

Chapter 113: The Hidden Wisdom of God

Matthew 27:32–44

We have seen Jesus suffer in a variety of ways throughout his life, even in his infancy, when he fled from Herod into exile (Matt. 2:13–15). All of those sufferings, however, have been a prelude leading up to the climax of the Gospel of Matthew here at the cross. Yet, Matthew records the climax of the Gospel narrative in a way that stands in tension. On the one hand, every verse in this passage adds a new detail to the scorn, derision, suffering, and shame that our Lord bore in his crucifixion. On the other hand, the passage does not so much focus on Jesus and Jesus' sufferings, as on the actions and reactions of those around Jesus.¹ Matthew's approach follows the literary technique of "gapping," where some element of the story is emphasized by its omission.² Therefore, we do not so much read about Christ's suffering as about the causes of those sufferings, and we must everywhere ask what each detail of this story adds to the passion of Christ. By the near-invisibility of Jesus in this passage, we learn that *Christ crucified is the hidden wisdom of God*.

Naked and Ashamed (Matt. 27:32–36)

The technique of gapping begins in the first of this passage, where we read that the Romans force Simon the Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross: "As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross" (v. 32). Curiously, Matthew does not tell us *why* Simon must carry Jesus' cross, but only *that* he must do so. It does not, however, take much reflection to determine that Jesus must have been unable to carry his own cross: "He had been subjected to a great deal of stress. He had been up all night and had undergone the agony in the garden, the various sessions with the Jewish authorities, and the mockery of a trial before Pilate. He had endured the scourging, which, as we noted before, could be a very brutal affair. He had been mocked and hit by the soldiers."³ Lenski is almost certainly correct when he writes that "Jesus broke down under the load, broke down so completely that even his executioners saw that no blows and

¹ "The overenthusiastic attempts to draw out the physical horror of crucifixion which disfigure some Christian preaching (and at least one recent movie) find no echo in the gospels. Perhaps the original readers were too familiar with both the torture and the shame of crucifixion to need any help in envisaging what it really meant. At any rate, the narrative in these verses is rather on the surrounding events and the people involved (Simon, the soldiers, the bandits), together with the ironical placard over Jesus' head which sums up the Roman dismissal of his claims." (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1064.)

² See "Gaps, Ambiguity and the Reading Process" in Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, ISBL 453 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 186–229.

³ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 714.

cursings of theirs could make him stagger on.”⁴ Rather than describing anything of Jesus, however, we simply read the fact that someone else had to carry Jesus’ cross.

Next, Matthew tells us that, at the arrival of Jesus to “Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it” (vv. 33–34). We should remember that they “went out” (v. 32) to get to Golgotha, which emphasizes the shame and disgrace of his death, which he offered up for our salvation: “Christ went out of the gate of the city, that, by taking upon him the curse which pressed us down, he might be regarded as accursed, and might in this manner atone for our sins.”⁵ The first thing the soldiers do upon arrival at this gruesome place of execution is to offer Jesus wine mixed with gall. It is possible that the “gall” refers to some kind of narcotic that would have doped the prisoner so that the executioners might have had an easier time affixing the victim to the cross. If so, Jesus refuses because he “intended to go through the final ordeal with a perfectly clear mind; he intended to endure all without avoiding a single agony.”⁶ It is also possible that the “gall” is a word that describes the bitterness of the specific additive, “myrrh,” as Mark records (Mark 15:23). If so, Carson argues that “Myrrh may have been used with wine to strengthen the drink..., but it has no effect on pain....But myrrh tastes bitter; so a large dose of it mingled with wine would make the latter undrinkable. Whether customary or not, the drink was offered to Jesus; but it was so bitter he refused it, and, according to this view, the soldiers were amused.”⁷ Here again, though, we have only the facts that Jesus refused to drink the wine, without any elaboration on his torments.

Where we see the gapping most strikingly comes in v. 35, where Jesus’ crucifixion is described in only one word, and not even in the main verb, but only in a subordinate participle, “almost as if in passing”:⁸ “And *having crucified* [σταυρώσαντες; *staurōsantes*] him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots” (v. 35). In this instance, there is something of a holy modesty to the event of Christ’s crucifixion. It is as though the camera, catching a glimpse of the event, quickly turns away to prevent rubbernecks from gawking. Lenski writes, “Among the astounding features of the Scripture are the records of the supreme events: one word to describe the scourging of God’s Son, one word to state his crucifixion, one word to record his resurrection. Events so tremendous, words so restrained!”⁹ Yet, we must know the general sense of what lies in this gap. Carson writes:

Crucifixion was unspeakably painful and degrading. Whether tied or nailed to the cross, the victim endured countless paroxysms as he pulled with his arms and pushed with his legs to keep his chest cavity open for breathing and then collapsed in exhaustion until the demand for oxygen demanded renewed paroxysms. The scourging, the loss of blood, the shock from the pain all produced agony that could go on for days, ending at last by suffocation, cardiac arrest, or loss of blood. When there was reason to hasten death, the execution squad would

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1104.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:296.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1106.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 643.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 833.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1106.

smash the victim's legs. Death follows almost immediately, either from shock or from collapse that cut off breathing.¹⁰

Literarily, the agony of our Lord Jesus is heightened by the relative lack of description (gapping). Whatever human words Matthew may have been able to summon, none could capture the hellish torments that Jesus underwent upon the cross. Rather than trying—and failing—to depict the scene, Matthew modestly states the fact of Jesus' crucifixion, but leaves the physical, emotional, and spiritual carnage unstated.

Moving quickly away from this image, the camera pans down to the soldiers: “they divided his garments among them by casting lots” (v. 35b).¹¹ While it is possible that Jesus was permitted the use of some kind of loincloth to retain a minimal modesty, the general pattern of Romans was to crucify their victims entirely naked.¹² Consistently with his pattern through the rest of this passage, Matthew does not so much tell us about *Jesus' nakedness* as he tells us what *other people* were doing with his clothes. As we discussed in the previous passage, the language of clothing in Scripture often suggests a change of fortune, and especially it appears to describe the investiture of royalty: “modern interpreters have so focused on the shame-covering function of clothing that they generally miss what ancient interpreters took for granted: the use of clothing as a means of beauty, glory, even royal majesty.”¹³

At a very basic level, to be stripped not only of his (faux) royal garments (Matt. 27:31), but even of his own clothing, was an act of degrading humiliation. There seems to be an even greater significance when we consider this event in light of the reversal of the primordial sin in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve, upon eating from the forbidden tree, immediately recognized that they were “naked” (Gen. 3:7a)—but, their recognition of their nakedness stood in contrast with the previous fact of their nakedness, which they had experienced without shame (Gen. 2:25). They scrambled to cover themselves with fig leaves, but God graciously covered them with animal skins (Gen. 3:7b, 21). This background suggests an important element of the cross: Jesus' had to be crucified naked as one aspect of the shame that he had to endure. Yet, our Savior died naked so that we could be clothed with resurrection life (2 Cor. 5:4).¹⁴

Finally, Matthew closes off this section describing the actions of the crucifying soldiers by writing, “Then they sat down and kept watch over him there” (v. 36). Once again, we do not read about Jesus' situation on the cross, but about those surrounding him. Yet, this statement is important

¹⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” 641.

¹¹ “The attention is focused not on Jesus' sufferings on the cross, which, however, cannot be far from the readers' minds, but upon the activity of the soldiers at the foot of the cross who unknowingly fulfill what the scriptures anticipated. Although Matthew does not use a fulfillment formula, there can be no question but that in keeping with his practice elsewhere he could have. The use of the language of LXX (21:19) of Ps 22:18 is deliberate: διεμερίσαντο τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ, ‘they divided his garments,’ is verbatim from the LXX, except for the LXX's first person μου ‘my [garments]’; βάλλοντες [LXX: ἔβαλον, ‘they cast’] κλήρον, ‘casting lots,’ is also nearly verbatim from the LXX (cf. John 19:23–25, which elaborates the tradition and provides a fulfillment formula quotation of the LXX's Ps 21:19 verbatim). This is the first of a series of allusions to Ps 22 in Matthew's passion narrative (cf. vv 39, 42–43, 46).” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 835.)

¹² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1193.

¹³ William N. Wilder, “Illumination and Investiture: The Royal Significance of the Tree of Wisdom in Genesis 3,” *WTJ* 68.1 (2006): 58.

¹⁴ For background on these reflections, see Wilder, “Illumination and Investiture.”

for two reasons. First, Lenski writes, “This implies that the bloody work had been completed. All that remained to be done was to guard the cross against interference.”¹⁵ Second, Hendriksen writes, “This act of keeping Jesus under strict surveillance is significant. Does it not bear witness to the fact that Jesus really *died* on Calvary?”¹⁶ Once again, Matthew sets his the attention on those surrounding him to heighten our anxiety over what is happening to Jesus, of whom Matthew says very little.

Derided by the World (Matt. 27:37–40)

Still again, Jesus is mentioned only in passing (“over his head”) as Matthew directs our attention away from the crucified, dying Messiah: “And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews’” (v. 37). For the Romans, the sign bearing his charge was an open source of ridicule against both Jesus (who did not look like a king) and the Jews (whose king was hanging on the cross). Of course, this “irony increases when we recognize that, rightly interpreted, the sign proclaimed the truth.”¹⁷ Even more, by stating this charge as an assertion, the accusation functioned as a final vindication of Jesus as innocent: he really is the king of the Jews, despite the criminal charges against him that found him guilty for claiming to be so.¹⁸

Next, Matthew again describes the scene, leaving Jesus notably absent from the picture: “Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left” (v. 38). With this description, Matthew has given us a description of what is happening *below* Jesus (where the soldiers cast lots for his clothing and “sat down” to guard him; vv. 35–36), *above* Jesus (where his charge hung; v. 37), and to the *right* and the *left* of Jesus, with these thieves on the cross. We still do not, however, know what is happening to Jesus as he hangs on the cross. Here, the infamy of Jesus is defined by his association with these two criminals. Calvin, reflecting on the scene, writes, “Here we perceive how dreadful is the weight of the wrath of God against sins, for appeasing which it became necessary that Christ, who is eternal justice, should be ranked with robbers. We see, also, the inestimable love of Christ towards us, who, in order that he might admit us to the society of the holy angels, permitted himself to be classed as one of the wicked.”¹⁹

At this point, the scene moves to the passers-by: “And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads...” (v. 39). France’s comment is important: “The place of execution was deliberately in a well-frequented area so as to maximize the deterrent effect.”²⁰ Then, we should see how once again Matthew sets Jesus just outside the frame of the narration, so that the emphasis falls on the reactions of the pilgrims to Jerusalem for the Passover who saw Jesus hanging from the cross. Literally, the word that the ESV translates as “derided” is “blasphemed” (ἐβλασφήμουν; *eblasphēmoun*), “which means to speak against God or anything pertaining to God in anger or in derision. Here God was being mocked in the person of his own Son.”²¹ They “wag their heads” at

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1108.

¹⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 965.

¹⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 416–17.

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1109–10.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:302.

²⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1070.

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1111.

Jesus' destruction,²² offering “the last human indignity [Jesus] must face.”²³

The larger travesty of this scene comes in the way that they taunt Jesus. First, they must have heard something about the trial about Jesus so that they echo the one bit of testimony that could stick, regarding destroying and rebuilding the temple. These vicious passers-by say, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!” (v. 40a). Their taunt may have seemed manifestly absurd to them, but in this, they outline the means by which Jesus will save himself: through his resurrection from the dead three days later. Then, they continue, saying, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (v. 40b). The “if” statement that prefaces their challenge “echoes the preamble to two of the devil’s temptations in 4:3, 6; here again Jesus must have felt the force of the temptation to exploit his special relationship with God in order to escape physical suffering.”²⁴ As Blomberg writes, “Here truly is Jesus’ last great temptation, to come down off the cross.”²⁵

Forsaken by God (Matt. 27:41–44)

Matthew indicates that the religious leaders “echo”²⁶ what the crowd has said: “So [or, ‘likewise/ similarly’; ὁμοίως; *homoios*] also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him...” (v. 41). Yet, as France notices, “Their mockery is more theologically sophisticated than that of the general public.”²⁷ While the crowd holds Jesus in general derision, the religious leaders detail their reasons for mocking Jesus. Each of these statements convey important meaning on multiple levels. As Hagner writes, “Throughout this pericope, as in the preceding pericopes, the underlying paradox cannot be missed. What these mockers scornfully ridicule, what they regard as impossible, what they look upon as the wild claim of a charlatan is paradoxically the truth.”²⁸

First, they say, “He saved others; he cannot save himself” (v. 42a). In this, they affirm the genuine nature of the miracles that Jesus had performed when he “saved others,” but this does not give them pause, since they have argued that his power comes from Beelzebub (Matt. 9:34): “The conclusion they draw is that now that Beelzebub is not able and/or willing to help him any more, he is completely powerless.”²⁹ Furthermore, they are correct in one sense that Jesus *cannot* save himself—not that he has no recourse to save himself (Matt. 26:53), but that he cannot save himself if he is to save sinners and to fulfill the Scriptures (Matt. 26:54): “If he had saved himself, he would not have

²² Kenneth Bailey draws attention to the “those who passed by” and “wagging their heads” in both Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospel as the beginning of a series of allusions to Lamentations 2:15–16. As the Gentiles mocked the destruction of Jerusalem, so Jewish pilgrims mock the destruction of Jesus. (Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Fall of Jerusalem and Mark’s Account of the Cross,” *Expository Times* 102.4 (1991): 102–05.)

²³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 837.

²⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1070.

²⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 417.

²⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 418.

²⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1071.

²⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 840.

²⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 967.

been able to save others.”³⁰

Second, they acknowledge that Jesus “is the King of Israel,” even as they issue a challenge on that basis: “let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him” (v. 42b). On this challenge, Calvin writes, “And it is too customary with all wicked men to estimate the power of God by present appearances, so that whatever he does not accomplish they think that he cannot accomplish, and so they accuse him of weakness, whenever he does not comply with their wicked desire....And why did he for the time disregard his own safety, but because he cared more about the salvation of us all?”³¹

Third, and worst of all, they mock Jesus’s relationship to his Father: “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (v. 43). This taunt anticipates Jesus’ cry from the cross in the next section, where he laments his God-forsakenness (Matt. 27:46). Again, Calvin draws out of this an important pastoral principle:

This...is a very sharp arrow of temptation which Satan holds in his hand, when he pretends that God has forgotten us, because He does not relieve us speedily and at the very moment. For since God watches over the safety of his people, and not only grants them seasonable aid, but even anticipates their necessities, (as Scripture everywhere teaches us,) he appears not to love those whom he does not assist. 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.³²

Whereas Jesus was forsaken at the cross, Jesus then promises his church, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Finally, to add one final insult to his extensive injuries, “the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way” (v. 44). It is not enough for Jesus to be numbered among the malefactors; they join in heaping scorn on him, which drives him *below* their positions to his right and left side.

Discussion Questions

1. Why must the Romans compel Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross (v. 32)? Why doesn’t Matthew answer this question directly? What was significant about the location of Golgotha (v. 33; see Heb. 13:12–13)? What is the significance of Jesus’ refusal to drink the wine mixed with gall (v. 34)? How elaborately does Matthew narrate Jesus’ crucifixion (v. 35a)? Why do you think that is the case? What is the significance of the soldiers’ gambling for Jesus’ clothes (v. 35)?

³⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1070.

³¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:306.

³² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:306–07.

2. Who is ridiculed by the charge that the Romans affix above Jesus' head (v. 37)? How does Jesus' association with robbers on his right and left side increase the shame of his suffering (v. 38)? Why do we read about what happens under (vv. 35–36), above (v.37), and on each side of Jesus (v. 38)? Read Lamentations 2:15–16 in comparison with vv. 39–42. Why does Matthew compare Jesus' crucifixion to the lamentation over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC?

3. How does the crowd echo the temptations of Satan with the phrase, "If you are the Son of God..." (v. 40; cf. Matt. 4:4, 6)? How do the religious leaders "echo" (Blomberg) the taunts of the crowd ("So also..."; v. 41)? How do the leaders frame their taunts in "more theologically sophisticated" ways (France)? Why do they acknowledge the power of Jesus' miracles (v. 42)? Why do they acknowledge Jesus as the King of Israel" (v. 42)? What does the reviling of the robbers add to the scene (v. 44)?

4. Why do you think that Matthew keeps Jesus almost entirely out of view in this passage? How does the hiddenness of Jesus in this passage exacerbate our anxiety over his sufferings? How does the hiddenness of Jesus exemplify the "hidden wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 2:7)? Why do you think that God delights to reveal himself in ways that are hidden from the world? What do you see when you gaze upon the invisible, hidden Christ by faith in this passage?