

Bible Study Guide: Week of 3-30-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Blessings on your study and reflection. Please contact me with any questions or comments. Stay healthy in mind, body, and spirit. God bless!

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 27:11-54

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. 15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. 16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. 17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" 18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" 23 Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" 24 So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." 25 Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" 26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. 27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. 32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." 38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to;

for he said, "I am God's Son." 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. 45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Jesus' silence before his accusers is a hallmark of his passion. This is often interpreted as a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7, "As a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." To give no answer before Pilate, the most powerful ruler in the region, especially in response to such a serious charge as claiming to be a king, would truly have been amazing or astonishing to Pilate. All Jesus would have to do to escape death would be to deny publicly that he was a king. He would likely have been humiliated and beaten and then released. Rome liked to remind those who challenged imperial authority who was really boss. Jesus' refusal to speak likely sealed his fate. Yet it sealed our fate, as well, as he laid down his life for us all and took it back up again on the third day.

15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. 16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. 17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" 18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" 23 Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

All of the gospels include a reference to a prisoner named Barabbas. In John's gospel Barabbas is called "a bandit" (In John 10, Jesus claims that he is the Good Shepherd, in contrast to others whom he calls "bandits.") Matthew is unique in calling this prisoner "Jesus Barabbas." There is great dramatic irony here as both men "on trial" here share the first name of Jesus. On the one hand we have Jesus "of Nazareth" or "Messiah" or "Christ." On the other hand, we have Jesus Barabbas. Even more ironically, the name "Barabbas" or "Bar-abbas" means "son of the father." It is with sad irony that the crowds hail a criminal named Jesus Barabbas (Jesus, son of the father) instead of Jesus the Messiah, the true Son of God the Father. All of the gospels report this custom of Pilate releasing a prisoner at the Passover festival. It is unclear from historical records that this was the case, but it is clearly an important part of this gospel narrative—the people had a chance to choose and they chose the wrong one to be released. Yet, for our sake, Jesus was handed over to die and be raised.

Pilate's wife plays an important but minor role in this narrative, allowing us to see that Pilate had some forewarning that his dealings with Jesus would be difficult. Also, even Pilate's wife calls Jesus "innocent." Knowing this, Pilate tried to intervene on Jesus' behalf, but ultimately we know the crowd won out. Here Matthew presents Pilate as one at the mercy of the crowds and ultimately powerless to do anything other than what they demand. Some have interpreted Matthew's portrayal of Pilate as an attempt to absolve Rome for the death of Jesus and blame the Jewish leadership and community. As we will see in the upcoming verses, there is great danger in that interpretation.

24 So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." 25 Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" 26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Because Matthew portrays Pilate as washing and being absolved and the Jewish crowds as claiming multiple generations' worth of responsibility for the death of Jesus, this passage has added much fuel to the fires of antisemitism and persecution of our Jewish neighbors over the centuries. Ultimately, we should acknowledge that Jesus' death resulted from a confluence of many factors: The power and cruelty of Rome, an intrareligious rivalry between Jesus and the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem at that time, and (of course) divine providence. Rather than trying to blame others for Jesus' death, it would be wise for us to be grateful to God for the gift Jesus brought through his life and ministry and even through his death and resurrection.

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

This scene of Jesus' humiliation and torture at the hands of Roman soldiers is likely a scene that would have happened had Jesus recanted and renounced his royal claim. Had he told Pilate, "I am not a king," Pilate would have likely ordered him to be "made an example of" in this way so that others would see the might of Rome and the futility of claiming kingship aside from the reign of Caesar. Here, however, because Jesus said nothing and the crowd prevailed against him, Jesus is led away to be crucified after his torture and humiliation.

32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Simon of Cyrene is merely a passerby or a bystander in Matthew's gospel. His being "compelled" to carry Jesus' cross shows the complete domination Rome exercised over those in their realm. They could make anyone do anything they wanted, it seems. In Mark's version of this story, Simon is identified as "the father of Rufus and Alexander." Presumably, Simon and/or his children, were known to some early Christians. Perhaps Simon was already a follower of Jesus at this time or perhaps he became one after "sharing" in Jesus' sufferings.

"Golgotha"—Place of a Skull—was so named either because the topographical prominence of the bare hillside bore resemblance to a skull or because people were often crucified there. Probably the place name echoed with overtones of both explanations. What "better" place to crucify the condemned than a hill that looked like a skull?

The wine offered to Jesus was mixed with "gall"—probably a narcotic or anesthetic. Jesus' avoiding this drink may show his strength in facing death without pain relief or it may be that this offer was meant as mockery rather than mercy and so he refused to partake.

Here as in the other gospels, Jesus' clothes are gambled away—a reference to Psalm 22:18. Psalm 22, incidentally, begins with the words, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" which Jesus speaks in vs. 46.

38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He

trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." " 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

The mockery of those who taunt Jesus echoes the words of Satan during the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness—"if you are the son of God." Like Satan, the people who mock Jesus either doubt his sonship or misunderstand it or both. Unlike in Luke's version where one of the thieves on the cross begs for mercy, here the bandits both taunt Jesus.

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

The darkness over the land, a feature of all the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion, shows the cosmic significance of Jesus' death. As I mentioned before, here Jesus calls out in the words of Psalm 22. For some reason, the people interpret Jesus' exclamation as a call for Elijah. It is possible that the people misheard Jesus' words "Eli" as "Elias"—a form of the name Elijah. Psalm 22, if we read it all the way through, is a Psalm not of despair but of vindication. The Psalmist, by the end of the Psalm, is vindicated and showing forth God's glory. Jesus intends to welcome the ultimate vindication God will bring about through his faithful death. The crowds may interpret his words as "proof" that Jesus thinks he is the Messiah. The prophet Malachi predicted the return of Elijah before the coming of the Messiah (early Christians associated John the Baptist with this claim—John and Elijah shared many of the same characteristics). So perhaps the crowds interpret Jesus' words as an attempt to call Elijah to come so that he could indeed claim his place as Messiah. The attempt to give Jesus sour wine was likely an attempt to sedate him and hasten his death. Others object, hoping to see Elijah show up.

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

These signs indicated that Jesus' death was not a normal death. The temple curtain represented the barrier between God's throne room open only to the high priest and the outer courts of the temple where the people were allowed to go. Here, the temple curtain is ripped in two, symbolizing the removal of the barriers between God and humankind. Earthquakes and geological instabilities were widely believed to be portents or signs in the ancient world.

52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

Much has been written about these two verses. This story is unique to Matthew and it is strange, to be sure. The main point seems to be the power and significance of Jesus' death. Again, this is no ordinary death, but rather is a death that will culminate in resurrection and ascension—not just for Jesus, but for all who believe in him. Who were these "saints?" They can't be disciples or apostles because those folks were still alive when Jesus was crucified. Were they faithful Jewish people who had looked forward to the coming of the Messiah? We simply don't know. Why didn't anyone else in scripture report this "little resurrection" and the appearance of dead saints "to many?" Again, we simply don't know. Have fun pondering these questions! I know I will!

54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Even the centurion of Rome who was guarding the cross noted the incredible circumstances surrounding Jesus' death and acknowledged that Jesus was "God's Son." "Son of God" was a term used by Caesar to refer to himself, so this centurion is not only proclaiming truth, he is simultaneously speaking out against his emperor.

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus refused to answer Pilate's questions?
2. Read Psalm 22. In light of the entire Psalm, what do you think Jesus meant by crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
3. Did Pilate's washing of his hands absolve him of blame for the death of Jesus? Did the crowds' acknowledgement of guilt cause them to bear all of the blame for Jesus' death?