

THE IRONY OF JESUS' PASSION

(Matthew 27:27-44)

You and I live in a world full of irony. It is ironic when:

- A fire station burns to the ground or when a . . .
- A police station gets robbed.

We find irony in literature. In the story, *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry, the wife cuts her long hair and sells it to have the money to buy her husband a pocket watch chain. Unaware of her plan, the husband sells his watch to buy his wife tortoise shell hair combs. Because of the sacrificial acts of both, the gifts they gave and received were useless.

History is full of irony.

- While riding through the streets of Dallas in the presidential limousine, Nellie Connally, the wife of the Governor of Texas said to John. F. Kennedy: “Mr. President you can’t say that Dallas doesn’t love you.” He responded, “That’s very obvious.” We know what happened moments later.
- It was called *the war to end all wars*, but now we call it, *the first world war*.

Irony shows up in the pages of the Bible.

- We read the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 10:7-9.

⁷ I have seen servants on horses,
While princes walk on the ground like servants.
⁸ He who digs a pit will fall into it,
And whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten
by a serpent.
⁹ He who quarries stones may be hurt by them,

And he who splits wood may be endangered by it.

- We see that Saul, the persecutor of the Early Church, the one who chased down Christians, put them in prison, and approved of them being stoned to death, became Paul, the apostle, the one who travelled the length and breadth of the Roman Empire starting churches and writing 13 letters that are in the NT.

Many of the truths of the Christian life are ironic.

- The greatest are those who serve.
- When we are weak, that is when we are strong.
- He who loses His life is the one who will find it.
- We die to self in order to live.

Today, we are going to examine four ironic truths about who Jesus is that show up in our text—Matthew 27:27-44. The title of this message is “The Irony of Jesus’ Passion.” The English word *passion* comes from a Latin word that means *suffering*. That is why we call the week of Jesus’ life that began with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem as Passion Week. It was a week of suffering.

In 2004, Mel Gibson produced and directed a blockbuster motion picture entitled, *The Passion of the Christ*. It is a movie that depicts in great detail the suffering and death of Jesus. In contrast, the Bible gives us surprisingly few details about the death of Jesus. The gospel writers do not describe the actual crucifixion of Jesus. They do tell us some of the things Jesus said and some of the things that were said to Him and about Him, but they do not re-tell the violent manner in which Jesus was crucified. The main reason for that is their initial audience did not need any description of crucifixion. They were all too familiar with it. It was not uncommon to see a man carrying the crossbeam of his cross to the place of his crucifixion or to come upon a crucified man as you were

walking along a major thoroughfare. The Roman government wanted people to know, “This is what happens to people who dare to defy Rome.”

Jesus’ suffering was physical, emotional and spiritual. As we move through our text, we are going to see each of those aspects of Jesus’ suffering. Our focus, however, will be upon four ironic truths that are highlighted by the mocking Jesus endured by Pilate’s soldiers, by the religious leaders, by the crowd at the cross, and even by the two who were hanging on their own crosses on either side of Jesus.

IRONY #1: JESUS REALLY IS THE KING OF THE JEWS AND MORE.

I have heard it said that life of a soldier can be summed up by the phrase, “Hurry up and wait.” That was also the life of a legionnaire in the Roman army of the first century. Soldiers were often stationed in places far from home and family. They had a lot of down time in which there was little to nothing for them to do. Soldiers made up their own games to pass them time.

In Jerusalem there was a fortress for Pilate’s soldiers. It was called the Antonia. When Ruth Ann and I were in Israel, we got to see a portion of the original floor of the Antonia. The floor dates back to the time of Christ. We could see etchings in the floor of some unknown game the soldiers would have played with dice of some kind.

Roman soldiers were not known for their kindness and compassion. Just the opposite, they were rough and mean. Many of the legionnaires resented being stationed in a back water like Israel and being charged with the responsibility of keeping peace among a people they did not understand and for which they did not care.

When some of them were given the task of guarding Jesus, one who was said to be the King of the Jews, they

thought to themselves, “Here’s a change for having some fun.” They mockingly paid homage to Jesus as a “King.” A cohort or battalion was said to be 600 men, according to Matthew, they gathered the whole band around Jesus, and they had their fun “honoring Him” as a King (vv. 27-31).

In Jesus’ day, it was customary for a placard or sign to be made announcing the crime for which an accused man was being crucified. On the way to the place of execution, that sign was either put around the neck of the accused or held by a soldier. When the accused man was nailed to the cross, the sign was also nailed above his head for all to see. Matthew tells us that a sign was made for Jesus that read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (v. 37).

Oddly enough, there was a man who was known as the King of the Jews. His name was Herod—King Herod. There are at least three Herod’s found in the NT—Herod the Great, the one before whom the Wise Men appeared, Herod Antipas, the one before whom Jesus stood before being sent back to Pilate, and Herod Agrippa, the one before whom Paul stood when he was being held in Caesarea. All of these were men of authority and power.

The ironic truth is that all of these men, and all people of authority, and everyone will one day stand before Jesus because He is not only the King of the Jews, He is the King of Kings. Paul wrote in Philippians 2 that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Due to the events of this past week in our nation’s capital, words like *sedition*, *treason*, and *insurrection* have been bandied about, and for good reason. Let me tell you what Christians for the first 300 years of the church did that was treasonous. Christians proclaimed, “*Iasous Christos esti kurios*,” which means, “*Jesus Christ is Lord*.” Such a statement was treasonous because the Emperor was seen as

divine, and it was incumbent upon those living within the Roman Empire to worship the Emperor by saying, “*Caesar esti kurios,*” translated, “*Caesar is Lord.*”

Christians refused to own the Lordship of Caesar. They confessed the Lordship of Christ, and they were shunned, persecuted, martyred (killed) for their faith.

It is no accident that Luke mentions the name of Caesar Augustus in Luke 2:1 and then ten verses later he reports that an angel from heaven announced, “For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” He is the Savior. He is the Lord. Not Caesar. Not Trump. Not Biden. Not this politician or that.

IRONY #2: JESUS REALLY IS THE ONE WHO BUILDS A TEMPLE.

Look at vv. 39-40a. At Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews, the chief priests were seeking people who would bring false testimony against Jesus. Two men came forward and said they heard Jesus say that He would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days (26:61). Of course, Jesus never made such a claim that He would destroy the temple. What Jesus really said is found in John 2:18-19. John explained why Jesus said what He said in v. 21.

While some got wrong what Jesus said, the disciples remembered what He said, and the truth of what He said encouraged them (v. 22).

In Scripture, there is a strong connection between Jesus’ body and the Church. The Church is said to be the body of Christ in this world. The Church is also identified as a temple that Jesus is building. Look at what we are told in 1 Peter 2:4-5. We are living stones. Jesus, the Carpenter from Nazareth is building us into something special that will honor God.

A team of researchers from three universities have named a phenomenon they studied. They call it, “The Ikea Effect.” If

you are not familiar with it, Ikea is a Swedish-based company that is loved by millions of Americans feel for Ikea. Ikea sells furniture that often arrives with some assembly required.

Researchers conducted a series of experiments and concluded, “[Participants experienced] the increase in valuation of self-made products . . . [They] saw their amateurish creations . . . as similar in value to the creations of experts.” In other words, the researchers found that when we get personally involved in a project, we have a greater affection for the end product—even when we know it isn’t perfect.

One of the researchers for the study described the Ikea Effect this way:

Imagine that you built a table. Maybe it came out a little crooked. Probably your [spouse] or your neighbor would see it for what it is—a shoddy piece of workmanship. But to you that table might seem really great, because you’re the one who created it. It’s the fruit of your labor. And that is really the idea behind the Ikea Effect.

I wonder if that is a little the way Jesus views the Church, His creation. Ask anybody. The Church isn’t perfected. It carries the stains of hypocrisy and judgmentalism. It has hard and sharp corners that have injured many. Despite its obvious flaws, Jesus loves the Church.

The Church was initially built in three days by Jesus through His death and resurrection, but the good news is that He is not done. He is still building His Church. He is not through with us yet. He is still shaping and molding us to look more and more like Him.

There is a great little song entitled, “He’s Still Working on Me.” Listen to the words of the chorus:

He's still working on me
To make me what I need to be
It took Him just a week to make the moon and stars
The sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars
How loving and patient He must be
'Cause He's still workin' on me

That is also true of His temple, the Church. He's still working on the Church, so, don't judge it just yet.

IRONY #3: JESUS REALLY IS THE POWERFUL SON OF GOD.

Let's pick back up in 27:40b. The church has baptized, so to speak, the word *saved*. The original meaning of saved had nothing to do with sin. It meant *to rescue*. The meaning is found in v. 43. *To save* means *to deliver*.

The religious leaders challenged Jesus to prove He was in fact the Son of God by delivering Himself from the cross. In the latter part of v. 42, they even vowed to believe in Him if He would do that.

What would Jesus have to do for you to believe He is the Son of God? What miracle would He have to perform to win your allegiance?

In Luke 16, Jesus told a story about a rich man who died and went to Hades while a poor man named Lazarus went to Paradise. The rich man wanted Lazarus to be sent back to warn the brothers of the rich man so they wouldn't end up where he was. He reasoned that if a man came back from the dead, they would believe Him. His request was denied. He was told that if his brothers did not believe Moses and the Prophets, they wouldn't be convinced if a man came back from the dead.

Unbelief is not a result of a lack of knowledge. It is the result of a wicked heart. We have the testimony of a man who

came back from the dead. His name is Jesus. In addition to the writings of Moses and the prophets, we have the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, and others. And yet, so many people do not believe.

I believe it took more power for Jesus to stay on the cross than it would have taken for Him to come down from the cross. When Jesus was arrested, Peter drew his sword to defend Jesus. Jesus rebuked Him and said, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53).

The power of a quick prayer would have delivered Jesus, but it was the power of love that kept Him there.

Those who mocked Jesus challenged Him to come down from the cross to prove He was God’s Son. Instead, Jesus stayed on the cross to prove a more important point that He did not want us to miss.

The late Brennan Manning was a well-known Catholic author and speaker. He once told how he got the name “Brennan” because he was born with the name Richard Francis Xavier Manning. His best friend was Ray. The two of them did everything together. They bought a car together as teenagers. They double-dated together, went to school together and even enlisted in the Army together. They went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together. One night while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan’s life was spared.

When Brennan became a priest, he was instructed to take on the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So, he took the name “Brennan.”

Years later he went to visit Ray’s mother in Brooklyn.

They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, “Do you think Ray loved me?” Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan’s face and shouted, “What more could he have done for you?” Brennan said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, *Does God really love me?* And Jesus’ mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, “What more could he have done for you?”

The cross of Jesus is God’s way of doing all he could do for us. And yet we often wonder, *Does God really love me? Am I important to God? Does God care about me?*

Sure, Jesus could have come down from the cross to prove He was God’s Son. Instead, He stayed on the cross to prove we are loved by God.

IRONY #4: JESUS REALLY IS THE ONE WHO SAVES OTHERS.

Look at v. 42 and v. 44. We read in Luke’s account a specific statement one of the criminals made to Jesus while they both hung on their respective crosses. One of them said, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39).

We say that God can do anything. Technically, that is not true. God cannot tell a lie. God cannot sin. God cannot worry. God cannot allow sin into heaven. God cannot act contrary to His nature. Added to these, it was impossible for Jesus to save Himself and others at the same time. The only way He could succeed in saving others was to not save Himself. That is exactly what He chose to do.

In her book, *The God Who Hung on the Cross*, Ellen Vaughn tells the story of how the Gospel came to a small village in Cambodia. In September 1999, a missionary pastor traveled to Kampong Thom Province in northern Cambodia. Most of the people of that region were either Buddhists or

spiritists. Almost no one had even heard of Christianity.

When the pastor arrived in one village, however, the people warmly embraced both him and his message about Jesus. When he asked the villagers about their openness to the gospel, an old woman shuffled forward, bowed, and grasped the pastor's hands. She said, "We have been waiting for you for twenty years." She then told him an amazing story.

In the 1970's, the Khmer Rouge, took over Cambodia. The communist regime killed an estimated 2 million of the Cambodian people during their short but brutal reign.

When the soldiers came to this rural village in 1979, they rounded up the villagers and forced them to start digging their own graves. After the villagers had finished digging, they prepared to die. Some screamed to Buddha; others screamed to demon spirits or to their ancestors.

One of the women started to cry for help based on a childhood memory—a story her mother told her about a God who had hung on a cross. The woman prayed to that unknown God on a cross. If this God had known suffering, he might have compassion on their plight.

Suddenly, her lone cry became one great wail as the entire village started praying to this God who had hung on a cross. As they continued facing their own graves, the wailing slowly turned to a quiet crying. There was an eerie silence. Slowly, they dared to turn around and face their captors. When they did, they discovered that the soldiers were all gone.

The old woman finished her story by saying that ever since that humid day from 20 years ago, the villagers had been waiting for someone to come and share the rest of the story about the God who had hung on a cross.

Jesus hung on that cross to save you. Now is the time to trust Him and receive the gift of life He offers—new life, abundant life, and eternal life.