

Matthew 27:27–56 | “The Cruelty & Wonder of the Cross”

Preached on August 4, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles to Matthew 27:27. *[pause]*

Today we are going to be looking at one of the central events of the Christian faith, and really all of history—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. *[pauseeee]*

What would you do if you were talking to someone who just lost their job, and they couldn’t stop rejoicing? *[pause]*

What would you do if someone was just beaten up by somebody else and they celebrated?

Or if someone lost all of their money and was happy? *[pause]*

It wouldn’t make sense. *[pause]*

To us: failure, brutality, and loss are not moments of celebration or joy, but only moments of atrocity and sorrow.

Yet if you notice my sermon title this morning, I have entitled it, “The Cruelty & Wonder of the Cross.” *[pauseeee]*

You might be thinking, “What’s wrong with you Pastor Matt?”

“Is that a mistake?” Or, “Have you lost your mind?”

How can something be both ugly *and* beautiful, horrific *and* great, cruel *and* wonderful? *[pause]*

It doesn’t quite make sense at first; it sounds contradictory...

How can something be so cruel it makes you cringe, yet fill you with wonder because it’s so great and amazing? *[pause]*

Yet if you think about it, the crucifixion of Christ fits that description. *[pause]*

Now it doesn’t make sense to the world.

To them, it’s like we are rejoicing in a loss, celebrating a defeat, or glorying in an electric chair...

...But there’s so much more to the cross than meets the unbelieving eye. *[pauseeee]*

Let’s READ the passage to see this. (verses 27–56)

What I want us to see first is...

I. The cruelty of the Cross.

In our day, we aren’t used to brutal executions by the government. *[pause]*

Capital punishment is only legal in 27 states in America, and only 23 people were executed last year.¹ *[pause]*

And then when you think about the executions that we *do* have, it's not done publicly, and it's also done with what is considered a more humane method: lethal injections. *[pause]*

So what we are used to is nowhere close to what Jesus went through, so we must put ourselves back in that time to see how cruel it really was. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus' death was done in public, in a humiliating, shameful way, and it was utterly barbaric and cruel. *[pauseee]*

The Romans would have laughed at our 8th Amendment banning "cruel and unusual punishment" for they *perfected* cruel punishment. *[pauseee]*

Every aspect of crucifixion, and even the suffering before it, was meant to humiliate, shame, and torture the person to the greatest degree, in order to deter others from committing crime. *[pauseeee]*

Think of all of the ways that Jesus suffered...

First, you have all the *mocking* that He endured. *[pause]*

We are told that a whole battalion gathers before Jesus.

And do you know how many soldiers that would be? A battalion could be up to 600 men! *[pause]*

He is stripped, mocked, spit on, and hit in front of hundreds of Roman soldiers. *[pauseeee]*

The big thing that they do is they make fun of Him for being called a king.

So they put a robe on Him, a crown of thorns on His head, and give him a reed for a fake kingly scepter. *[pause]*

They kneel before Him and mockingly say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" pretending to submit to this one, who is nothing in their estimation. *[pauseeee]*

We can't stand being the focus of mocking or laughter among people, yet just look at what Jesus went through in front of a whole battalion of soldiers.

They treated Him like He was their dress-up doll, who they could dress up, laugh at, and hit around. *[pauseee]*

To top it off, they nail, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews," above his head to mock Him for all to see. *[pauseeee]*

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/19/us/death-penalty-fast-facts/index.html>.

The mocking of the Romans was more than enough in itself, but many others did, too. *[pause]*

Now we can expect the religious leaders to mock Him, for they were always against Him.

So they ridicule Him for not being able to come down from the cross, when He claimed to be King of Israel.

But the people who pass by *also* wag their heads for not saving Himself, when He claimed so much. *[pause]*

And get this, even the men crucified along with Jesus revile Him. *[pause]*

You would think that people who are going through the same horrific thing that you are, would be on your side and not join in with the mocking, but they do. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus was looked down upon by most everyone around the cross, and He was treated as dirt. *[pauseeee]*

Not only did Jesus suffer great emotional pain when He was mocked, but Jesus suffered *intense physical pain*. *[pause]*

Just before this passage, we heard that Jesus was scourged.

Now He's struck in the head with a reed, and they crush a crown of thorns into His head. *[pause]*

He's in such bad shape even before the cross that the soldiers have to get another man to carry His cross for Him. *[pause]*

And then you have the actual crucifixion which was excruciating in every way. *[pauseeeee]*

Jesus also went through something that would cause *deep humiliation and shame*. *[pauseeee]*

Being mocked and treated horribly in front of all those soldiers would be hard to go through. *[pause]*

To then have to carry your own cross to the place of your death in front of people would add to it all. *[pause]*

Then to hang almost naked, if not completely naked, on the cross would be utterly humiliating. *[pauseeee]*

There you are, with people watching on, and you are hanging there suffering with your crime hanging above your head. *[pause]*

It wasn't like He was suffering behind closed doors, but this was public, for all to see.

In the most humiliating, painful, torturous, weak, and degrading moments of your life, you are on display for all to see. *[pauseeeee]*

May we never forget the lengths that Jesus went, and all that He went through on the cross.
[pauseeee]

What Jesus went through in the cruelty of the cross shows us the depth of human depravity.
[pause]

Here was the King, sent to graciously care for them, yet they mock Him, spit on Him, and hit Him. *[pause]*

Here was Son of God, perfectly innocent, doing nothing wrong, yet they treat Him like the worst of criminals. *[pause]*

Here was the Savior, sent to save them, and they killed Him. *[pauseeee]*

In their mockery and mistreatment, sinful humanity was showing its true colors, and it's not a pretty picture, but a gruesome one. *[pause]*

Let's not sanitize the cross, for it was truly cruel and horrific.

Never lose sight of what Jesus went through, and try to round its edges or throw some sparkles on His wounds. *[pause]*

Don't ever become so accustomed to thinking and talking about it that the horrid reality of what Jesus went through fades into the background. *[pauseeee]*

There is cruelty in the cross—you can't get around that fact, but there's more to it...

As Christians, we know that the cross is more than just mere suffering, agony, and brutality.
[pause]

There was something deeper going on than mockery, jeers, blood, and death.

Behind it all was a glorious purpose, a gracious act, a loving mission. *[pauseee]*

And that leads me to point 2...

II. The wonder of the Cross.

Now you may be wondering why I used the word “wonder” here.

And it's because amidst all of the barbaric cruelty of the cross, there's wonder. *[pauseee]*

If it was all just about humiliation, agony, and suffering then there would be no wonder behind the cross.

We would be horrible people, who rejoice at suffering, like some heartless savages.

But there's more to the cross than what appears at first.

So I want us to look beyond the pain and pangs of the cross to see what was truly going on.
[pauseeee]

When we look at this horrific event with faith lens, the first thing we see is that *the One mocked for being a king was truly King.* [pauseee]

There is great irony throughout this passage...

The soldiers mock Jesus for being called a king, and even bow down to him in jest, yet little do they realize that He is truly the King, who every knee will bow down to someday.² [pauseeee]

Even the writing above His head on the cross unwittingly declared the truth about Him. [pause]

The enemies of Jesus unintentionally proclaimed the truth.

That just goes to show that God will get the truth out, even through unknowing participants.
[pauseeee]

God wasn't rubbing His hands together in nervousness when Jesus was mocked.

He was using the Romans to do His bidding. [pauseeeee]

The mockers and abusers here are like people who play that "whack-a-mole" game...

The mole comes up, you hit it down with the hammer, and you think that you won, but what happens?

Another one pops up.

And every mole "whacked down" is replaced by a new one that pops up. [pause]

So also, no matter how much they tried to hit and push Jesus down, God would make the truth known. [pauseeee]

There was more to the story, there was more to this death, there was more to Jesus than many thought.

And this is because His death was *purposeful.* [pauseeee]

What Jesus went through here was not something that caught Him unaware.

Back in Matthew 20:19, Jesus said that they would "deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified." [pause]

He knew what would happen to Him, but it's even more than simply knowing beforehand, for He *came for this purpose.* [pause]

² A reference to Philippians 2:10.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus said, "...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."³ *[pauseeee]*

What we read, and what we are looking at this morning is not an account of a mere tragedy, it's an account of a mission being accomplished...

Jesus came to die for us. *[pauseeee]*

You see, it was *because of our sinfulness that led Him to the cross. [pause]*

He went in order to save us, for we were so sinful, so lost, so depraved that we could never save ourselves. *[pause]*

We were under the condemnation of death for our sin deserved death and to face the wrath of God, but He took our punishment, He paid our penalty, so that we could be forgiven and go free.

And so when we look at the cross now, we don't see mere agony, we see love-infused agony. *[pause]*

We don't see mere suffering, we see purpose-filled suffering. *[pauseeeee]*

Yes, His suffering and death saddens our hearts, as we see the pain and cruelty that He endured...

...But as we look beyond the suffering to the love that flowed from His wounds, we rejoice with exceeding joy because of His sacrifice for us. *[pauseee]*

Now as we look at Jesus hanging on the cross, we can't help but see the wonder of it all. *[pauseeee]*

When the people repeatedly mocked Jesus and told Him to just save himself or come down, we can't help but say...

"But that wasn't His purpose! He didn't come to save Himself, He came to save others!" *[pause]*

When the people say, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross," we know that it was exactly *because He was the Son of God that it was necessary for Him to remain on the Cross.*

Only He could atone for our sins, for He was the sinless, perfect God, who took on flesh. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus' intentional sacrifice is seen especially here in His feeling of being abandoned by God the Father. *[pause]*

³ Matthew 20:28.

All throughout Jesus' ministry, He talks of such a close, intimate relationship with His Father, but right before He yields His spirit, He says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
[pause]

What's with that? [pause]

There must be something significant going on, for such a drastic change in Jesus. [pause]

He didn't say this when He was persecuted earlier or even when He was arrested or condemned, but here as He gives up His life, He does. [pauseeee]

It's because God the Father turned away His face from Jesus when Jesus bore the sins of the world. [pauseeee]

You see, Jesus didn't just face physical suffering. [pause]

The criminals around Him also faced physical suffering, but there was something more that He faced. [pause]

Because Jesus became our substitute on the cross, taking our sins upon Himself and paying for it, then He faced something unique.

Though completely innocent, Jesus faced the judgment of God for *our* sins. [pause]

The wrath of God was poured out upon Him in order that He could satisfy the wrath of God for our sins.

But in order to truly do that, then our sin had to be credited to Him, and in that moment, God could not look upon sin. [pause]

So in a unique and mysterious way—Jesus and His Father's perfect communion was interrupted. [pause]

Jesus felt abandoned, for He felt what He never felt before: a disruption in His fellowship with the Father.

So He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" which is quoting David in Psalm 22:1. [pauseeee]

There's nothing like feeling forsaken by someone you love, and Jesus felt it with His Father, whom He had perfect harmony with from all of eternity.

Yet through it all, He trusts the Lord, who He cries out to. [pauseeeee]

His feeling of abandonment must never be abandoned by us, for we must remember the extreme agony He felt...

He experienced abandonment for us, so that we never have to be abandoned by God. [pause]

He went through shame, so that our shame before God could be removed. *[pause]*

He bore the guilt for our sin, so that we could stand before God no longer guilty. *[pause]*

Our sins were placed on Him, so that it would no longer be on our own shoulders, but so that we could once-for-all be forgiven and no longer condemned. *[pauseeee]*

The cross is truly an earth-shaking moment in history, both literally and figuratively.

It changed so much, and the evidence for the momentous nature of this event is seen in the supernatural activity that accompanied Jesus' death. *[pauseeee]*

Can you just imagine the scene?

Before Jesus died, there was utter darkness, and the thing is that it wasn't even nighttime, but it was from noon to 3pm. *[pause]*

Then as soon as Jesus dies, the temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom.

The earth shakes, and rocks split open.

Even many people are raised from the dead, and appear to others. *[pause]*

No wonder the centurion and other soldiers proclaim, "Truly this was the Son of God!" *[pauseee]*

These supernatural events show that Jesus' death was no ordinary death, but they had utmost significance. *[pause]*

Jesus was no ordinary person, for He was the Son of God, and God was at work, judging our sin, yet also bringing salvation through Him. *[pauseeee]*

The separation between us and God was torn asunder, as is symbolically displayed in the temple curtain being torn in two.

And there is new life found in Him, as is displayed by the bodies being raised. *[pauseeeee]*

What Jesus did on the cross is truly a wonder. *[pause]*

It is astonishing that the Son of God would die for us, and we can't help but stand in admiration and amazement for His work of redemption. *[pauseeee]*

There is a cruel nature to the cross, as we see His pain and agony, but there is a wonder side when you look deeper at its purpose. *[pauseee]*

The cross of Jesus is both ugly *and* beautiful, horrific *and* great, cruel *and* wonderful. *[pause]*

The world doesn't understand it, but we do, for "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to [us]...Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God."⁴
[pauseeee]

In light of all of these things, what should our response be? *[pause]*

Well let's see...

III. The responses to the Cross.

Rembrandt, the famous artist, created the painting called, *The Three Crosses*. *[pause]*

In the painting, you have Jesus on the center cross, as well as the two other criminals crucified on both sides of Him, but all of the attention is on Jesus. *[pause]*

There are various facial expressions and actions seen in the painting, showing the various responses of people to Jesus' death. *[pause]*

Some are sorrowful, like Jesus' mother. *[pause]*

Some are responding in faith, like the centurion. *[pause]*

But you also have other people who are drawn walking away, and still others seem to be indifferent to it all.⁵ *[pauseeee]*

The various responses of people to Jesus' death found in *The Three Crosses* painting reflects what we find here in this passage...

People respond differently to Jesus' death. *[pauseeee]*

First, we see some people respond to the cross with *derision*. *[pause]*

All of the people mocking Christ on the cross demonstrate this...

To them, a suffering Savior and a weak King doesn't compute.

That's why they keep saying, "Why doesn't He just come down, if He truly is who He says He is?" *[pauseee]*

That just goes to show that the cross doesn't make sense to a lot of people.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that, "Christ crucified [is] a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."⁶ *[pauseee]*

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:23–24.

⁵ This illustration idea came from: <https://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/cross.htm>.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:24.

The world considers Jesus' death as foolish, weak, low and despised,⁷ and many stumble over it.

So in response, they mock Jesus as Lord, Savior, and King.

They spit on the thought. *[pause]*

They say, "How could you believe in a Savior, who died?"

Or, "How could you believe that God would do that to His only Son?" *[pause]*

The world mocks the Savior, but that very Savior is who they need! *[pauseeee]*

Is that you? *[pause]*

Are you someone who thinks that the cross is foolish, weak, or too low for you to believe in Jesus? *[pause]*

Ask God to help you to open your eyes to see the glorious wonder of the cross. *[pauseeeee]*

Along with that, there are some who respond with misunderstanding, but it remains as misunderstanding. *[pauseeee]*

The people who say, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!", didn't understand that he was talking about his death and resurrection. *[pause]*

The people who thought that He was calling for Elijah misunderstood who Jesus truly was, for He didn't need Elijah to save Him, for He's the better Elijah. *[pauseeee]*

And that's what happens to some people—their misunderstanding of the cross remains as misunderstanding. *[pause]*

Instead of searching more and looking to God for the truth, they just say, "That doesn't make sense," and continue on in their lives unchanged. *[pause]*

Their misunderstanding of Jesus leads to indifference to Him. *[pauseee]*

Maybe that's you today...

This whole crucifixion of Jesus thing doesn't make sense to you.

But don't let misunderstanding remain as misunderstanding, but ask God for eyes to see the truth.

Come with a desire to know not just the cruelty of the cross, but the wonder of it. *[pauseeee]*

Another response we see to the cross is *awe-filled faith*. *[pause]*

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 1:27–28.

If you remember, the Roman soldiers were the very ones who were mocking Jesus for who He claimed to be.

Yet after the earthquake and other supernatural events take place, the centurion and some other soldiers with him are changed. *[pause]*

They are “filled with awe” and say, “Truly this was the Son of God!” *[pauseeee]*

Get this—the cross can radically transform people from revilers to followers! *[pause]*

That’s what it did for some of the Roman soldiers...

What they witnessed at the cross caused them to do a complete 180.

They went from mocking Jesus’ identity to confessing it in awe. *[pauseeee]*

How could this happen?

How could they think that a man who just suffered and died on the cross was the Son of God? *[pause]*

Wouldn’t His suffering and death point in the other direction?

Yet God opened their eyes to see the majesty of the crucified Christ.

They saw beyond the pain, blood, agony, and death to the reality that was there. *[pause]*

And for each of us who are true believers, we have likewise been changed from revilers to followers because of the cross.

God opened our eyes to see the wonder of who Jesus is and what He has done on that tree. *[pauseeee]*

Lastly, one more response to the cross is *steadfast commitment*. *[pause]*

In verses 55–56, we are told of the many women followers of Jesus who are there at the crucifixion. *[pause]*

The fear, shame, and lowliness of the cross didn’t deter them from being there, but they remained steadfastly committed to Jesus.

And that is an encouragement for us to remain faithful to Jesus, no matter what the world says about the cross. *[pause]*

They may make fun of it, look down upon it, or despise it, but we remain with Jesus. *[pause]*

No matter the shame that comes along with it that the world tries to throw on our backs...

No matter how hopeless things look like in the moment...

We follow Him, for we know that it's worth it. *[pausee]*

What's your response to the cross?

Derision?

Misunderstanding that leads to indifference?

Or awe-filled faith and steadfast commitment? *[pauseee]*

Truly we see here that...

The Son of God died on the Cross for us!

There is cruelty in the cross, as we saw the horrific things that Jesus went through as He suffered and died.

Yet there is wonder in the cross, as we look deeper to the purpose behind it all, for we see that...

Jesus suffered, but for an eternity-shaping purpose. *[pause]*

He was in agony, yet He cares for us in ours. *[pause]*

Beaten, but is going to be bowed down to someday. *[pause]*

Mocked, but king over all. *[pause]*

Abandoned, so we could know His presence.

And bled and died, yet now alive forevermore. *[pauseee]*

Every scourge, every hit, every mocking word, and the abandonment He felt from God was not in vain, but was for a loving, saving, redeeming purpose. *[pause]*

He was there because of our sin. *[pause]*

That statement causes sorrow in our hearts for it reminds us of our great sinfulness and incapability to save ourselves.

But that statement—"he was there because of our sin"—also causes joy, gratitude, and love in us because we can't help but see the love and grace that flows down to us from the cross.