

Jesus Death Opened the Way to God

Matthew 27:1-66

Key Verse: 27:50-51a

by Moses Lenthang

“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”

In the previous passage Jesus showed that the way of God is to rely on God in prayer. Peter's way was the way of the world, which was to depend on himself, and he failed completely. In today's passage we will study the meaning of Jesus' death. Through Jesus' trial, crucifixion and death we see the ways of Judas, Pilate and the religious leaders, and how they all failed. In contrast, we see the true identity of Jesus and how he opened the way to God. Through this passage, we can learn the meaning of Jesus' death and why his death is the most significant in human history.

First, Jesus' trial before Pilate (1-26).

In the last passage, the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus on charges of blasphemy for claiming to be **“the Messiah, the Son of God”** (26:63). They made plan to execute Jesus: they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the Roman governor. Upon seeing Jesus condemned, Judas was seized with remorse. He admitted that he sinned and said, **“I have betrayed innocent blood.”** He tried to return the money but they told him, **“That's your responsibility.”** So Judas threw the money into the temple, went away and hanged himself. Judas' way was to resolve his problem of guilt by himself. His way did not work, so he took his own life.

According to the Torah, money gained through detestable practices should not be brought into the temple (Deut 23:18). So the priests and elders considered this money to be ritually impure and they used it to buy a cemetery for foreigners. Ironically, they showed great concern for ritual purity but overlooked their guilty role in bribing Judas with the same money to arrest Jesus and have him condemned to death. They thought that religious observances made them right with God. This was their way. But their way of religiosity could not open the way for them to God.

Look at verse 11. **“Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’”** At that time, anyone who claimed to be a king was taken as a threat by the Roman government and would be

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executed (Acts 5:36-38). But Jesus replied, **“You have said so”** (11b). The only time Jesus spoke up before his accusers was when it came to his identity. He knew his **“Yes”** would cost his life, but he answered boldly, **“You have said so.”** Before Pilate, the chief priests and elders accused Jesus of many things. But Jesus gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, **“Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?”** But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge (12-14). In Roman law, those who did not defend themselves were considered guilty. Thus Pilate was greatly amazed that Jesus did not respond to save himself. Pilate had never seen anyone like this, who remained silent in front of his accusers. No one would remain silent under false accusations. Why did Jesus remain silent? Isaiah 53:7,8b says, **“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”** Jesus silently obeyed his Father's will.

The day of Jesus' trial happened to be during the Passover Feast. Each Passover day was like “Amnesty Day,” the Jews would choose one prisoner to release. Desiring to release Jesus, Pilate selected the most wicked and notorious man in prison, Barabbas. Pilate must have reasoned that, though the chief priest wanted to kill Jesus, the crowds would rather have Jesus pardoned than Barabbas. It seemed like a brilliant plan. However, when Pilate asked the crowds, **“Which of the two do you want me to release to you?”** they answered, **“Barabbas.”** This put Pilate in a difficult situation.

Look at verses 22-23. **“What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?”** Pilate asked. They all answered, **“Crucify him!”** Pilate asked them, **“Why?”** **What crime has he committed?”** But they shouted all the louder, **“Crucify him!”** Pilate knew that if he did not please the crowd, he would lose his job. It was a defining moment for him to speak out based on the truth as a judge and governor, and pronounce Jesus innocent and release him. Even his wife pleaded with him, not to do anything with innocent Jesus (19). Still, the way Pilate chose was to escape the warning and responsibility. So he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. He claimed, **“I am innocent of this man's blood,”** and excused himself saying, **“It is your responsibility!”** And Pilate released Barabbas, had Jesus flogged, and handed over innocent Jesus to be crucified. Pilate's words however, did not excuse him from responsibility. His way did not work. History does not let him get away with his words and symbolic hand-washing. He is immortalized in the Apostles' Creed (which we recite every Sunday) as the one responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. Later in his life, Pilate also committed suicide for the same reason that Judas did. No matter how much we

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may try to wash our hands and ease our consciences, we cannot solve our own sin problem. Without Jesus, sin has tragic consequences.

In Jesus' trial each character reveals the ways of sinful men and their self-seeking motives. For Judas it was money. For the religious leaders it was envy or self-interest (18). For the crowd it was the fear of man, they just went with the flow. For Pilate it was security and avoiding responsibility. We can find little Judas Iscariots, religious leaders, crowds, and Pilates in each one of us. We are all capable of being like them. Which character do you identify with? I identify myself with Pilate. I make excuses to escape responsibility. I usually ignore my wife's warnings in major decision-making. My wife knows me very well in these areas.

In contrast, Jesus was different. Jesus did not claim or defend his innocence as Pilate did. Instead, Jesus was silent before his accusers. At the trial of Jesus, no one could find a blemish in Jesus. Even Judas, Pilate and Pilate's wife all confessed Jesus' innocence (4). Though Jesus was innocent, he accepted the guilty verdict and was handed over to be crucified. Before God, we are all guilty. There is no one righteous and innocent, not even one. We are the ones who should be condemned and punished. Yet we try hard to escape the responsibility of our guilt. But Jesus, the Righteous One, took the responsibility of our guilt and condemnation which we deserve. The Innocent One became guilty to open the way to God for us.

Second, Jesus was crucified as the King of the Jews (27-49).

After being condemned, the whole company of Roman soldiers gathered around him. There they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. They put a crown of thorns on his head and a staff in his right hand. They knelt before Jesus as if paying homage to a king and said, "**Hail, King of the Jews!**" They spit on him, and struck him on the head again and again with the staff. This humiliation was all done to mock his kingship.

Jesus was physically so weak that he had no strength to carry the cross. So a man named Simon from Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross. When they came to a place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"), they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall [a bitter liver discharge]; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

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Look at verse 35a. **“When they had crucified him...”** Matthew avoids the gruesome descriptions of Jesus’ physical agony. Crucifixion was designed to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering. Crucifixion may be the most awful form of punishment ever devised. The condemned was stretched out and nailed to a wooden cross through his hands and feet. Then the cross was put upright to display the victim to all who passed by. Even a small movement would cause so much pain that there were no words to describe it. So a word had to be invented, “excruciating” (out of the cross). On the cross, the victims fell in and out of consciousness many times.

Look at verses 36-37. **“And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”** The charge was intended to make Jesus look like a rebel. Jesus was crucified between two rebels to shame and humiliate him all the more. But from God’s point of view, Jesus is the spiritual king who came to save us from our sins.

On the cross, Jesus was mocked and insulted by the Jews who passed by. They said, **“You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”** (39-40) Their taunting words echoed Satan’s words when he tempted Jesus in the desert (4:3,6). The chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders sarcastically mocked him. **“He saved others, but he can’t save himself!”** (43)

In this passage, we see all the characters wanted to save themselves. This is the way of Satan. The desire to save myself is very strong in me. How about you? Satan’s way is to sacrifice others to save ourselves. People sacrifice others to save themselves. But God’s way is different. Jesus could have saved himself. He could have defended himself during his trials. He could have sent 12 legions of angels to destroy all his enemies (26:53). But he did not. He went to the cross willingly and suffered. Why? It was to **“save his people from their sins”** (1:21). This is God’s way. Jesus reversed the self-saving ways of Satan.

“From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land.” “About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**) The word “forsaken” means abandoned. Imagine parents abandoning their children! Or husbands abandoning their wives or vice versa. Being abandoned by loved ones is always painful. But this pain cannot even be compared with how terrible it is to be abandoned by God, which is hell. Why was Jesus forsaken by

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God? It was because Jesus took upon himself God's wrath and judgment for our sins. Isaiah 53:4-5 prophesied, **"Surely he took up our pain and bore our sufferings...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities..."** Apostle Paul explained in 2 Cor. 5:21, **"God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** Apostle Peter wrote, **"He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.'" (1Pe 2:24)** This is the gospel. Thank you Jesus for taking upon yourself the wrath of God for our sins!

Third, the meaning of Jesus' death (50-66).

At the moment of Jesus' death, the religious leaders and the devil thought that they had won the victory. But God was in control of everything. Matthew states that the death of Jesus is not an ordinary death and describes four remarkable things that occurred the moment Jesus died.

(1) Jesus' death opened the way to God (50-51a). Look at verses 50-51a. **"And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At the moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."** In Jewish history, the temple was the center of their culture. The temple was the dwelling place of God. God is holy and we are sinners. Hebrews 9 tells us that in the temple there was a thick curtain separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place. The curtain was said to be four inches thick; even horses tied to each side could not pull the curtain apart. No one could enter the Most Holy Place. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was permitted to go in to the Most Holy Place (Ex.30:10; Heb.9:7). This curtain separated the holy God from sinful men. People commit sin every day. But they had to wait the whole year until the Day of Atonement to solve their sin problem. People couldn't come to God without the high priest. However, at the moment Jesus died, God tore the curtain of the temple in two from top to bottom. Jesus' sacrifice, the shedding of His own blood, signified atonement for sins. It also signified that now the way into the Most Holy Place is open for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. Now Jesus is our high priest; we can enter the Most Holy Place through him. Hebrews 10:19-20 says, **"we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body."** Through his death, Jesus removed the barrier between God and men. Now we can approach God freely and boldly (Heb.4:14-16). That is why, whenever we come to God, we need Jesus. Now we can come to God not just once a year, but every day, any time, wherever we are, through faith in Jesus. This is how Jesus opened the

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way for sinners to come to God. All the ways of sinful men cannot solve their sin problem. Judas' way of returning the money could not ease his guilty conscience. The religious leaders' way of ritual could not justify them. Pilate's way of avoiding responsibility and washing his hands did not make him right. But Jesus opened the way for all kinds of sinners to solve their sin problem and come to God through his death on the cross. This is a great blessing. Growing up in India, I wanted to follow Hindu philosophy and live a good moral life. But I was unable to. I lived with guilt and shame in my sin of lust, without any hope of recovery. I could not resolve my sin and guilt problem for many years. But through studying the Bible, I came to see and accept that Jesus opened the way to God for me. Now I have access to God, forgiveness, healing and I am moving forward. What a blessing it is that Jesus opens the way for us to come to God! Because of Jesus, the way to God has been opened for all of us to come to God and worship Him freely, and experience forgiveness, healing and fellowship with God.

(2) Jesus' death opened the tombs (52). Look at verse 52. **“...and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.”** Before the death of Jesus, everyone was under the power of death. Job describes death as **“the king of terrors”** (Job 18:14). No one heard of a dead man raised to life from the tomb. Many people think that death is the end of life. So they live irresponsible and reckless lives without hope and meaning, and die and go to the tomb to dwell there forever in darkness and hopelessness. What a tragedy! There are so many religious leaders in the world like Muhammad, Buddha, Krishna, Joseph Smith, Confucius, Baha Ullah, and Guru Nanak. They died like everyone else. None of their deaths give us any meaning or significance to our life. However the death of Jesus is different. The moment Jesus died, the tombs broke open and many holy people were raised to life. This is the sign of the resurrection hope. This is why the death of Jesus is not the death of a criminal, or even of a good man; it is the death of the promised Messiah, and Son of God. Without Jesus, death is terrifying. Jesus came to destroy the power of death through breaking the tombs open. Only Jesus' death can set you and I free from the power of death. For Christians, the tomb is not our final destiny. Our final destiny is the resurrection of the body, the holy city, the kingdom of God. This hope helps us to overcome the terror of death and help us live a life of joy, meaning and a bright hope and future in the resurrection of the body.

(3) Jesus' death opened the eyes of Gentiles (54). The hardened Roman centurion had seen many people who were crucified cursing, swearing, and wanting to save themselves and dying without any significance. However, when he saw Jesus' death, it opened his eyes to see God in Jesus. The centurion and those

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guarding Jesus with him made a confession of faith, “**Surely he was the Son of God!**” Such a statement from the lips of Gentile soldiers is all the more remarkable.

(4) Jesus’ death gives us courage (57-61). Mark and Luke report that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin (Mk 15:42; Lk 23:50). John said he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders (Jn 19:38). But after the death of Jesus, suddenly Joseph became courageous. He stood up and went to Pilate to ask for Jesus’ body. As a ruling council member, he possessed the kind of influence to approach Pilate and obtain his request for Jesus’ body. He took down the body of Jesus, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut out of the rock which had been prepared for himself (Isa.53:9). He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb. In this way Jesus was buried. There were also many women who witnessed the death and burial of Jesus. The tomb was sealed and guarded to ensure that Jesus remained buried within.

In today’s passage we learn through Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, and death His true character and nature. He is our spiritual King who came to serve and sacrificed his life as a Lamb of God for the forgiveness of our sins. The death of Jesus is not the death of a criminal or the death of a good man. It is the death of the Son of God. The ways of man cannot solve our sin problem or bring us to God. But the death of Jesus opened the way to God. Because of Jesus we have access to come to the Holy God at any time and experience forgiveness, healing and fellowship. The death of Jesus destroys the terror of death. The death of Jesus opens our eyes to see God. The death of Jesus gives us courage. Praise Jesus who did not save himself in order to save us from our sins! Praise Jesus who died to open the way to God!