There will be momentary *failures*—many of them—but there is absolutely no excuse for final failure, for all that God asks is our best.

He never requires anything beyond our ability. All He asks is *everything* we have, which is perfectly reasonable, and actually the very *least* He *could* ask under the circumstances, for it to really mean anything at all.

The gift is so great, and what we have to offer Him is so utterly puny, that for Him to ask—and for us to give—anything less than *everything* would make a mockery of the whole thing.

All the things that God asks for of us are the things that enlightened love and common sense would *want* to give anyway. The truly spiritual mind—the intelligent godly mind—could not possibly be *satisfied* in giving anything less. It is desolated and embarrassed that it has so *little* to give to manifest its love and devotion and thanksgiving.

Devotion always wants to *give*. It gets its joy and peace in *giving*. It is always eagerly striving to give more.

This is why the cleavage is so clear-cut at the judgment seat—

“Come ye blessed: Depart ye cursed.”

When we have to do with God, the issues are so great that there just *cannot* be any halfway. If we do not *eagerly* go all the way, we just haven’t learned about Him at all.

God asks nothing we can’t do—but *everything* that we can. The basic requirement is eager desire.

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The chapter before us records the final, terrible sufferings of Christ in his loving obedience to His Father. These sufferings should be ever before our minds. I do not wish to dwell on their details, but we should all be fully familiar with *all* the dreadful details of scourging and crucifixion, and we should think upon them often, to keep our minds in the healthy track of humility and gratitude.

There are many puzzles in Matthew 27—strange enigmas that give us partial hints of so much that is not revealed, as Pilate’s wife’s dream; Joseph of Arimathea, who suddenly

appeared just this once, and just at the right time and never again; the thief on the cross, a manifestation of almost incredible faith and comprehension from a dying criminal; the deeply-impressed Roman Centurion; the dark tangled picture of the traitor Judas; the dead saints who rose and appeared to many; Simon the Cyrenean who suddenly, out of nowhere, was thrust into the very centre of all history; the strange words of Christ in his agony—

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

Pilate himself, a vile and wicked man caught up in depths that frightened him, struggling to set Jesus free.

All these lead to both profitable *and* unprofitable lines of thought: *profitable* if in the direction of a *better understanding of basic principles; of getting closer to the mind of God; of a beneficial effect on our walk and character*: but *unprofitable* if just aimless, merely curious, dead-end speculation.

It is to be noted (v. 3) that Judas “*repented*.” He regretted what he had done: he recognised and confessed his sin. But it was merely the repentance of despair: a natural fleshly repentance. It did not lead him to do good. Repentance must go all the way to complete change to mean anything.

How different it was with Peter’s repentance. And how differently was he treated!

And then the strikingly hypocritical contrast between vs. 4 and 6. To the statement—

“*I have betrayed innocent blood,*”

The Jewish leaders replied—

“*What is that to us?*”

But to the idea of putting the betrayal money into the treasury, oh, no, that cannot be done, it is not lawful!

How easy it is for us all to strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! There is no basic *logic* or *balance* or *reason* to the natural human mind. It is “*deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked*.” It can *believe* whatever it wishes. It can *justify* whatever it wishes.

Pilate presents a strange figure in this confrontation. We know, from Scripture and from history, that he was a wicked and evil man. Yet he struggles mightily to free Christ, three times protesting his innocence.

The message from his wife was just what was needed to cause him to do what had to be done. It had to bring out those terrible words—

“*His blood be on us and our children! . . . We have no king but Caesar!*”

It had to bring about the choice between Christ and Barabbas. The multitude had to be aroused to a frenzy bordering on riot before Pilate could overcome his fears and superstitions.

The Romans—perhaps the most practical and most deadly efficient people of all time—were deeply superstitious about dreams and omens auguries.

Pilate wanted to release Jesus. He had a nameless fear of this strange figure of such great dignity and self-possession, who claimed to be the Son of God, and of whose works he

had doubtless heard much. He knew the leaders had delivered him up because of envy (v. 18)—envy because of Jesus’ power and popularity with the people.

Here again, over-ruling providence takes a hand in events. This was the Passover—the greatest, in the Jews’ eyes, of the three great feasts when all must assemble at Jerusalem.

And it was the custom for the Romans to release one prisoner to them on this occasion. And the time for that release has *just exactly* arrived. Matthew says—

“Therefore when they were GATHERED TOGETHER”

—that is, the whole multitude in Jerusalem, or at least as many as could crowd into the available space for the occasion. The Revised Version of Mark 15:8 (which is more accurate here than the A.V.) gives the same picture—

“And the multitude GOING UP, began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them.”

How wonderful that these events so marvellously converge—the nation unconsciously assembled to face the choice between a murderous bandit and the sinless Son of God.

Pilate clearly felt here was a way of escape. He knew Jesus was popular. He had gone everywhere doing good, and just a few days before, the multitudes had worshipfully hailed him with *“Hosanna to the Son of David.”* But *now* the multitude said, *“crucify him,”* and chose Barabbas the robber.

Why the sudden change? The chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude. But how were they *able* to? Jesus stood before them a pitiful figure—horribly beaten and wounded, bound and humiliated—and not doing any miracles—a meek, passive, uncomplaining, submissive sheep. He had claimed to be the Son of God—and here he stood helpless and powerless.

This was not the kind of king the mob wanted. They were not interested in his goodness and kindness and holiness, and gentle words of love and life.

“Give us Barabbas, a leader, a real man, a fighter—Barabbas who dared to lead an insurrection against the power of Rome.”

The chief priests really thought they were saving the nation—one man must die *“lest the Romans take away OUR place and nation.”*

But it was the Barabbas class that finally brought on the Roman armies and the desolation of the land, and the awful horrors of the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem.

Pilate tried in vain to stem the tide, pleading with them, but (v. 24) he could see the ugly and ominous beginnings of a riot brewing, so he took water, and washed his hands, and said—

“I am innocent of the blood of this just person.”

And the mob cried those terrible words of their own doom—

“His blood be upon us and our children.”

So he gave him over to their will.

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In preparation for the Crucifixion (v. 34) they offered him a stupefying drink, to *dull* his mind and reduce the agony of the terrible ordeal. But he would not drink it. The cup *he* chose was that prepared by his Father—full, conscious, patient, obedience right to the very end. There could not be the slightest degree of evading the divinely appointed path. He must manifest clear, unconfused perfection right till the final moment.

The way he accepted this terrible torture was all-important. It was for the eternal record. It was the final, climaxing event of an absolutely perfect life. His mind must be clear. He had things to say: to man and to God.

There are seven things recorded that he said on this occasion—manifesting throughout perfect self-control, perfect submission, perfect obedience. One moment of failure would have spoiled the whole age-long purpose of God. What a weight lay upon him. The weight of all the sin and sorrow and eternal destiny of mankind.

Here is the secret of the bloody sweat of Gethsemane, and the terrible cry, “*My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*”

Some have scoffed at his fears and tears, pointing to others who have gone bravely and defiantly to terrible tortures and horrible deaths. But how little they know of the *real* struggle! For thirty-three long years he had walked the agonising tight-rope of perfect obedience. Just a few hours more of perfect obedience in thought, word and action.

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There are recorded seven statements of Jesus that were spoken from the cross.

Luke 23:34— “*Father, forgive them.*”

Luke 23:43— “*Thou shalt be with me in paradise.*”

John 19:26,27— “*Behold thy son! Behold thy mother!*”

Matthew and Mark— “*My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?*” (Psalm 22:1).

John 19:28— “*I thirst.*”

John 19:30— “*It is finished.*”

Luke— “*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit*” (Psalm 31:5).

No one gospel gives more than three of them. Only one of them—the central and most striking one is recorded in more than one single gospel. Pieced together, they form a remarkably symmetrical, and obviously designed and intended pattern.

Luke gives three; John gives three more; Matthew and Mark together give one. The first, central, and last are prayers—the first and last addressed “*My Father,*” the central one “*My God.*”

The first two concern care for others. The last four concern Christ himself—although all that concerns him concerns everyone, for he is the foundation of all. The central prayer and the last prayer are quotations from the Psalms.

The *first*, recorded only by Luke, is—

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

This is fittingly the first, and it appears to have occurred at the beginning, when they cruelly nailed him to the cross.

They *did* not know what they were doing, though they *should* have known. They were blinded by the flesh. They had not sought the light to give them light. Many *were* forgiven, when they realised and repented. Peter said, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 3:15-19)—

“Ye killed the Prince of Peace . . . Through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers . . . Repent, therefore, and BE converted.”

The *second* utterance, also recorded only by Luke, was the glorious promise to the thief on the cross. We are specifically told that one was on his *right* hand, and one on his *left*, and we cannot help but feel sure that—in the wisdom and providence of God—*this* was the one on the *right* hand.

Actually, he was not a thief. It is a mistranslation. The New Testament throughout makes a very clear *distinction* between *thieves* and *robbers*, which the Revised Version consistently follows, though the Authorised Version does not. He was a *robber*, not a *thief*. A thief uses stealth, secretly; a robber uses violence, openly.

This may seem not much of a difference, or it may seem to make the use even worse. But it does give us a much clearer and more understandable picture.

Barabbas was a robber (*same word*) and a murderer. He had made insurrection against Rome. He was what today would be called a terrorist, a freedom fighter, a guerrilla. As today, these have *always* been a mixed and motley crew. We remember the type of some who assembled with David when he was a fugitive.

As today, some are high-minded patriots, some are common criminals, and some are somewhere in between. It is most likely that the robbers crucified with Christ were part of the robber Barabbas’ band of insurrectionists against Rome. It may have been Pilate’s revenge for their choice of Barabbas over Christ.

We cannot exonerate the repentant robber as a patriot. He *was* a robber. He himself recognised that his punishment was due and just. But as a robber and not a thief we can see his picture and background better. He quite likely had justified his robbery and violence to himself as part of his patriotic conflict, as so many do today.

One of the disciples had been of such a band—Simon Zelotes; Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were a wild party of violent insurrectionists.

It appears this robber at first joined with the other in reviling Christ. It is possible to take the record otherwise, but it is more natural to take it that way. Here is the importance of Christ’s deportment on the cross. It convinced the robber, just as it convinced the Roman centurion in charge—

“Truly this man was the Son of God.”

This robber clearly knew of Christ and his doctrine. He said, *“This man hath done NOTHING amiss,”* and he spoke of Christ’s coming kingdom.

He manifests one of the most remarkable cases of discerning faith in all Scripture. When the disciples had fled in bewildered despair, and he and Christ hung dying in agony, he understood, and believed.

It is a deeply sobering thought that, though he repented and was forgiven by Christ and promised eternal life, still he must endure the continuation of the crucifixion, even to the barbarous smashing of his leg bones with clubs, to make sure there was no escape or recovery when he was taken down.

The *third* utterance was to Jesus' mother and to John—loving consideration and provision, even in the midst of his agony. Only John mentions this.

These three seem to be quite early—certainly during the first three hours, before the darkness came.

The last four were at the end, at the ninth hour. First, that strange, central, key cry—

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

—recorded by Matthew and Mark.

What did it mean? He knew all his life, from the 22nd Psalm, that this moment would come. He knew all his life this moment must come, and, that he would in anguish make this cry. This was the climax of his lifelong struggle. From his birth, and especially from his baptism, he had been filled with the Holy Spirit. God dwelt *in him*—

“God was in him, reconciling the world unto Himself.”

He was thus God manifest in the flesh. He could say—

“He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.”

There was a perfect oneness, a perfect union, a perfect fellowship. He had never known anything else. But now the time had come for a brief sundering and the time had come for the Father's presence to leave him. It was a moment of desolation and anguish, expected and braced for, but still a shock in his weakened agony that called forth that bitter cry.

But that last hurdle was now passed. He said (the *fifth* utterance) *“I thirst,”* recorded by John. What a terrible choking, burning thirst it must have been to stand out above the torture of crucifixion! But he needed one last moment of refreshment. He had two more things to say.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us that Jesus cried with a loud voice. (The word is usually translated “great”). It was a cry of triumph and joy—as loud as he could cry in his weakened condition.

But only John tells us what he cried—

“It is finished”

—not ended, but completed, accomplished.

His work was done—accomplished, fulfilled. The terrible thirty-three-year ordeal of agonised perfection in struggle with the flesh was over. The foundation of righteousness was laid; the way of life opened up; sin and death conquered, and their power forever broken.

The *seventh* and *final* utterance, which Luke gives us, was—

“Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.”

This is from Psalm 31, a psalm of both deep distress and joyful, thankful, confident worship and praise.

His next conscious moment was glorious resurrection and then all powerful life forevermore.

(Taken from “Be Ye Transformed” Volume 4, pages 194-202, by Bro. G. Growcott)