

Good morning, welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace and Truth Bible Church. It is a privilege to gather with you this morning and have the opportunity to be nourished and encouraged by what we find in the Word of God. We are in Matthew chapter 27. We are at verse 42, in that vicinity, looking at this scene at Golgotha, the crucifixion proper, and we have some very telling details to address this morning.

Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and on our study, and we'll begin. Father, it is such a privilege and a blessing to gather in the name of the Lord Jesus to worship You and to appreciate, through Your Word and through Your Spirit, the incredible salvation that is ours because of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, fulfilling Your plan and purpose, the fullest expression of Your love toward us and Your desire that all men everywhere come to repentance, that none should perish. And yet You have granted us free will and the ability to make our own decisions. And we pray that, as we look at this portion of Your Word together, that the Holy Spirit will minister it to our hearts, let it flame and shine as a light in our souls to renew our minds, to make clear and to expose the thoughts and intents of our hearts so that we can make better decisions, make those decisions, establish our priorities, pursue our goals, and express those values that most fully reflect our identity as the body of the Lord Jesus, His representation on this earth, and that we can accomplish what He accomplished, which is to fulfill Your purpose and reflect Your glory to everyone who observes. All of those who are seeking and are susceptible can see the light shining and be drawn to You through the Lord Jesus. We pray it in His name, amen.

Let's review our passage beginning in verse 38. We know that the Lord Jesus has been placed on the cross. The soldiers have cast lots for His clothing, which is a fulfillment of Scripture. The two robbers are crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. It is so telling to me, it is so significant to me, what the Gospels choose to emphasize and what they don't. The detail here that the thieves are crucified with Him is in all four Gospels.

Any human being concocting this story, or even telling this story as an eyewitness without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would have dwelt on other details: the appearance of the Lord Jesus, the moment when the cross is assembled and the Lord Jesus is nailed to it, and the cross is erected, and we would have heard about the shocking scene. Those details are entirely omitted. All of the Gospel writers focus on other things, and one of those that all four relate is the presence of the two thieves and that Jesus is in the center.

There's one on the right and one on the left. We take this for granted, that Jesus would be in the center, but I ask myself the question, why did the Romans do it this way? Why didn't they put Him on the left or on the right? Why weren't they behind or in front? This seems to have been a regular place of crucifixion. This is not the only crucifixion that took place in Jerusalem.

This was the execution ground. You can visit places from World War II in various countries, whether it's Poland or Czechoslovakia or somewhere, where there are walls that are pockmarked with bullets, and this is where the Germans would take those that they wanted to execute and line them up, sometimes blindfold them, and then shoot them. It is a regular and repeated place of execution, and Golgotha—they didn't break fresh ground.

This wasn't a new innovation. It was a relative commonplace. People had been crucified there before; more would be crucified after.

The Romans took this completely in stride and did not have any qualms or take any special notice of this. This crucifixion was nothing special to the Romans, as I was mentioning a moment ago, and not particularly so to the Jews. It is so central to our faith and our understanding, and the scene is so deeply engraved in our thoughts and in our memories that we don't always stop and consider the details and how unusual they might be.

But the Lord Jesus is in the center, and there is a thief on each side. And of the things that would be prophesied, it says He was numbered with the transgressors. But it's interesting that there is a prophecy that says, "They cast lots for my garments," which is a seemingly minor detail. But the arrangement that He is crucified between two thieves is not something that was prophesied, and yet it is so visible and so iconic, if you will, that it makes me ask myself the question, why are the things that we think of as most emblematic not the content of the prophecies, or even of the points that the Gospel writers dwell on? Why do they give the details they give and de-emphasize the things that we have to fill in from inference, from interpolation or extrapolation, knowing how crucifixions typically go? But we don't know the shape of the cross.

The Jehovah's Witnesses think Jesus was crucified on a pole, and you say, "Well, that's going to be easy to disprove." It's not as easy as you might think. They can get away with that because there's no clear indication of the shape of the cross.

We can infer it and we can understand it, especially from Old Testament symbolism, such as the blood on the doorposts and those splashes on the doorposts and on the lintel, and then dripping down to the floor in front. Those four locations tell us that Jesus' hands were outspread. The use of the word tree to talk about the cross—you don't typically think of a tree as being a telephone-pole shape. It has branches. It has lateral extensions. But the details that are omitted are significant by their absence.

And then there are other things that all four Gospel writers are very careful to tell us. The Synoptic Gospels don't tell us about Jesus committing His mother to John's care. There is only the one indication that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is an uncertain, it is a questionable text. If it is legitimate, it, by way of context, is directed at the soldiers who are accomplishing the crucifixion. The pronouns are consistent in that situation.

But the words are not included by anyone else. And you would think if Jesus was conferring forgiveness on everyone at the scene, this would be something that would be prominently expressed in all of the Gospels. And it's only in Luke, and questionable there.

So I'm intrigued by this, as you can tell. And it has occurred to me that there is a theme that runs through the details that are given. See if you can pick it up here as we review our context.

When you begin with the crucifixion in verse 35, we begin seeing those who are present at the scene. And what we find detailed and expressed in very graphic terms is not the Lord Jesus on the cross, His appearance. There are very few references to Him. There's not a detailed account of how He looked or His deterioration physically as He approaches the moment of death. The focus is on those who are around the cross, including these two thieves, one on the right hand and one on the left.

So we begin with the soldiers, and their presence and casting lots for His garments is emphasized by the citation of the Old Testament prophecy from Psalm 22. And we have several references and allusions back to Psalm 22. And if you'll keep your place here and turn to Psalm 22, this is an appropriate place to review the content of that. We have allusions to Psalm 22 and another psalm.

Psalm 22. You have to believe that this psalm in its entirety was committed to memory and was in the Lord Jesus' mind as He accomplished this work in partaking of the cup that the Father has left Him to, has assigned for Him. Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning?"

The number of italics here indicate that there's a little bit of uncertainty in terms of what this actually means. In the Hebrew, as in the Greek, it is probably better translated, "My God, my God, what have You left me to?" And if you look at—if you leave out the italics—"far from helping me, the words of my groaning. Far from helping me, the words of my groaning."

"Oh, my God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent." And we're about to see the three hours of darkness descend on the scene. And the light and the darkness that are expressed here are reflected in that morning and then midday darkness.

"But You are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in You. They trusted, and You delivered them. They cried to You and were delivered. They trusted You and were not ashamed." This idea that, "Why have You forsaken me? God is gone and I'm all alone and left to do this in my own strength," is really a mistaken idea.

Looking at the context, both at the cross and here in anticipation in Psalm 22, the confidence that God is righteous and holy. He is—as remember when Paul says, "God is not unrighteous to forget your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope," the triad of Christian virtues. And he says, you know, you're facing difficulty, you have persecution, you've got opposition from the legalistic Jews in your community and so on. But God is not unrighteous to forget.

And it is fine to ask questions, to look at a difficult situation, and our first thought is, “Has God forgotten me? Has He left me on my own here?” The question comes up, and hard on the heels of the question—which it's not sinful to ask it; we shouldn't be ashamed of ourselves for momentarily wondering—these challenges are designed to stimulate us to remember what we know. And so we ask the question, and God the Holy Spirit brings to our heart the answer.

But there's nothing wrong with asking the question. And this is consistent across the accounts of the Lord Jesus, His “Eli, Eli,” or “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” which is the quotation of this verse. To be in such a severe strait that you begin to wonder if this really is the will of God: “Is this what You have left me to?” But immediately, as a response from our soul and from our heart, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, from the Word of God, we supply the answer. And that's what David does in Psalm 22.

That is what the Lord Jesus does as He accomplishes this work on the cross. “You are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel.” These praises are deserved. They are merited. God is holy. He is righteous. He is just. He does not suffer the righteous to be moved. He does not abandon His Holy One to Sheol, and so on.

Human nature, faced with this horrific affront—it is unjust. It is unfair. It is beyond the pale. Is God in this? Is this truly the cup that You have put on the table before me? And the answer is in verse 3: “You are holy. You are enthroned in the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in You. They trusted, and You delivered them.” This is God's name. This is God's history. This is God's reputation. This is the expression of God's plan, purpose, and power in the Old Testament age.

And this is how we work ourselves back to confidence, to peace, to faith in God, that He knows what He's doing when it, to the human eye, raises a question. This is the answer. They trusted in You; You delivered them. They cried to You and were delivered. I am crying to You, “My God, my God.” That's how this psalm begins. When they cried out, You answered. I can fully expect that, as I cry out, You will answer.

This is the opposite of being forsaken. They trusted in You and were not ashamed, were not abandoned, were not left twisting in the wind or unaided, unthought of, uncared for.

“But I am a worm and no man, a reproach of men and despised by the people.” Notice verse 6. This is what the Gospel accounts focus on. It is the mockery of the soldiers. It is the mockery by the passersby. It is the scorn and the vindictive, hateful, despicable speeches that are launched at Him from the rulers of Israel, the priests, the scribes, the quote-unquote spiritual leadership. This is detailed verse by verse by verse during Jesus' time on the cross.

And it is anticipated in Psalm 22 here: “A reproach of men and despised by the people. All those who see me ridicule me. They shoot out the lip. They shake the head, saying, ‘He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue him. Let Him deliver him, since He delights in him.’”

And if you can believe it, this is quoted word for word by the religious leaders who are standing viewing the crucifixion. They quote this. How can you be that far gone? And yet we remember we are made out of the very same clay. We are equally capable.

These men, by the way, are believers. They are going to be resurrected. Jesus said, “You are going to see people gathered from the four winds and sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and you are going to see yourself thrust out.” The rest of the dead live not till the end of the millennium. These men are gonna be resuscitated at the beginning. And they think that they are all set up for a golden chair at the table in the millennial Jerusalem. They will be thrust out. They will be weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth. They have this six hours of scornful, arrogant, crazy attitude. They'll have a thousand years to regret it. They will have a thousand years to regret it.

But it is anticipated, and the Lord Jesus is comforted, I think, during His trial, during this suffering, by the knowledge that it is a part of God's plan. God has not forsaken Him. God has supplied Him with an understanding that this is part of it. It was foreseen. It was foreknown.

Jesus tells His disciples, “In this world, you shall have trouble.” Thlipsis, tribulation, it is in the Greek. I'm sure He told them in Aramaic. “You're gonna have trouble in this world, but be of good cheer. Be comforted. Don't be discouraged. Don't be beat down. Don't be depressed.” Why? “I have overcome the world.”

Well, we don't see the victory of the Lord Jesus yet. The Lord Jesus on the cross doesn't see the deliverance of Himself yet. When is the Lord Jesus going to be delivered in this situation? He is not removed from the cross, and boy, do they scorn Him for that. We'll see that in all of the accounts when we return to it.

But they shoot out the lip. They shake the head. This moving of the head, this wagging of the head, is specifically mentioned in the Gospels. Not just what they say, but the way they say it. The attitude with which they launch these jabs and these jibes and these vicious attacks.

“Well, you're not so hot now. You delivered others. You can't deliver yourself. If you're the Son of God, if you're the Christ, we'll come down from the cross so we can see it and believe in you.” That's exactly what they say. Prove to us you're the Christ by coming down off the cross.

Do you remember a similar test, a similar temptation that Jesus faced at the very beginning? It is satanic. Why don't you skip the cross and just take the crown? “If you'll fall down and worship me, I'll give you the kingdoms of the world. You can have the millennium now and you don't have to suffer. If you're the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. If you're the Son of God, cast yourself down from the temple. Look at these nations of the world. They all belong to me. Your Father, God in heaven, gave me sovereignty over everything but Israel. And I'll give it all to you. This unappreciative little bunch of Jews here—you've come to your own and your own receive you not. They're not going to believe in you. You know where this is headed. I'll give you everything else in the world. You fall down and worship me. I'll give you all the kingdoms of the earth with their glory. Instead of this little postage-stamp patch on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea here, this little bunch of unappreciative people, forget them. I'll give you the planet. Just submit. Bow to me. You can have it all.”

“He trusted in the Lord. Let Him rescue him.” The Lord Jesus is trusting in the Lord. His Father does delight in Him. What has God said from heaven at least twice? What did He say at the baptism by John in the Jordan? Holy Spirit descended like a dove. And what were the words that accompanied that descent? “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” What did the voice from heaven say on the Mount of Transfiguration? “This is My Son in whom I delight, in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye Him. Listen to Him.”

But people allege and accuse and spitefully claim that God can't be delighting in Him, or He would deliver Him from the cross. “Let Him deliver Him if He delights in Him.” And their test of whether God is delighted or not is 180 degrees out.

“Well, this is what God would do. I know what God would do. If You were really the Christ, God would deliver You and not let You suffer on the cross, because I know God so well.” Right? People who think they know God because they know a lot of Scripture—that's these guys. People who have popular wisdom. “Well, if He were the Son of God, this would never happen. This is shameful. He's completely powerless and helpless.”

And we'll get to the worst of it when we finish reviewing Psalm 22. But God built into the human soul of the Lord Jesus the antidote, the defense, to enable Him to survive this test. As the song says, He could have called 10,000 angels to destroy the world and set Him free. He told Peter in the garden, “Don't you know I could end this at any moment?” And He didn't. What a difficult test.

He could have melted these people by first demonstrating that He could come down from the cross. God would deliver Him if He chose. But their notion of what God would do is as wrong as everything else they believe about what God would do.

“Well, God's blessing me because I'm righteous. I'm rich because God delights in me. I am powerful and well thought of, or I think I am, in my hypocrisy and in my twisting of the law and in my oppression of the poor.” Jesus told them over and over again, “You search the Scriptures because in them you think you have eternal life, and it is they which testify of Me. If you knew My Father, you would know Me. If you listened to the Father, you would listen to Me.” But they don't know the Father. And it never comes to a sharper, finer point than right here.

“Well, if God delighted in Him, He'd deliver Him off the cross.” This is dangerously blind, dangerously ignorant for a believer to claim to know God, claim to represent God, claim to be a leader on behalf of God, and be so entirely blind. That's why Jesus said, “If you were blind, if you would acknowledge your blindness, you could repent, be forgiven, and you would have no sin. But because you say, ‘We see,’ because you're happy with what you think you know, your sin remains.”

If we learn nothing else from this scene at the foot of the cross, it is the dangerous, deceitful nature of our own hearts. We can think we're on the right track and we're not. We can think we are right. We can think we're traveling the way that seems right, and the ends thereof are the ways of death. Not just physical death, but operational death, fruitfulness death, usefulness death—everything that does not partake of eternal life. It is temporary. It is temporal. It is earthly. It is a vapor and a chasing after the wind.

And we think it's substance. We think it's great. It pleases us in our human wisdom. But to quote Psalm 22 at the Lord Jesus while He is fulfilling it, and be so blind as to think that it is an accusation and a proof that He's not the Christ and He's not the Son of God and God does not delight in Him—the very Scripture that proves who Jesus is—they are so blind. They take it in its opposite sense.

And you know from past study that this is not the only Scripture that people can take and completely massacre the meaning and twist and distort to our own destruction. We have to have the humility to appeal to God so that it will be given, so that it will be opened, so that it will be found by us—to ask and to seek and to knock—and to have the humility to be ready to admit that my previous understanding, my current understanding, may not be right. I am going to lash myself to the mast of God's Word, and that is going to be my stability. That is going to be my correction, my instruction. In some cases, my rebuke. It is going to be the truth that guides me and that defines me, and it requires humility.

The one thing you can say about shooting out the lip and wagging the head and launching these vicious, hateful remarks—even just take for a moment the possibility, the hypothetical, that Jesus was misguided and wasn't the Messiah, wasn't the Son of God. He had some sort of problem. What exactly has He done that merits this kind of spite and vindictive hatefulness? Wouldn't a normal, healthy, God-fearing human being feel sorry for someone who was delusional and those delusions led them to a really bad end, to a suffering demise? Wouldn't loving God and loving your neighbor make you want to help someone who was delusional?

This hate is not from God. This—and I'm belaboring this a bit because there is a lot of vicious attack and hatred in our society today. People scorecard other people by issues and by viewpoints and by opinions. And if someone doesn't share your opinion or doesn't support your candidate or your choice or your position on something, it isn't a matter of, “I really wish I could illuminate, I wish I could get someone to understand why I believe what I believe, I wish we could come together and unite on some common ground.” It is crush, kill, destroy. “These people must be silenced. They must be punished. They must be hurt. I'll go to their house and shout at them through a bullhorn. I'll viciously smear them. I'll destroy their reputation. I'll make them lose their job. I'm going to hurt them. I want to hurt them and hurt them bad because they don't agree with me.”

That is not of Christ, and it should not be found in the heart and soul of any healthy believer. We should be characterized by love to the extent that it is possible. We are commanded to live peaceably with all men. We don't attack people if they've got a different political leaning or support a different candidate or believe that an issue should be decided and implemented this way or that way or the other way.

We can personally discern for ourselves and say, “I don't support that. I don't think that's right. I'm not going to vote that way or support somebody who thinks that's a good idea.” But this hate is exposed at the cross to remind us that we have a choice. This is why there is one thief on the left and one on the right. And we're not told that it's the thief on the right that is the one who is repentant and the thief on the left is wrong. Well, was it Jesus' left or was it the observers' left? It doesn't matter which side.

The fact is they are separated by the cross. They are divided by the cross. One of them says, “You shouldn't be talking about this man in this way. We deserve our punishment, but this man has done nothing wrong.” And then he says, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” The other one doesn't have that response. The cross is a dividing point.

Jesus said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Obviously, He is the Prince of Peace, but He didn't bring peace the first time. He made an issue of Himself and His identity. “Who do men say that I am? Who do you say that I am?” “You are the Christ.” Or, “Well, He can't be the Christ or He'd come down from the cross.” That's the division.

And it is not just a choice in terms of salvation. It is a choice for us. Are we going to honor the Lord Jesus as the Lord of our life, as the example which we should follow? Are we going to represent Him as His body on this

earth? Are we going to accompany Him and partake of the overcomer blessings because we value Him, because we adopt His attitude? When reviled, He did not revile in return.

Reviling should never escape our lips. It shouldn't even enter our hearts. Humility extinguishes this mockery, this vicious, hateful, vindictive, unkind attitude and speech toward others. You either have humility or you have this hatred. And Christians should be absent from these awful, bitter arguments and personal attacks and desire to punish and cancel and remove and stomp out by force those who disagree. It's not the Lord Jesus.

But we'll pause here and take our break. When we come back, we have much more to see about those who surround the cross.