

## Can You Explain This?

Matthew 27:26–36

We have a longer Scripture reading today. The apostle directed Timothy: “Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Tim. 4:13). The first part, “give attention to *reading*,” in context, directed to a minister of the gospel, undoubtedly refers to the public reading of Holy Scripture, God’s holy Word, which was meant to be read aloud. It’s good to take a deep dive and look in depth at shorter texts. It’s good also to read a longer narrative and see the flow of a context. Both are edifying, and neither practice should be neglected.

This message is the second-to-last of a series based on texts which contain the phrase “that it might be fulfilled.” Today, we come to Matthew’s account of the crucifixion. Notice that we encounter the word *fulfill* twice in today’s text. Two specific elements of today’s text are said to be direct fulfillments of Old Testament Scripture. First, in verses 9–10 we read: “Then was *fulfilled* what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver’”—referring to the purchase of the potter’s field as a burying place for the poor. Then, in verse 35 we have the full phrase: “Then they . . . divided His garments, casting lots, *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by the prophet: ‘They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.’” Note the words “that it might be fulfilled”—the last instance of this phrase in the Holy Bible. Next week, Lord willing, we will consider the one Old Testament use of the phrase (in the book of Ezra), bringing an end to this series.

Matthew 27 contains the story of the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus. These are two of the most important events in the Savior’s life, for he took on human flesh in order that he could “die for our sins, according to the Scripture.” As the eternal Son, equal to the Father as to his deity, it was impossible for him to die, for God cannot die. So he had to become man. As the chapter opens, Jesus has been arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and has had a hasty trial in the middle of the night before Caiaphas the high priest and the Sanhedrin, or Jewish council. The finding of guilt was predetermined and unanimous: “He is deserving of death.”<sup>1</sup> As the night wore on, Peter denies Christ three times, just as our Lord had said he would.

In the morning, Jesus is bound and led away to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for his civil trial—to rubber-stamp and give a veneer of legitimacy to his religious trial. Judas Iscariot, seeing that his betrayal of the Savior had resulted in Jesus being condemned, was remorseful, and repented. He went back to the temple and tried to return the thirty-pieces-of-silver blood money, but the chief priests and elders wouldn’t take it back. So Judas threw down the money and went out and

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 26:66

hanged himself. The chief priests scooped up the silver pieces and, having intentionally wrongly condemned an innocent man to death, suddenly became scrupulous about doing the right thing. They said, “It is not lawful to put [the money] into the treasury, because [it is] the price of blood.” That’s a little like paying the proper taxes on a bank robbery. How easily we justify our wrongdoings!

Consider the case of Judas. His was a monstrous crime—betraying the innocent Son of God who came to teach us the way of truth and die in our place to take us to heaven. When Judas first conceived the evil plan, he should have dropped it right then and there. But what was done was done. Judas should have followed the example of David, who, confronted with his guilt in having committed adultery with another man’s wife, freely acknowledged his transgressions.<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 28:13 promises, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them *shall have mercy*.” The gospel that Judas formerly preached promises *mercy* to penitent sinners. Judas should have cast himself upon God’s mercy and said, “Father, I have sinned.” But instead, he added sin to sin and compounded his guilt, taking his own life (self-murder), a violation of the sixth commandment. It is possible to be in such a confused state of mind as not to be thinking straight. But when we are on the wrong course, what we need to do is to repent, not press ahead! As the Psalmist puts it, “There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.”<sup>3</sup>

We do not have time to go into all the details of Jesus’ civil trial before Pontius Pilate. Jesus knew that the system was rigged against him, so he remained silent and didn’t argue for his innocence. The Jews were not interested in a fair trial. They didn’t even try to make a case against Jesus. As for his part, Pilate couldn’t risk antagonizing the Jews, so he tried to placate them. When Pilate asked them, “What . . . shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” The Jews responded with one voice, “Let Him be crucified!”

Pilate, obviously uncomfortable doing this, said, “Why, what evil has He done?” But the Jews cried out the more insistently, saying, “Let Him be crucified!”

Pilate was a savvy politician and could sense the political winds. Verse 24 tells us that “When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising [NASB: “a riot was starting”], he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.’” The Jews’ answer was tragic: “His blood be on us and on our children.”

We’ll come back to this statement of the Jews in a moment, but consider what Pilate said: “I am *innocent* of the blood of this just Person” (v. 24). Pilate was tragically misinformed. *Man cannot declare himself innocent*. Innocence and guilt are ultimately determined by God himself, who at the last day will judge all things

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<sup>2</sup> Ps. 51:3

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 130:4

according to his perfect law. Sinful man thinks that he can redefine sin and declare himself righteous. Think, for example, of the LGBTQ or “gay-pride” movement that proudly proclaims to be “good” what the Bible declares to be *perversion*.<sup>4</sup> The root idea of perversion is the *alteration of something from its original state*. If something that is perfect is altered, then it is no longer perfect. In the very beginning God created a perfect world. He looked around at everything he had made and pronounced it “very good.” But when Adam sinned, God cursed the ground for man’s sake. From that point on, man would have to labor and toil to earn a living. Woman would experience pain and sorrow in childbearing. And man’s thinking and understanding would be affected as well. Man would tend to call “good” what God calls “evil”—but Holy Scripture declares: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isa. 5:20). God pronounces a curse upon those who dare to redefine his moral order. Pilate could not simply wash his hands and absolve himself of the guilt of sentencing an innocent man to death by crucifixion in order that he could please the Jewish leaders. And you cannot absolve yourself of guilt by declaring your sinful behavior to be good. You cannot *declare yourself* to be innocent; rather, what you need is to look to the Lord Jesus in faith and have your sins washed away by his precious blood, and have his perfect righteousness credited to your account. There is no other way of salvation.

There is a textual variant in Pilate’s statement, and I need to say something about it. The New King James has: “I am innocent of the blood of this *just* Person.” The ESV has: “I am innocent of this man’s blood” (with the marginal note: “Some manuscripts *righteous blood*, or *righteous man’s blood*”), leaving out the word “righteous,” or “just” from the main text. Here is an important testimony to our Lord’s reputation, even among the pagans, such as the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. John would write in his first epistle that “if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ *the righteous*” (1 John 2:1). (Note: “righteous” and “just” are both appropriate translations of the word δίκαιος [dikaios], used in both Matt. 27:24 and 1 John 2:1; “righteous” comes into English from the Anglo-Saxon; “just” comes into English from Latin.) The 1 John reference is the testimony of the inspired apostle John, who loved Jesus and was his disciple, but the Matthew 27 reference is the testimony of a *non-believer*—a Roman, Pontius Pilate. This indicates that Jesus’ character was of such a reputation that even the non-believing world could not help but notice it—and our own reputation should be as well. If the critical text is correct, then this testimony to the character of our Lord from the pagan Pontius Pilate is entirely lacking.

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<sup>4</sup> Try looking up the words *perverse*, *perversion*, *perversity* or *perverseness* in various translations.

The ESV (and it is not alone; almost all modern translations follow this reading) deliberately ignores the whole Byzantine tradition, the text that was in common use in the church. It's not "some" manuscripts (per ESV), it is the vast majority of *thousands* of manuscripts. Sadly, the ESV prefers the opinions of critical scholars over almost 2,000 years of church practice. This is very biased. It implies that the church did not have the correct text of Scripture until scholars came along and corrected us. This does not square with our Lord's teaching that when the Holy Spirit would come, he would guide the church into *all* truth (John 16:13). How could the Lord of heaven allow his church to use a corrupted version of his Word for almost 2,000 years—meaning that he originally inspired his perfect Word, which is forever settled in heaven,<sup>5</sup> then failed to preserve that Word and allowed it to be lost to his faithful church? What does this say about the intention and power of Almighty God? How can this be squared with Scripture's testimony that "he doeth *according to his will* in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan. 4:35). The teaching of Scripture is that God performs *all* his holy will, not only in heaven, but also among those who dwell on earth, both regenerate and unregenerate. This is what theologians call "omnipotence"—God is absolutely sovereign, and does not lack the power, ability or desire to carry out all his holy will. If he wills something, then absolutely nothing in heaven or on earth can prevent him from carrying it out.

This is a doctrine that is readily confessed by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Consider Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8, which says in part, "The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, *kept pure in all ages*, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them."<sup>6</sup> Note especially the phrase "kept pure in all ages." The Westminster divines were very careful to insist that the God of heaven not only inspired the original autographs (the actual pieces of parchment and papyrus on which the words of God were originally written down), but he also *kept his word pure* as it was used in his church's worship. Many Christians have a defective understanding of the doctrine of inspiration: that the original autographs were divinely inspired and perfect, but since these autographs are now lost (having worn out from use, ages ago), we can never be altogether certain that the copies we have are accurate. If this understanding be true, then the church cannot declare with certainty, "Thus saith the LORD." Perhaps we can be 99% certain, but never 100% certain. Brothers and sisters, I submit to you that that is not good enough! The Protestant Reformers believed that the ecclesiastical text (the text that was in common usage in the church's worship) was the true text of Scripture. The Geneva

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<sup>5</sup> Ps. 119:89

<sup>6</sup> *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 920

Bible of 1560 was translated by the English church in Geneva. The King James Bible, first published in 1611, was produced under the oversight of the Church of England. Since the late 1800s, the church has essentially given up its God-given role as custodian of the biblical text, leaving it to independent scholars and profit-seeking publishing houses, producing copyrighted versions of a Bible that never belonged to them—that was never their property. It is of note that the text that the church of our Lord Jesus Christ had used in its worship from earliest times preserved the inspired wording “the blood of this *just* Person” (the Lord Jesus Christ)—and we should not give that up.

In verse 25 we have the tragic self-incrimination of the Jews who could not stand to hear the self-evident truth that Jesus was “just”: “His blood be on us and on our children.” What does this mean? The *guilt of his bloodshed* be on us and on our children. These unbelieving Jews were intentionally pronouncing a curse upon themselves. As noted by Calvin: “while they commit an irreparable crime, they add to it a solemn imprecation, by which they cut themselves off from the hope of pardon.”<sup>7</sup> Such is the tragic blindness of sin—to so arrogantly and stubbornly cling to their hatred and detestation of the Son of God that they would pronounce a curse upon both themselves and their descendants, for all time. It is one thing to say, “May I be eternally damned,” but to wish that upon one’s descendants is the height of folly.

But in his Great Commission, our Lord said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned*” (Mark 16:15–16). You can disagree with a fellow human being without harming yourself, but you cannot disagree with Christ without bringing eternal harm upon yourself. If you do not believe in Christ, to the salvation of your soul, then by default you are consigning yourself to eternal damnation. You are saying: “I utterly reject my only hope of salvation.” This is indeed the height of folly.

In verse 26 we read that Pontius Pilate delivered Christ up to be crucified. Then in verse 35 we read that the sentence of crucifixion was carried out. What is crucifixion? Look closely at the word itself. The first part, *cruci-*, refers to the cross. The second part, *-fixion*, refers to the act of affixing—fastening a human body to an instrument of torture and death. To *crucify* means to put to death by nailing the wrists and feet to a wooden cross. Crucifixion causes asphyxiation, where the victim struggles to breathe until he finally succumbs. It was a cruel and painful means of execution perfected by the Romans, and it continues in some places to this very day. It comes into our common vocabulary as *excruciating*—being in such pain as enduring crucifixion. Matthew faithfully documents that

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Matt. 27:25 (Logos Bible Software)

“they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.” Here is a reference to Psalm 22, which speaks prophetically about Christ’s crucifixion. Matthew quotes the 18<sup>th</sup> verse of this Psalm and states that this prophecy was literally fulfilled at Christ’s crucifixion. Roman soldiers carrying out a crucifixion would typically strip the victim naked, then divide among themselves his garments, which at that time would have been made entirely by hand, and so were valuable. The Psalmist, writing about 1,000 years before the time of Christ, would not have known about the future practices of Roman soldiers. But notice that the Psalmist specifically states that “for My clothing they *cast lots*.” This prophecy was fulfilled to the letter in the case of Christ, for his tunic—the garment worn closest to his skin—was “without seam, woven from the top in one piece.”<sup>8</sup> The soldiers did not want to ruin this garment by cutting it apart, so they cast lots for it. Here is a very specific prophecy of Scripture, penned by David a thousand years before Christ, that specifically foretells that the soldiers attending Christ’s crucifixion—Romans—would *cast lots* to determine which of them would go home with Jesus’ tunic. It would have been impossible for Jesus’ disciples to collude with the Romans soldiers assigned to this particular crucifixion, to instruct them to cast lots as they divided up Jesus’ clothing. Now Bible-believing Christians know that the God of the Bible is the God who knows perfectly and comprehensively, absolutely everything that will ever happen in the future. He knows this from eternity past, and it happens because he predetermines it. He is never taken by surprise, and he never overlooks anything. Absolutely everything that happens to you in this life happens because it is his eternal purpose. He determines it for his glory and your ultimate good—no exceptions! The Christian can explain how this obscure prophecy of King David was exactly fulfilled in the death of Christ. But if you reject the biblical worldview, can *you* explain it? No! Here, then, is a testimony to the divine origin of Holy Scripture. It did not originate in the will of man but in the mind of God, who inspired holy men of his choosing to write down his words. There’s no other way of explaining it.

The fact that Jesus’ tunic—the garment closest to his skin—was removed indicates that he was crucified completely naked. To paraphrase Calvin: God determined that his own Son should be stripped of his clothing, that we, clothed with his righteousness, may appear with boldness in company with the angels.<sup>9</sup> The only way to be saved is to throw off the rags of our own self-righteousness and be clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ which alone qualifies a sinner to enter heaven.

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<sup>8</sup> John 19:23

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Matt. 27:25 (Logos Bible Software)

As Christ's minister I plead with you to commit yourself to him and receive his gift of salvation. There's a warning here in our text: Two men, Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate, who were *not* faithful disciples, both recognized that Jesus was innocent and ought not to die. *Judas* was personally called by Christ and followed him as his disciple for three-and-a-half years. *Pontius Pilate* was a Roman governor whose interest was strictly political—preserving his own power. He was a polytheist who worshipped the many Roman gods—small g! It is unclear if Pilate had ever heard of Jesus prior to his being brought before him. His main concern was to maintain the political status quo and prevent a Jewish rebellion, so he tended to give the Jews what they wanted, as much as he could. Significantly, *both these men*—Judas and Pontius Pilate—had a high opinion of Jesus, yet perished in their sins. *You can have a good opinion of Jesus, yet die in your sin.* It is not enough to say, “I believe that Jesus was a great teacher, but do not accept that he was the eternal Son of God.” To say that is to sell him short, to refuse to acknowledge him as God's Messiah, the only Savior. O dear one, I plead with you: commit your life to Christ.

“If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”<sup>10</sup> God requires that you do two things in order to be saved: (1) personally believe the good news that Christ died for our sins and rose again the third day; and (2) confess Christ as Lord with his church. We who worship together here stand ready to help you. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Rom. 10:9