

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Ironies of the Cross

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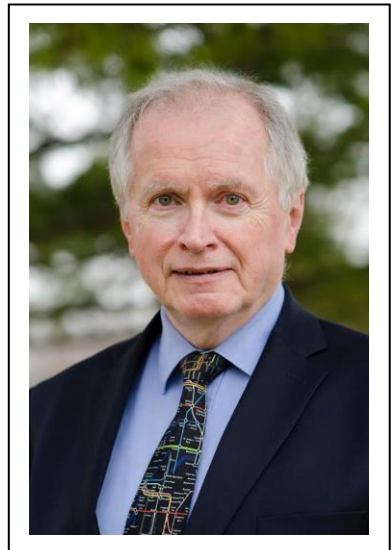
1

*Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.*

*Matthew 27:27–51a (NIV84)*

He was, on the whole, a very good king. He united the disparate tribes, built a nation, and established a dynasty. Personally courageous, he also built a formidable defense system and secured his country's borders. He proved to be an able administrator, and on the whole he ruled with justice. As if that were not enough, he was an accomplished poet and musician.

But in his middle years, he seduced a young woman next door. To understand a little more how perverse this evil was, we must recall that this young woman's husband was at that time away from home, at the military front, fighting the king's battles. Out of this one-night stand, the woman became pregnant and sent word to the king. He was a "fixer," and he thought he could fix this. He sent a messenger to the front, asking the military command to send the young man back to the capital with an ostensible message for the king. The young man came, of course, but as it turned out, he didn't return home to sleep with his wife: somehow he felt that would be letting down the side with his mates back at the front. The young man merely slept in the royal courtyard, ready to head back to the front—and King David knew he would be found out. So he sent back a secret message to the commanding officers at the front, a message carried by the hand of this young man, a message that was his death warrant. The officers were to arrange a skirmish, with everyone in the unit except the young man given a secret signal when to



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

withdraw. The inevitable happened: the unit withdrew, and the young man was left alone in the skirmish and killed. Shortly after, the king married the pregnant widow. David thought he had gotten away with his sin.

God sent the prophet Nathan to confront him. Faithful prophet though he was, Nathan decided he'd better approach the monarch with suitable caution, so he began with a story. He said, in effect, "Your majesty, I've come across a difficult case up country. There are two farmers, neighbors. One is filthy rich; the number of animals in his herds and flocks is past counting. The other chap is a subsistence farmer. He has one little lamb, that's all. In fact, he doesn't even have that lamb any more. Some visitors dropped by the home of the rich man, who, instead of showing appropriate hospitality by killing one of the animals from his own flocks and preparing a feast, went and stole the one little lamb owned by the dirt farmer. What do you think should be done about this?"

David was outraged. He said, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity" (2 Sam. 12:5–6). David had no idea how painfully ironic his utterance was. Nathan knew, of course, and the writer knew, and God knew, and the readers know—but David could not detect the desperate irony of his own words until Nathan said, "You are the man!" (v. 7).

We all know what irony is. Irony expresses meaning by using words that normally mean the opposite of what is actually being said. Sometimes the irony is intentional, of course: the speaker knows he is using irony; at other times, as here, David hasn't a clue that his words are ironic until his hypocrisy is exposed. He thinks his words establish him as a principled judge who makes right and fair judicial decisions, but in the light of his secret life he merely exposes himself as a wretched hypocrite. The real meaning of the words, in this broader context, is a blistering condemnation of the very man who thinks that by using these words he is showing himself to be a just man and a good king.

Some irony is vicious, of course; some is hilariously funny. But we all know that irony has the potential, especially in narrative, for bringing a situation into sharp focus. Very often it is the irony in the narrative that enables hearers and readers to see what is really going on. Irony provides a dimension of depth and color that would otherwise be missing.

Of the New Testament writers, those most given to irony are Matthew and John. In the passage before us, Matthew unfolds what takes place as Jesus is crucified—but he does so by displaying four huge ironies that show attentive readers what is *really* going on.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Permit me to remind you of the context. By this point, Jesus has been in the public eye for two or three years, the years of his public ministry. Now, however, he has fallen foul of the religious and political authorities. They resent his popularity, they fear his potential political power, they are suspicious of his motives. They wonder if the rising number of his followers could turn into a rebellion against the reigning superpower of the day, the mighty Roman Empire—for there could be only one outcome in a conflict with Rome. So Jesus has to be crushed. They provide a kangaroo court, find Jesus guilty of treason, and manage to secure the sanction of the Roman governor to have Jesus executed by crucifixion. All of this, they thought, was politically expedient, religiously for the best.

And here in the text (Matt. 27:27), we pick up the account immediately after sentence has been passed. In those days there was no long delay on death row for the prisoner. Once a capital sentence was handed down, the prisoner was taken out and executed within a few hours or at most a few days. In the text before us, we find the soldiers preparing Jesus for immediate crucifixion. As Matthew tells the story, we learn to reflect on four profound ironies of the cross.

## **The Man Who Is Mocked as King Is the King (Matt. 27:27–31)**

Apparently Jesus had been flogged earlier, as part of his interrogation. Immediately after sentence of crucifixion was passed, Jesus was flogged again (v. 26). This too was standard procedure; it was customary to flog prisoners before taking them out to be crucified. But what takes place in verses 27 to 31 is *not* standard procedure. It is more like barracks-room humor. The governor's soldiers gather around, strip Jesus of his clothes, and drape some sort of scarlet robe on him, pretending he is a royal figure. Then they wind together some strands of vine thorns, the spikes of which are 15 to 20 cm. long. They crunch this down on his head to make a cruel crown of thorns. They put a staff into his hand and pretend it is a scepter. Alternately bowing before Jesus in mock reverence and hitting him in brutal cruelty, they cry, "Hail, king of the Jews!"—and complete the acclamation by spitting in his face and hitting him again and again with the mock scepter. Raucous, mocking laughter keeps the room alive until the soldiers tire of their sport. They have finished laughing at him as the king of the Jews. Now they put his own clothes back on him and lead him away to be crucified.

But Matthew knows, and the readers know, and God knows, that Jesus *is* the king of the Jews. In case we've missed the theme, Matthew reminds us of it twice more in the following verses: the *titulus*, the charge against Jesus, is nailed to the cross above his head: "this is jesus, the king of the jews" (v. 37). The mockers are still dismissing him as the

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

king of Israel in verse 42. More importantly, Matthew has already made the theme clear throughout his Gospel. His very first verse reads, “This is of the genealogy of Jesus Christ *the son of David*, the son of Abraham” (1:1). The ensuing genealogy is broken up somewhat artificially into three fourteens, the central fourteen covering the years in which the Davidic dynasty reigned in Jerusalem. Even the number fourteen is a code for the name “David.” All the OT promises that look forward to the coming Davidic king spring from 2 Samuel 7, anchored in David’s life about 1000 b.c. Almost three hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah anticipates one who will sit on the throne of his father David, but who would also be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). Matthew’s opening chapter picks up on this Old Testament anticipation. In the second chapter, the Magi ask, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” (2:2). As he begins his public ministry, Jesus talks constantly about the kingdom—its nature, dawning, promise, and consummation. In some of the so-called “parables of the kingdom,” the stories Jesus tells sometimes make Jesus himself out to be the king. The same theme is raised in the trial before Pilate. In 27:11, Pilate the governor asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replies, yet the form of his response, while affirmative, depicts a gentle hesitation, because Jesus knows full well he is *not* a king in any way that Pilate fears. His reign does not spell out military threat to Caesar. Pilate himself soon discerns that even if Jesus claims to be the king of the Jews, he poses no immediate political threat, and he seeks to have him released. Still, the confession is there, and Jesus stands condemned on the capital charge of treason.

And while the soldiers mock Jesus as the king of the Jews, transparently Matthew knows, and his readers know, and God knows, that Jesus *is* the king of the Jews.

Indeed, look closely and you will see *two* layers of irony. The mockery of the soldiers was *meant* to be ironic. When they exclaim, “Hail, king of the Jews!” what they mean is the exact opposite: Jesus is *not* the king but a rather pathetic criminal. Doubtless the soldiers think their humor is deliciously ironic. But Matthew sees an even deeper irony; in fact, while the soldiers demean Jesus as a pathetic criminal, the words they use actually tell the truth, the opposite of what they mean: Jesus really *is* the king. That is the point of this paragraph: the man who is mocked as king—is the king (vv. 27–31).

Those who know their Bibles well know that Jesus is *more* than king of the Jews: he is king over all, he is Lord over all. Matthew himself makes this clear in his closing verses. This side of the resurrection, Jesus declares that all authority in heaven and on earth is his (28:18); his authority is none less than the authority of God. He is king of the universe. He is king over the soldiers who mock him. He is king over you and me. And one day, Paul assures us, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. The man who is mocked as king—is the king.

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

But we must probe a little further. With what conception of kingship is Jesus operating? In the first century, no one entertained the notion of a constitutional monarchy, like that of Great Britain, where the monarch has almost no real authority apart from moral suasion. In the ancient world, kings *reigned*. That's what kings did; that's how they operated. Indeed, that is the notion of kingship until fairly recent times. Louis XIV was not a constitutional monarch in the current British sense. What kind of king, then, is Jesus, in Matthew's mind, if Jesus is going to death on a cross? Is he a failed king?

5

Once again, Matthew has already given us some insight into the reality of Jesus' kingship. We must scan the interesting exchange in Matthew 20:20–28. The mother of the apostles James and John approaches Jesus, along with her two sons, requesting a favor. “What is it you want?” he asks. She replies, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left *in your kingdom*” (v. 21). Clearly they anticipated that Jesus would sit as king in a quite normal, historical, physical sense, and make his apostles the members of his cabinet, and they were hoping that James and John would get the two top jobs—secretary of state and secretary of defense, perhaps. Jesus tells them, in effect, that they have no idea what they are asking for: “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” he asks, referring, of course, to his impending suffering. With supreme overconfidence and massive ignorance, they reply, “We can” (v. 22). You can almost imagine Jesus smiling inwardly: well, yes, in one sense, they will participate in his cup, his cup of suffering: one of the two brothers, James, would become the first apostolic martyr, and the other would die as an exile on Patmos. Still, it is not Jesus' role to dispense the right to sit on his left or his right: that role the Father has reserved for himself.

When the ten other apostles hear of the request of James and John and their mother, they are incensed—not, of course, because of the arrogance and impertinence of their request, but because the ten did not get their requests in first. So Jesus calls the Twelve together, and gives us one of the most important insights into the nature of the kingdom. He says: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (vv. 25–28). This profound utterance must not be misunderstood. Jesus does not mean that there is *no* sense in which he exercises authority. Transparently, that is not the case—and in the closing verses Matthew reminds us, as we have seen, that Jesus claims all authority in heaven and on earth. What he means, rather, is something like this. The kings and rulers and presidents of this fallen world order exercise their authority out of a deep sense of self-promotion, out of a deep sense of wanting to be number one, out of a deep sense of self-preservation, even out of a deep sense of entitlement. By contrast, Jesus exercises his authority in such a way as to seek the good of his subjects, and that



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

takes him, finally, to the cross. He did not come to be served, as if that were an end in itself; even in his sovereign mission he comes to serve—to give his life a ransom for many. Those who exercise any authority at any level in the kingdom in which Jesus is king must serve the same way—not with implicit demands of self-promotion, confidence in their right to rule, or a desire to sit at Jesus’ right hand or his left hand, but with a passion to serve.

Small wonder, then, that Pilate could not figure Jesus out. Jesus claimed to be king, but he had none of the pretensions of the monarchs of this world. Small wonder that for the next three hundred years, Christians would speak, with profound irony, of Jesus reigning from the cross.

So here is the first irony in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ crucifixion: the man who is mocked as king—is the king.

## **The Man Who Is Utterly Powerless Is Powerful (Matt. 27:32–40)**

I cannot take the time to deal with all the subtle details in Matthew’s text. What is transparent is that Matthew provides ample evidence to demonstrate just how weak and powerless Jesus is. In the Roman world, the upright of the cross, the vertical member, was usually left in the ground at the place of crucifixion—usually near a public crossroads or thoroughfare so that as many people as possible could witness the torment and learn to fear Roman power. The horizontal member was carried by the victim out to the place of crucifixion. There the victim was tied or nailed to this cross-member, which was then hoisted up and suspended from the upright. But Jesus is now so weak he cannot even manage to carry this chunk of wood on his shoulder to the place of execution. So the soldiers exercise their legal right to conscript a bystander for the task, and Simon from Cyrene is forced to do the work (v. 32). Victims were crucified completely naked: the cross was meant to be an instrument of shame as well as of pain. So the soldiers gamble to determine who will gain possession of Jesus’ clothing (v. 35). It is difficult to imagine a portrait more calculated to depict Jesus’ utter powerlessness.

“And sitting down, [the soldiers] kept watch over him there” (v. 36). At a slightly earlier time in the history of the Roman Empire, soldiers had sometimes crucified people and then walked away to let them die. In some known instances, friends of the victim had lifted him down from the cross—and the victim had survived. So by this stage in Roman history, it was imperial policy to post soldiers at a crucifixion site until death had taken place. That is what is depicted in verse 36: the soldiers keep watch over Jesus. Jesus has

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

no hope, none whatsoever, of rescue. Suffering immeasurably, shamed intolerably, broken in body and spirit, without any prospect except the release of death, Jesus hangs in shame on that wretched cross, utterly powerless.

Then comes the mockery that shows the significance of this list of evidences attesting Jesus' weakness and powerlessness. We are told that some who passed by hurled insults at him and said, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" (vv. 39–40).

If we are going to understand why Matthew reports these words, we must remember that the theme of Jesus' destruction of the temple has already been introduced. Earlier in Jesus' trial, this time before the high priest, the authorities were still scrambling to find suitable witnesses who could destroy Jesus. In Matthew 26:61 we are told that two witnesses finally came forward who charged, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" This charge was potentially very dangerous. The Romans were worried about conflicts between peoples of different religions, so they made it a capital offense to desecrate a temple, any temple. If Jesus' words about destroying the temple of God could be taken as a serious intention to harm a temple, then they had him. But that line of thought peters out in Matthew 26; from parallel accounts, we learn that the witnesses couldn't get their stories straight. Eventually Jesus was condemned on a treason charge, rather than on a desecration-of-a-temple charge.

But what fun Jesus' words afforded to the mockers! He had glibly talked about destroying and rebuilding the temple in three days. What kind of power would that require? With modern technology, we can put together a prefabricated house in a day or two; we can build a skyscraper in a year or two. Historically, however, this kind of speed is a very recent development. None of the great cathedrals of Europe was ever seen in its fully constructed form by its original architect; building a cathedral took longer than one lifetime. The builders of the temple in Jerusalem faced additional constraints: they were not to use a mason's hammer anywhere near temple precincts. Each of the great stones had to be measured and cut elsewhere, and then brought in by animal and human power, without help of hydraulics. Yet here was Jesus, glibly talking about destroying and building a temple in three days. What kind of power would that take? What kind of *supernatural* power would that take? Yet here Jesus hangs, utterly powerless, on a Roman cross. The sting of the mockery turns on this bitter contrast between Jesus' claims to power and his current transparent powerlessness. Once again, the mockers think they are indulging in fine irony. Jesus claimed so much power, so very much power; now witness his powerlessness. So in the light of his claim, they say "save yourself" — which of course they utter ironically, since they are convinced he is helpless and cannot do a thing to help

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

himself. Jesus' claims are somewhere between ridiculous and scandalous—and they deserve to be mocked.

But the apostles know, and the readers of the Gospels know, and God knows, that Jesus' demonstration of power is displayed precisely in the weakness of the cross. Because we read John's Gospel, especially John 2, we know what Jesus actually said on this subject: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (2:19). According to John, Jesus' opponents did not have a clue what he meant; indeed, Jesus' own disciples had no idea, at the time, what he meant. But after Jesus was raised from the dead, John says, the disciples remembered his words; they believed the Scripture and the words Jesus had spoken. They knew he was talking *about his body* (vv. 20–22). The point is that under the terms of the old covenant, the temple was the great meeting place between a holy God and his sinful people. This was the place of sacrifice, the place of atonement for sin. But this side of the cross, where Jesus by his sacrifice pays for our sin, Jesus himself becomes the great meeting place between a holy God and his sinful people; thus he becomes the temple, the meeting place between God and his people. It is not as if Jesus in his incarnation adequately serves as the temple of God. That is a huge mistake. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." It is in Jesus' death, in his destruction, and in his resurrection three days later, that Jesus meets our needs and reconciles us to God, becoming the temple, the supreme meeting place between God and sinners. To use Paul's language, we do not simply preach Christ; rather, we preach Christ crucified.

Here is the glory, the paradox, the irony; here, once again, there are two levels of irony. The mockers think they are witty and funny as they mock Jesus' pretensions and laugh at his utter weakness after he has claimed he could destroy the temple and raise it in three days. But the apostles know, and the readers know, and God knows, that there is a deeper irony: it is precisely *by staying on the cross in abject powerlessness* that Jesus establishes himself as the temple and comes to the resurrection in fullness of power. The only way Jesus will save himself, and save his people, is by hanging on that wretched cross, in utter powerlessness. The words the mockers use to hurl insults and condescending sneers actually describe what is bringing about the salvation of the Lord.

The man who is utterly powerless—is powerful.

This principle has already been worked over by Matthew. According to Matthew 16, at Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Simon Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). We must not interpret Peter's confession too generously. When *we* say, "Jesus is the Christ," we inevitably include in the confession the substance of Jesus' person, his crucifixion, his resurrection, for we live this side of those great events. We cannot think of him without thinking of his cross and



## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

resurrection. But when Peter confesses to Jesus, “You are the Christ,” he includes nothing of the crucifixion and resurrection. By “Christ,” he has in mind a conquering, victorious, messianic, Davidic, king. The proof lies in the following verses. When in the wake of Peter’s confession, Jesus goes on to talk about his impending suffering, death, and resurrection (v. 21), Peter still has no category by which to understand what Jesus is saying. Messiahs do not die; they win! They are not crucified; they conquer! So Peter takes it on himself to rebuke Jesus smartly: “ ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’ ” (v. 22). So flawed is Peter’s understanding of Jesus’ purposes in coming as the Messiah that he earns the Master’s immortal rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (v. 23).

It is at this juncture that Jesus universalizes the principle that is at stake: “If anyone would come after me,” he says, “he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (vv. 24–25). This expression “to take up one’s cross” is not an idiom by which to refer to some trivial annoyance—an ingrown toenail, perhaps, or a toothache, or an awkward in-law: “We all have our crosses to bear.” No, in the first century, that sort of interpretation would have been impossible. In the first century it was as culturally unthinkable to make jokes about crucifixion as it would be today to make jokes about Auschwitz. To take up your cross does not mean to move forward with courage despite the fact you lost your job or your spouse. It means you are under sentence of death; you are taking up the horizontal cross-member on your way to the place of crucifixion. You have abandoned all hope of life in this world. And then, Jesus says, and only then, are we ready to follow him.

Is this not universal Christian teaching? It is in dying that we live; it is in denying ourselves that we find ourselves; it is in giving that we receive. Paul understands the same principle when he says, in 2 Corinthians 12, that he has learned to rejoice when he is weak, for when he is weak, he experiences God’s strength.

All of this, of course, was first of all supremely exemplified in the Lord Jesus. In shame, ignominy, and powerlessness he died in suffering and agony and rose in power to become the risen temple of God, the living meeting place between God and his people. The mockers laugh at their perception of the irony of the situation: Jesus made such outrageous claims to power, claiming he could destroy the temple and build it again in three days, when in fact he dies in the throes of the most abysmal weakness. But we see a deeper irony: the very weakness the mockers find amusing is Jesus’ own way to power, the way to the resurrection, the way to functioning as the mighty temple of the living God. Although our own death to self-interest never functions with the same atoning

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

significance as the death of Jesus, the same principle applies to us: in dying we live, in denying ourselves we find ourselves, as we take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Here, then, is Matthew's second irony of the cross: the man who is utterly powerless—is powerful.

## The Man Who Can't Save Himself Saves Others (Matt. 27:41–42)

The mockery continues in verses 41 and 42: “In the same way [that is, with similar mockery] the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.’ ”

What do we mean today by the verb *to save*? Ask someone at random on the streets of Seattle what the verb “to save” means, and what will be the response? Someone who is worried about his financial portfolio may reply, “ ‘Save’ is what you’d better do if you want money set aside for a comfortable retirement.” Ask a sports fan what the verb means, and he may reply, “ ‘Save’ is what a fine goalie does; he stops the ball from going into the net, and thus *saves* the point.” Ask computer techies what the verb means, and they will surely tell you that you jolly well better *save* your data by backing it up frequently, for otherwise when your computer crashes you may lose everything.

The mockers in verses 41 and 42 do not mean any of these things, of course. They are saying that apparently Jesus “saved” many other people—he healed the sick, he exorcised demons, he fed the hungry; occasionally he even raised the dead—but now he could not “save” himself from execution. He could not be much of a savior after all. Thus even their formal affirmation that Jesus “saved” others is uttered with irony in a context that undermines his ability. This would-be savior is a disappointment and a failure, and the mockers enjoy their witty sneering.

But once again, the mockers speak better than they know. Matthew knows, and the readers know, and God knows, that in one profound sense if Jesus is to save others, he really cannot save himself.

We must begin with the way Matthew himself introduces the verb *to save*. It first shows up in Matthew's first chapter. God tells Joseph that the baby in his fiancée's womb has been engendered by the Holy Spirit. God further instructs him, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will *save* his people from their sins” (1:21). “Jesus” is the Greek form of “Joshua,” which, roughly, means “yhwah saves.”

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

With this meaning so placarded at the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew gives his readers insight into Jesus the Messiah's mission by reporting why God himself assigned this name: Jesus has come to save his people from their sins.

The entire Gospel must be read with this opening announcement in mind. If in Matthew 2 the infant Jesus in some ways recapitulates the descent of Israel into Egypt, it is part of his self-identity with them, for he came to save his people from their sins. If he experiences temptation at the hand of Satan himself, and repeatedly triumphs over it, it is because he must show *himself* removed from sin, however tempted, if he is to save his people from *their* sins. If in Matthew 5–7, in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives matchless and finely woven material on what life in the kingdom of heaven is like and how it fulfills Old Testament anticipation, it is, in part, because transformation of the lives of sinful human beings is part and parcel of Jesus' mission: he came to save his people from their sins, as much the practice of sin as its guilt. If in chapters 8 and 9 Matthew reports a variety of symbol-laden miracles of healing and power, it is because the reversal of disease and the destruction of the demonic are inevitable components of saving his people from their sins. That is why Matthew 8:17 cites Isaiah 53:4: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" — for his name is Jesus, yhwsh saves, and he came to save his people from their sins. If Matthew 10 reports a trainee mission, this is part of the preparation for the extension of Jesus' earthly ministry into the future, when the good news of the gospel, the gospel of the kingdom, will be preached in all the world, for Jesus came to save his people from their sins. In this fashion we could work our way through every chapter of Matthew's Gospel and learn the same lesson again and again: Jesus came to save his people from their sins.

Matthew knows this, the readers know this, God knows this. They know that Jesus is hanging on this damnable cross because he came to save his people from their sins. Even the words of institution at the Last Supper prepare us to understand the significance of Jesus' blood, shed on the cross: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*" (26:28). To use the language of Peter, Jesus died, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God; to use Jesus' own language, he came to give his life a ransom for many.

When I was a boy I had a very perverse imagination, even more perverse, I suspect, than it is now. I sometimes liked to read a story, stop at some crucial point in the narrative, and wonder how the plot would unfold if certain crucial determining points were changed. My favorite biblical story for this doubtful exercise was the account of the crucifixion of Jesus. The mockers cry with irony and sarcasm, "He saved others, but he can't save himself. He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

we will believe in him.” In my mind’s eye, I could see Jesus gathering his strength, and suddenly leaping down from the cross, healed, demanding clothes.

What would happen? How would the narrative now develop?

Would they believe in him?

At one level, of course, they certainly would: this would be a pretty remarkable and convincing display of power, and the mockers would be back-peddling pretty fast. But in the full Christian sense, would they believe in him? Of course not! To believe in Jesus in the Christian sense means not less than trusting him utterly as the One who has borne our sin in his own body on the tree, as the One whose life and death and resurrection, offered up in our place, has reconciled us to God. If Jesus had leapt off the cross, the mockers and other onlookers could *not* have believed in Jesus in *that* sense, because he would not have sacrificed himself for us, so there would be nothing to trust, except our futile and empty self-righteousness.

Suddenly the words of the mockers take on a new weight of meaning. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself.” The deeper irony is that, in a way they did not understand, they were speaking the truth. If he had saved himself, he could not have saved others; the only way he could save others was precisely by not saving himself. In the irony behind the irony that the mockers intended, they spoke the truth they themselves did not see. The man who can’t save himself—saves others.

One of the reasons they were so blind is that they thought in terms of merely physical restraints. When they said “he can’t save himself,” they meant that the nails held him there, the soldiers prevented any possibility of rescue, his powerlessness and weakness guaranteed his death. For them, the words “he can’t save himself” expressed a physical impossibility. But those who know who Jesus is are fully aware that nails and soldiers cannot stand in the way of Emmanuel. The truth of the matter is that Jesus *could not* save himself, not because of any physical constraint, but because of a moral imperative. He came to do his Father’s will, and he would not be deflected from it. The One who cries in anguish in the garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will, but yours be done,” is under such a divine moral imperative from his heavenly Father that disobedience is finally unthinkable. It was not nails that held Jesus to that wretched cross; it was his unqualified resolution, out of love for his Father, to do his Father’s will—and, within that framework, it was his love for sinners like me. He really could not save himself.

Perhaps part of our slowness to come to grips with this truth lies in the way the notion of moral imperative has dissipated in much recent Western thought. Did you see the film *Titanic* that was screened about a dozen years ago? The great ship is full of the richest

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

people in the world, and, according to the film, as the ship sinks, the rich men start to scramble for the few and inadequate lifeboats, shoving aside the women and children in their desperate desire to live. British sailors draw handguns and fire into the air, crying “Stand back! Stand back! Women and children first!” In reality, of course, nothing like that happened. The universal testimony of the witnesses who survived the disaster is that the men hung back and urged the women and children into the lifeboats. John Jacob Astor was there, at the time the richest man on earth, the Bill Gates of 1912. He dragged his wife to a boat, shoved her on, and stepped back. Someone urged him to get in, too. He refused: the boats are too few, and must be for the women and children first. He stepped back, and drowned. The philanthropist Benjamin Guggenheim was present. He was traveling with his mistress, but when he perceived that it was unlikely he would survive, he told one of his servants, “Tell my wife that Benjamin Guggenheim knows his duty” —and he hung back, and drowned. There is not a single report of some rich man displacing women and children in the mad rush for survival.

When the film was reviewed in the *New York Times*, the reviewer asked why the producer and director of the film had distorted history so flagrantly in this regard. The scene as they depicted it was implausible from the beginning. British sailors drawing handguns? Most British police officers do not carry handguns; British sailors certainly do not. So why this willful distortion of history? And then the reviewer answered his own question: if the producer and director had told the truth, he said, no one would have believed them.

I have seldom read a more damning indictment of the development of Western culture, especially Anglo-Saxon culture, in the last century. One hundred years ago, there remained in our culture enough residue of the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, of the *moral imperative* that seeks the other’s good at personal expense, that Christians and non-Christians alike thought it noble, if unremarkable, to choose death for the sake of others. A mere century later, such a course is judged so unbelievable that the history has to be distorted.

So we have reached a time when a powerful internal, moral, imperative is not easily understood. Small wonder, then, that the moral imperative under which Jesus himself operated has to be explained and justified.

Moreover, Christians today will understand that biblically authentic Christianity is never merely a matter of rules and regulations, of public liturgy and private morality. Biblical Christianity results in *transformed* men and women—men and women who, because of the power of the Spirit of God, enjoy regenerated natures. We *want* to please God, we *want* to be holy, we *want* to confess Jesus is Lord. In short, because of the grace secured by Christ’s cross, we ourselves experience something of a transforming moral imperative: the sins we once loved we learn to fear and hate, the obedience and holiness we once



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

despised we now hunger for. God help us, we are woefully inconsistent in all this, but we have already tasted enough of the powers of the age to come that we know what a transforming moral imperative feels like in our lives, and we long for its perfection at the final triumph of Christ.

That is why we Christians will rejoice in this double irony: the man who can't save himself—saves others.

## The Man Who Cries Out in Despair Trusts God (Matt. 27:43–51a)

Still sneering, the chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders cry mockingly, “He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God’ ” (v. 43). Once again, their words are meant to convey sarcastic, ironic humor. When they say, “He trusts in God,” what they really mean, of course, is that his trust could not have been real, it could not have been valid, for he has been abandoned by God himself. Otherwise why would he be hanging from this wretched instrument of torture?

Those crucified with him join in the abuse (v. 44). Indeed, at first reading, Jesus’ cry of desolation almost seems to warrant the bitter skepticism as to whether Jesus truly trusts in God: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 46). Some contemporary commentators insist that these words demonstrate that at this point Jesus does in reality abandon his trust in God. The appropriate pastoral application, they conclude, is that if even Jesus can crack when he is subjected to enough pressure, then it is not too surprising if we sometimes crack, too. We should not be too hard on ourselves, they say, if we lose our confidence in God, if we abandon trust in God, since even Jesus could lose his trust in his heavenly Father.

But this reading of the passage—we’ll call it “the self-pitying Jesus” view—does not make sense of the context. First, it does not make sense of the fact that throughout these scenes, as we have seen, while the mockers think they are laughing at Jesus with witty irony, there is always a deeper irony. So here Matthew knows, and the readers know, and God knows, that Jesus *does* trust in God. The deep irony of verse 43 is that the mockers, as usual, are speaking better than they know: Jesus *does* trust his heavenly Father. But that means his cry of desolation cannot be read as evidence that he does *not* trust his heavenly Father.

Second, the cry of desolation is of course a quotation from the Davidic psalm, Psalm 22:1. But that psalm is rich in expressions of confidence and trust in God. If David can utter such an anguished cry while demonstrating his own steadfast trust in God, why should

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

it be thought so unthinkable that David's greater Son should not utter the same cry while exercising the same trust?

Third, Jesus has just come through the agony of Gethsemane. Despite his immeasurable repugnance at the prospect of the cross, Jesus prays, "Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (26:42). In other words, there is not a scrap of evidence that Jesus was suddenly surprised by the cross. He knew all along that this was his Father's will, and he expresses his resolution to do his Father's will.

15

Fourth, Jesus has already given evidence that he understands his death is for the sake of others, a ransom for sinners, a payment that effects the remission of sins, the shedding of his blood—that is, a bloody sacrifice—that seals the new covenant, a Passover sacrifice where the lamb dies, and because of that substitution the people of God do not die. Those categories are *already* established in Matthew. Jesus' cry of desolation *must* be interpreted within that framework, *not* within the framework of contemporary pop psychology that is rather keen on "the self-pitying Jesus" view.

Fifth, the narrative carefully spells out how darkness falls upon the land, and it is this darkness that precipitates Christ's anguished cry. In the light of everything that has been spelled out so far, this darkness can signal, somehow, only the absence of God, the Father's judicial frown—even though this entire sacrifice is the Father's indescribably wonderful plan—as the weight of sin and guilt crushes Jesus, who bears the penalty alone. We hover, breathless, at the edge of the mystery of the Trinity, as the Triune God's matchless love is displayed in the sacrifice of the cross, in the penal, substitutionary death of the eternal, incarnate, Son of God—Emmanuel, God with us.

Sixth, at the very moment when Jesus gives up his spirit (v. 50), Matthew reports, "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (v. 51a). This is not some mere datum of interesting destruction. The destruction of the curtain makes a *theological* statement. Up to this point, the curtain signaled that only the high priest could enter into the presence of the holy God and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement—and even then the high priest, when he went behind the curtain, had to be carrying the blood of bull and goat, the animals that had been slaughtered as substitutionary deaths that averted the wrath of God and paid for the sins of the priest and the people, according to the stipulations of the old covenant. With the tearing of the temple curtain, however, the way into the presence of God is open to everyone, for the shed blood of Jesus Christ has made the perfect and final payment for sin. We no longer need mediating animal sacrifices and mediating priests; we no longer need repeated ritual. The wrath of God has been finally and forever averted from the people of the new covenant. The tearing of the curtain cries out in happy witness to the success of Christ's cross work. That means the

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

wrath of God *has* been averted, and the cry of desolation must be interpreted as the measure of Jesus' anguish as he bears the full weight of the divine condemnation from which we are now freed.

Seventh, in exactly the same way, the miraculous temporary resurrections of verses 51 to 53 must be understood as the beginning of the death of death, the unwinding of sin and all its consequences.

16

So here is the fourth irony: The man who cries out in despair — trusts God.

One of the great English hymn writers was William Cowper. Cowper was a brilliant scholar who wrote distinguished critical essays for the students of Oxford and Cambridge, but in his distinctively Christian work he combined with his friend and pastor John Newton to compose and publish hymns of great depth and power. But people sometimes forget that Cowper wrestled with deep, clinical depression all his life; four times he was institutionalized for long periods in an insane asylum. Each time when he was released he was nursed back to health and strength by a kind Christian woman in the church John Newton served as pastor. About a century after Cowper's death, the great poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a three-page poem entitled, "Cowper's Grave." In it she describes the extraordinary influence of Cowper's scholarship, hymnody, and personal piety. Then she begins to allude to his horrible, dark nights of the soul. And then, powerfully referring to Jesus' cry of desolation, she writes:

Yea, once Immanuel's orphaned cry this universe hath shaken.  
It went up single, echoless, "My God! I am forsaken!"  
It went up from the Holy's lips amidst his lost creation,  
That of the lost, no son should use these words of desolation.

Do you hear what the poet is saying? Jesus cries this agonizing cry, "My God! I am forsaken!" — so that for all eternity, William Cowper would not have to. In his depressions Cowper doubtless felt utterly abandoned, but Christ's cry ensures that for all eternity Cowper will never cry the same cry. Jesus cries this cry, "My God! I am forsaken!" so that for all eternity Don Carson will not have to. Hear the ironies of the cross:

- 1) The man who is mocked as king — is king.
- 2) The man who is utterly powerless — is powerful.
- 3) The man who can't save himself — saves others.
- 4) The man who cries out in despair — trusts God.

On that wretched day the soldiers mocked him,  
Raucous laughter in a barracks room,

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

"Hail the king!" they sneered, while spitting on him,  
Brutal beatings on this day of gloom.  
Though his crown was thorn, he was born a king—  
Holy brilliance bathed in bleeding loss—  
All the soldiers blind to this stunning theme:  
Jesus reigning from a cursed cross.

Awful weakness mars the battered God-man,  
Far too broken now to hoist the beam.  
Soldiers strip him bare and pound the nails in,  
Watch him hanging on the cruel tree.  
God's own temple's down! He has been destroyed!  
Death's remains are laid in rock and sod.  
But the temple rises in God's wise ploy:  
Our great temple is the Son of God.

"Here's the One who says he cares for others,  
One who says he came to save the lost.  
How can we believe that he saves others  
When he can't get off that bloody cross?  
Let him save himself! Let him come down now!" —  
Savage jeering at the King's disgrace.  
But by hanging there is precisely how  
Christ saves others as the King of grace.

Draped in darkness, utterly rejected,  
Crying, "Why have you forsaken me?"  
Jesus bears God's wrath alone, dejected—  
Weeps the bitt' rest tears instead of me.  
All the mockers cry, "He has lost his trust!  
He's defeated by hypocrisy!"  
But with faith's resolve, Jesus knows he must  
Do God's will and swallow death for me.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A. (2010). *Scandalous: the cross and resurrection of jesus* (pp. 13–37). Crossway.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

of the Gospel Coalition. He has written or edited about sixty books and currently serves as president of the Evangelical Theological Society.<sup>2</sup>

Carson has been described as doing "the most seminal New Testament work by contemporary evangelicals"<sup>3</sup> and as "one of the last great Renaissance men in evangelical biblical scholarship."<sup>4</sup> He has written on a wide range of topics including New Testament, hermeneutics, biblical theology, the Greek New Testament, the use of the Old Testament in the New, and more.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.etsjets.org/node/12592>

<sup>3</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 136.

<sup>4</sup> Köstenberger, Andreas J. "Detailed biography on D.A. Carson" (PDF). Archived from the original (PDF) on 2009-08-24. Page 5.