

Exhortation 12: Christ is Crucified

Charles Herle (1598-1659)

Matthew 27:23, 35

I. The Text Opened

A. Matthew 27:35

1. “And 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,” (Matt. 27:35).

a) Of all the prophetic passages of Christ’s passion, none so specifically paints the minute details of our Savior’s death as Psalm 22.

(1) And verse 18 of this messianic psalm are the very words quoted by Matthew in the verse of this text: “They part my garments among them and cast lots upon my vesture.”

(2) This verse refers to a particular incident that occurred at the foot of the cross that Friday afternoon as Jesus hung dying.

b) Per Jewish custom, the Savior was wearing two garments: the one, a larger outer garment, and the other, a seamless inner tunic (John 19:23).

(1) Four Roman soldiers were assigned to attend the crucifixion of Christ, and at the time he was nailed to the cross, he was stripped of his clothing, leaving him hanging in a shameful state of nakedness.

c) Both Matthew and Luke’s account of Christ’s death simply state that these soldiers divided up what was referred to collectively as “his garments,” (likely consisting of a head piece, an outer garment, his girdle, and his sandals).

d) It would seem from John 19:23 that they came to some agreement on who got each item of clothing between them.

(1) But there was one more item to be considered, his seamless inner coat or tunic, likely a more valuable piece than the rest.

(2) So as John further explains, instead of tearing it into four equal parts, they decided to cast lots to see who would become its new owner.

e) Keep in mind that these Roman soldiers were simply fulfilling their assignment for that day’s work, which happened to be guarding the crucifixion of this man called Jesus.

f) Further, beyond their duties, they were interested in nothing more than how they could profit from the situation by obtaining his possessions.

(1) Of course, not being Jews, they had no knowledge of David’s messianic prophecy in Psalm 22:18.

(2) And certainly no one informed them of what they should do with these articles of clothing.

(3) Still, unbeknownst to them, with precision they fulfill this particular prophecy to the letter.

g) John describes this inner garment as one that was “without seam, woven from the top throughout,” (John 19:23).

(1) This seemingly trivial detail is pregnant with beauty and divine significance, however, for it ties Christ – our High Priest – to the Old Testament high priest (the first of which was Aaron, Moses’ brother).

(2) Included among the specifications God provided surrounding the office and duties of the high priest in Moses’ day were the exact articles of clothing he was to wear on the Day of Atonement when he entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement on behalf of himself and the people of Israel.

h) And among those specified articles of clothing we find one in particular, “a tunic of fine linen thread,” (Exod. 28:39).

- (1) Further descriptions of this piece from ancient historians affirm that this tunic was seamless.
- (2) It would seem, then, that this is the reason John, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, included this observation in his account of this incident.

II. The Doctrine from the Text

A. Doctrine: In fulfilling God’s redemptive plan, this “Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) is here identified, at this specific point in time, as not only the ultimate sacrifice but also as our High Priest who ever lives to make intercession to God on our behalf, (Heb. 4:14, 9:11).

1. He guides both the inscrutable hearts of kings and, as here, the most savage hands of soldiers to spoil and spare, as he pleases, (Prov. 21:1).
 - a) He ever guides the Christians hands to despise evil and do good, (Psa. 34:13), and their heart to seek peace.
 - b) He clothes them graciously with that richer robe, that welcoming wedding garment of his righteousness that will not grow old in their journey through this world’s wilderness and will bring them to that better Canaan above.
 - c) Though they know this garment is theirs as they belong to his body, his bride, the Church, if they do not fight the good fight of faith, they should not expect to share in the spoils of his victory over sin and Satan.

B. “And the governor said, ‘Why, what evil hath he done?’ But they cried out the more, saying, ‘Let him be crucified,’” (Matt. 27:23).

1. Because of what the cross represents for the believer in terms of our redemption, it is a symbol of sacrificial love both near and dear to the heart of a Christian.
 - a) Yet at the time of Christ, the cross was the most despised and vilest means of punishing the worst of society’s criminals.
2. The Jews had multiple means of putting someone to death (by way of stoning or the sword, for example), but none were considered tortuous enough for this Christ, their mortal enemy.
 - a) Because to the Jewish people, being hung on a cross was a death that – for the pain, the shame, and the curse it carried – was far worse than all others.
 - b) Besides being an unspeakably tortuous death, it was associated with shameful nakedness and being made a spectacle of.
 - (1) It was designed to make the accused vulnerable by exposing them to the ridicule of the people.
 - (2) To die on a cross was ugly, vile, and disgraceful.
 - (3) And for these reasons it was reserved for the most wretched of criminals, those that were deemed subhuman, unfit to participate in society.
 - c) The curse of this death was worse than the shame, however, for it struck at the very soul of the sufferer.
 - d) Hundreds of years previous God established with his people that this form of capital punishment indicated that the criminal was cursed of God.

(1) Deuteronomy 21:22-23 says, “if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him that day, (for he that is hanged is cursed of God).”

e) Referencing this command of God, Paul in Galatians 3:13 ties the crucifixion of Christ directly to the gospel, “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree.’”

(1) This explains why Paul reiterated this means of death in Philippians 2:8 explicitly, “he became obedient to death, even the death of the cross.”

(2) And yet, as Jerome distinguishes very well, Christ is not accursed because he hangs, but he hangs because he is accursed.

(3) In other words, our Savior hung on the accursed tree because he bore the curse of all our sins all on himself at that moment in time.

f) The curse of the cross also explains why Jesus was not crucified inside Jerusalem, the “holy city.”

(1) The Jews would never have allowed such a brutal death to take place inside their city walls.

(2) Thus, Jesus had to carry his cross outside the gates to Mount Calvary.

3. The cross was not only considered the vilest of deaths by the Jewish people; death by crucifixion was also the most despicable means of death to the Roman citizenry.

a) The Roman writer Cicero described crucifixion as: “a most cruel and disgusting punishment.... It is a crime to put a Roman citizen in chains, it is an enormity to flog one, sheer murder to slay one; what then shall I say of crucifixion? It is impossible to find a word for such an abomination.... Let the very mention of the cross be far removed, not only from a Roman citizen’s body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears.”

b) But it wasn’t just about the curse and the shame Christ bore on that cross; the pain he suffered was beyond description.

(1) Barbarous and inhumane hangmen stripped him of his blood-soaked garments, leaving him naked.

(2) Along with the clothing came pieces of battered and shredded flesh that had stuck themselves securely to his clothes by way of dried blood and fluid from his tissues.

(3) They drove spikes through the least fleshy and most sensitive extremities – that of his hands and feet – to sustain the weight of the rest of his body.

(4) As a result, the pulling weight stretched these painful wounds still wider, causing continual torture.

(5) And just to be sure he was dead, before removing him from the cross one of the soldiers thrust a sword through the core of his body, causing the last remaining blood and water to drain from him.

e) It was not enough to crucify him as a reprehensible thief; they had to disfigure him to the point where he looked like a monster.

(1) And it was not enough that he be cut with whips while he was still alive; he must also be pierced through with a sword while he hangs dead.

(2) No wonder the prophet Isaiah said of him, “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not,” (Isa. 53:3).

(3) David’s prophetic messianic psalm further describes the pain, “I may tell all my bones,” (Psa. 22:17), and “all my bones were out of joint.”

(a) *How could it possibly be otherwise, with such a violent distortion?*

4. This is a scene much more fit for meditation than speech.
 - a) To fully express the realities of the crucifixion requires both the eloquence and experience of him that felt it.
 - b) For he that was so abused has thereby blotted out that handwriting of ordinances against the Christian (Col. 1:14).
 - (1) *They can only bow before him with a thoroughly worshipful, and utterly thankful, heart.*

III. The Text Applied

A. How much did your sins disfigure Christ at Mount Calvary?

1. No wonder your prophet said there was, “no form left in you, nor beauty for which you should be desired,” (Isa. 53:2).
2. What else can be said for such broken and bleeding veins, bruised shoulders, raw scourged flesh, furrowed back, (Psa. 129:3), punctured temples, butchered hands and feet, distorted and disfigured limbs, (Psa. 22:17), not to speak of the depths of shame and burden of the curse of God, that he bore for you?
3. It was for you that he died, and it is in him that you live.
 - a) He suffered none but the worst of deaths for you; how can you now live anything but the best of lives for him?
 - b) How happy an exchange have the merits of Christ’s sufferings made with those of your sins?
 - c) Instead of death you now know life.
 - d) Instead of shame, you now know glory.
 - e) Instead of pain, you have the promise of the pleasures of his right hand forevermore (Psa. 16:11).
 - f) Instead of bearing the curse of sin, you are blessed with righteousness itself.
 - (1) *How far is this from “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?” (Exod. 21:24).*
 - (2) *And how much like Samson’s riddle, “out of the eater comes meat, out of strength, sweetness?” (Judges 14:14).*
 - (3) *Out of devouring death comes the bread of life.*
 - (4) *Out of the strength of malice comes the sweetness of mercy.*
 - (5) *Out of the darkness of sin shines the light of your glory.*
4. It is true that you cannot number your sins that caused Christ to suffer such a gruesome death, but he teaches you to number your days that you may apply your heart to wisdom (Psa. 90:12).
 - a) His wounds, are both the treasure (Matt. 13:44) and foundation of His church.
 - b) In those rich mines of His wounds, by a lively faith dig for this invaluable everlasting treasure of his merits, and on this foundation build your house.