

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 27

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Matthew 27 narrates the Passion of Jesus Christ from His binding and delivery to Pilate through His crucifixion, death, and burial. The chapter opens with the chief priests and elders formally condemning Jesus and delivering Him to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (vv. 1–2), immediately followed by the tragic subplot of Judas’s remorse and suicide (vv. 3–10). The Roman trial unfolds in two movements: Pilate’s interrogation and his political maneuvering (vv. 11–23), culminating in the crowd’s choice of Barabbas and Pilate’s infamous hand-washing (vv. 24–26). The soldiers then mock Jesus as a false king, robing Him in scarlet and crowning Him with thorns (vv. 27–31). The crucifixion proceeds with Simon of Cyrene conscripted to carry the cross (v. 32), Jesus offered wine mixed with gall (v. 34), the soldiers casting lots for His garments (v. 35), and the charge “THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS” posted above Him (v. 37). Two rebels are crucified alongside Him. The mockery continues from passersby, chief priests, scribes, and elders, and even from the two criminals — all taunting Him to save Himself if He is the Son of God (vv. 39–44). Darkness covers the land for three hours (v. 45). Jesus cries out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 46), is misunderstood as calling Elijah, and then cries out and yields up His spirit (vv. 50). The curtain of the temple tears from top to bottom, an earthquake shatters rocks, tombs open, and a Roman centurion confesses, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (vv. 51–54). Women disciples observe from a distance (vv. 55–56). Joseph of Arimathea claims the body, wraps it in clean linen, and lays it in his own new tomb (vv. 57–61). The chapter closes with the chief priests and Pharisees securing the tomb with a seal and a guard, fearing the disciples will steal the body and manufacture a resurrection claim (vv. 62–66).

Matthew’s account is saturated with Old Testament fulfillment markers — the thirty pieces of silver and the potter’s field (vv. 3–10, Zechariah 11 / Jeremiah 32), the casting of lots for garments (Psalm 22:18), the mocking taunt of the righteous sufferer (Psalm 22:7–8), the cry of dereliction (Psalm 22:1), and the cosmic signs accompanying the death of the Son of God. The chapter is not raw narrative — it is theologically constructed testimony, presenting the cross as the decisive moment in redemptive history, announced beforehand in Scripture and confirmed afterward by both cosmic event and human confession.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to produce, through this chapter, two interconnected effects in the reader: *worship* and *trust*. Worship — because the cross, when seen clearly, reveals the full depth

of what the Son of God endured and why; the reader is meant to be arrested, stilled, undone. Trust — because Matthew’s narrative demolishes every false savior in the frame (Pilate, Barabbas, the crowds, the religious leaders, even the disciples) and leaves only one figure standing at the end who says the right thing about Jesus: a pagan Roman soldier at the foot of the cross. The chapter is designed to press the reader toward the centurion’s confession as the only adequate response. It is also designed to inoculate against false expectations of what Messianic deliverance looks like — Jesus saves not by coming down from the cross but by staying on it.

Subject Sentence: The Son of God dies as the condemned criminal, accomplishing salvation the crowd could not recognize.

Primary Claim: God is calling every reader to the centurion’s posture — to see the cross not as the defeat of Jesus but as the event in which the Son of God accomplished what no earthly power, religious system, or self-salvation strategy ever could; the cross is not where Jesus failed to be King but where He was King in the only way that saves.

Interpretive Evaluation

The cry of dereliction (v. 46) — abandonment or identification?

The most contested verse in Matthew 27 is Jesus’ cry from Psalm 22:1: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Interpretive traditions divide significantly here. Liberal-critical readings have historically treated this as evidence of Jesus’ despair, disillusionment, or even failure of faith — a cry that reveals the cross as tragedy rather than triumph. This reading is to be refused: it imports a hermeneutical framework alien to Matthew’s entire narrative, which has been building toward this moment as fulfillment, not catastrophe. The Psalm 22 citation is not incidental; Matthew expects his readers to hear the whole psalm, which begins in lament and ends in vindication and cosmic praise (Psalm 22:27–31). The cry is not the end of the story — it is the pivot.

The more theologically serious debate is between those who read the cry as expressing real divine abandonment (Reformed and Lutheran mainline) and those who soften it to a sense of abandonment that was not truly ontological (certain evangelical readings seeking to protect Trinitarian unity). The Reformed reading — that Jesus bore the full weight of the Father’s judicial wrath against sin, including the real experience of covenantal forsakenness — is to be preferred. It is the only reading that accounts for the specificity of Jesus’ language, the penal-substitutionary logic running through Matthew’s Passion narrative, and the consistent New Testament testimony that Christ became a curse *for us* (Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21). To protect Trinitarian unity by reducing the cry to a

feeling misses that the doctrine of penal substitution *requires* a real judicial transaction — and Matthew’s narrative supports exactly that.

Pilate’s hand-washing and the crowd’s self-imprecation (vv. 24–25)

“His blood be on us and on our children” (v. 25) has been catastrophically misread in Christian history as a license for anti-Semitism, or as a judicial self-curse permanently damning the Jewish people. Both readings are to be firmly refused. Matthew’s narrative is not assigning permanent ethnic guilt — it is recording a historical scene in which particular leaders and crowds in a particular moment reject their Messiah. The “blood guilt” formula is a covenantal idiom expressing moral accountability; it no more condemns all subsequent Jewish people than Achan’s guilt condemned all subsequent Israelites. The Reformed reading correctly distinguishes between the redemptive-historical function of this scene (the rejection of Messiah by Israel’s leaders, which Matthew traces throughout his Gospel as the hardening of covenantal unfaithfulness) and any ethnic or racial application. The chapter must be preached with this guard explicitly engaged.

The tearing of the curtain (v. 51) — access or judgment?

Some traditions (primarily those with a strong temple-theology or dispensational orientation) read the torn curtain primarily as an act of judgment — God departing from an apostate temple. The Reformed reading acknowledges this dimension but correctly locates the primary meaning in inaugurated access: the barrier between God and humanity that the sacrificial system managed but never removed has been torn away by Christ’s death. Hebrews 10:19–22 is the canonical control here. The judgment dimension is real but secondary; the primary claim the torn curtain makes is that the way into the Most Holy Place is now open, permanently, through the flesh of Christ.

Dispensational readings of the cosmic signs (vv. 51–53)

The resurrection of the saints in verses 51–53 is one of the most exegetically puzzling passages in Matthew. Dispensational interpreters sometimes treat these figures as a distinct “first fruits” resurrection separate from the general resurrection, while some Reformed interpreters struggle with the historical uniqueness of the event. Both should resist over-systematizing what Matthew narrates as sign and testimony: the resurrection of these saints is a proleptic announcement that the death of the Son of God has shattered death’s dominion. It is an enacted parable of what the cross achieves. Matthew is not writing a systematic eschatology here; he is piling up cosmic testimony to the identity of the One who just died.

Key Canonical Support

- **Psalm 22** — The psalm Jesus quotes at the moment of dereliction; its opening cry, its detailed description of mockery and suffering, and its concluding vindication and cosmic praise frame Matthew 27 as fulfillment narrative, not tragedy. Reading

Psalm 22 alongside Matthew 27 reveals that Jesus is not improvising a lament — He is inhabiting the divinely scripted role of the righteous sufferer who will be vindicated.

- **Isaiah 53** — The Servant of the LORD who is “pierced for our transgressions,” “crushed for our iniquities,” and led like a lamb to the slaughter; Matthew 27 is the narrative fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophetic portrait. The silence of Jesus before Pilate (v. 14) echoes Isaiah 53:7 directly.
- **Zechariah 9–13** — The thirty pieces of silver and the potter’s field (Matthew 27:3–10) fulfill Zechariah 11:12–13; the shepherd struck and the sheep scattered (26:31) fulfill Zechariah 13:7; the larger Zechariah section frames the Passion as the coming of the humble King whose rejection and piercing are themselves divinely ordained.
- **Hebrews 9–10** — The theological exposition of what the torn curtain means: Christ’s death is the perfect and final sacrifice that accomplishes what the entire Levitical sacrificial system was designed only to anticipate; His blood opens the way into the true Holy Place, and the access it grants is permanent and full.
- **2 Corinthians 5:21 / Galatians 3:13** — The Pauline articulation of what Matthew 27 narrates: the One who knew no sin was made sin; the One under the law redeemed those under the law by becoming a curse. These texts are the theological address of the event Matthew records.

Aim: To lead the reader to the centurion’s confession — to see the cross clearly enough that every competing savior is exposed and only Christ remains, and to rest the whole weight of one’s life on what He accomplished there.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Chief priests and elders bind Jesus and deliver Him to Pilate	Formal condemnation; political handoff from Jewish leadership to Roman authority
3–5	Judas returns the silver, confesses innocent blood, and hangs himself	Contrast with Peter’s repentance; Judas’s remorse is not repentance; Matthew records his end now
6–10	Chief priests buy the potter’s field; Matthew notes	The very coins used to betray the Messiah

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	fulfillment of Jeremiah/Zechariah	purchase a burial field for foreigners — irony of rejected silver
11–14	Pilate interrogates Jesus; Jesus answers only the question of kingship, then is silent	Silence fulfills Isaiah 53:7; Jesus neither defends Himself nor denies His identity
15–23	Pilate attempts to release Jesus via the Barabbas custom; crowd chooses Barabbas	Barabbas (“son of the father”) released; the true Son of the Father condemned
24–26	Pilate washes his hands; crowd takes blood guilt; Barabbas released, Jesus flogged	Hand-washing is a Jewish purity gesture by a Roman — irony; guilt is not removed by ceremony
27–31	Soldiers mock Jesus as king — scarlet robe, crown of thorns, reed scepter	The soldiers’ mockery inadvertently enacts the truth: He is the King
32	Simon of Cyrene conscripted to carry the cross	Unnamed fulfillment of cross-bearing discipleship (cf. Matthew 16:24)
33–34	Jesus brought to Golgotha; offered wine mixed with gall; refuses	Psalms 69:21; Jesus refuses the numbing agent — He will bear the full weight
35–37	Crucifixion; lots cast for garments; charge posted: “THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS”	Psalms 22:18; the posted charge is ironic truth — the Romans name Him correctly
38	Two rebels crucified alongside Him	Fulfills Isaiah 53:12 — “numbered with the transgressors”
39–44	Passersby, chief priests, scribes, elders, and even the criminals mock Him	Three-wave mockery; the taunt is always the same: “save yourself if you are the Son of God”
45	Darkness over the land from noon to three o’clock	Cosmic sign; echoes Amos 8:9 — the day of the LORD brings darkness
46–47	Jesus cries out: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken	Psalms 22:1; the depth of dereliction; even the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	me?” — misheard as Elijah	bystanders cannot understand what is happening
48–49	A bystander offers sour wine on a sponge; others wait to see if Elijah comes	Psalm 69:21; the mockery continues even at the moment of death
50	Jesus cries out again and yields up His spirit	The death is active — Jesus “yields” His spirit; sovereign to the end
51–53	Curtain tears, earthquake, rocks split, tombs open, saints raised	Four cosmic signs; the death of Jesus undoes the barriers between God and man, life and death
54	Centurion and guards confess: “Truly this was the Son of God!”	The only correct human confession in the entire passion narrative — and it comes from a pagan soldier
55–56	Women disciples observe from a distance — Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Joseph, mother of Zebedee’s sons	Faithful presence; witnesses who will be the first at the tomb
57–61	Joseph of Arimathea claims the body; wraps it in linen; lays it in his own new tomb	Fulfills Isaiah 53:9 — “with the rich in His death”; Joseph acts in courage after the disciples have fled
62–66	Chief priests and Pharisees secure the tomb with seal and guard	The irony of guarding a tomb against resurrection; their precaution will become the most powerful testimony to the event they sought to prevent

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–10	The Betrayer’s End and the Messiah’s Delivery
2	11–26	The Roman Trial: Pilate, the Crowd, and the Choice of

Division	Verses	Label
3	27–44	Barabbas The King Mocked: From the Praetorium to the Cross
4	45–54	The Death of the Son of God and the Testimony of Creation
5	55–66	The Witnesses: Women, Joseph, and the Guarded Tomb

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Son of God dies as the condemned criminal, accomplishing salvation the crowd could not recognize.

Primary Claim: God is calling every reader to the centurion’s posture — to see the cross not as the defeat of Jesus but as the event in which the Son of God accomplished what no earthly power, religious system, or self-salvation strategy ever could; the cross is not where Jesus failed to be King but where He was King in the only way that saves.

Applications (Five)

1. Repent of the crowd’s expectation that a real Savior rescues on your terms.

(*Mind/Belief*) Every voice mocking Jesus in Matthew 27 — the passersby, the religious leaders, the criminals — is making the same demand: “Save yourself, and then we’ll believe you.” The underlying assumption is that legitimate divine power expresses itself through self-preservation, comfort, and immediate deliverance. This is not ancient error — it is the operating theology of most contemporary hearts. Believers regularly manage a quiet suspicion that God has failed when He does not intervene in the way they expected. Matthew 27 directly confronts this: the most powerful salvific act in history looked, from every angle available on Good Friday, like defeat. The reader must name and repent of the expectation that God’s faithfulness shows up as immediate, visible, circumstantial rescue — and receive the cross as the definitive evidence that God’s ways are not our ways.

2. Let the cry of dereliction (v. 46) silence every fear that God has abandoned you.

(*Affections/Worship*) “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” is the most terrible sentence ever spoken — and it was spoken so that no believer ever has to speak it truthfully. The forsakenness Jesus experienced at the cross was judicial, penal, and complete precisely so that the believer’s experience of God’s presence is permanent and secure. Romans 8:38–39 rests on Matthew 27:46. When the believer walks through seasons of spiritual darkness, relational desolation, or providential silence, the cross is

not a rebuke to their sense of abandonment — it is the place where God demonstrates that He is not done with those who cry out from darkness. Let the cross be the evidence that overwhelms the feeling of abandonment.

3. Identify the specific “save yourself” demand your own life is making on Jesus.

(Mind/Belief) The mockery in Matthew 27 reveals a consistent pattern: the crowd has a version of salvation it wants Jesus to perform, and when He does not perform it, He is dismissed. This pattern does not die with the Jerusalem crowd — every human heart generates a list of what a real Savior would do for me, and when Christ does not deliver according to that list, the heart quietly steps back from full trust. The application is concrete: what is the specific circumstance, longing, or unanswered prayer that has functioned in your life as a test Jesus needs to pass? Name it. Place it at the foot of the cross, where the One who refused to come down is doing something more permanent and more decisive than what you asked for.

4. Worship at the place where the curtain tore. *(Affections/Worship)* The tearing of the curtain from top to bottom (v. 51) is not merely a theological proposition — it is a personal invitation. The architecture of the temple said: God is here, but not for you, not directly, not without a mediator, not without blood, not permanently. The torn curtain says: all of that has been abolished in the flesh of Christ. The application is to recover a posture of stunned, direct, unmediated access to God in prayer and worship — to stop approaching the throne with the hesitancy of someone who is not sure they are welcome, and to come with the boldness of someone for whom the curtain was torn. Hebrews 10:19–22 makes this explicit: *draw near, with full assurance of faith*.

5. Take the centurion’s position — say the right thing about Jesus even when every visible indicator contradicts it. *(Will/Behavior)* The centurion confessed “Truly this was the Son of God” not after the resurrection, not after Pentecost, not after any of the vindicating events — but standing at the foot of the cross in the moment of apparent defeat, in the darkness, amid the earthquake. His confession is the model for Christian witness: to name Jesus as Lord precisely when the cultural, social, or circumstantial evidence most powerfully argues against it. The application is behavioral and specific: where in your life is Jesus most culturally inconvenient to confess? In what relationships, professional contexts, or social circles is it most costly to say the right thing about who He is? The centurion is calling you to that exact spot.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 27 is the theological center of the entire Gospel — and, in a real sense, of all Scripture. It establishes that the death of Jesus is not incidental, accidental, or merely tragic but is the climactic act of divine redemption toward which all prior Scripture pointed and from which all subsequent gospel proclamation flows. The chapter reveals the character of God as One who does not save by power-display or circumstantial rescue but by absorbing the full weight of human sin and the full force of

divine judgment in the person of His Son. The cry of dereliction and the tearing of the curtain together disclose what the cross achieves: the Son bears judicial forsakenness so that the sinner is permanently welcomed; the barrier is removed by the One who was himself excluded. The cosmic signs — darkness, earthquake, resurrection of the saints — are Matthew's declaration that this death is not a local religious execution but a world-altering event that reorders the cosmos, the covenant, and the destiny of every human being.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 27 is one of the most concentrated narrative expressions of penal substitutionary atonement in the New Testament. The Reformed tradition's insistence that Christ bore the Father's actual judicial wrath — not merely its appearance, not merely a suffering that evokes sympathy — is directly supported by the cry of dereliction, the darkness, and the torn curtain read together. The curtain that tore was the curtain behind which God's holy presence dwelt and before which human sin was managed but never finally resolved; its tearing is not an architectural accident but the declaration that the just requirement of the law has been fully satisfied. The chapter also embeds the sovereignty of God in redemption with striking force: the betrayal, the false trial, Pilate's political cowardice, the crowd's murderous demand — all are simultaneously the acts of responsible moral agents and the fulfillment of the divine counsel prophetically announced centuries earlier. This is the Reformed understanding of providence and divine sovereignty: God does not merely react to human decisions but works through them without evacuating their moral character. The gospel displayed in Matthew 27 is not "God helps those who help themselves" — it is "God saves those who, like the thief and the centurion, have nothing to offer but need."

Main Takeaway

The cross is not where Jesus was defeated before He could save anyone — it is where He saved everyone who would come to Him, by the only means that could actually do it. Every person in this chapter who demanded that Jesus save Himself was asking Him to abandon the only act that could save them. He stayed. He bore the darkness. The curtain tore. Stop approaching God as if the curtain is still intact, and stop living as if you need Jesus to prove Himself before you trust Him — He already proved it, and it looked like this.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Matthew 27 primarily as a devotional reflection on Jesus' suffering rather than as a theological claim about what the cross accomplishes.** The

passion narrative is frequently preached as an emotional appeal — “look how much He suffered for you” — which, while not false, leaves the congregation with sentiment rather than gospel. The cross does not save because it was painful; it saves because it was penal and substitutionary. The tearing of the curtain, the cry of dereliction, and the centurion’s confession are not emotional footnotes — they are Matthew’s theological argument. Preachers must get to the *why* of the cross, not merely the *what*.

- **Preaching the crowd’s failure as a moralistic warning (“don’t be like the crowd”) without diagnosing the underlying theological error.** The crowd’s demand that Jesus save Himself is not merely bad manners or fickle loyalty — it is a theologically defined error: expecting a Savior who rescues on human terms. If the sermon concludes only with “be more faithful than Peter” or “don’t abandon Jesus like the disciples,” it has moralized a passage that is fundamentally about what God does, not what we must do better. The anti-moralism principle applies directly here: exposition must diagnose the root (a wrong theology of what salvation looks like) not merely the symptom (disloyalty).
- **Under-preaching the cry of dereliction out of concern for Trinitarian orthodoxy.** Some preachers soften verse 46 into a quotation of Psalm 22 that does not imply real abandonment, primarily to avoid the impression of a divided Trinity. This is an under-reading that costs the congregation the full weight of substitution. The Reformed doctrine of the impassibility and simplicity of God does not require minimizing what the text says Jesus experienced; it requires careful theological articulation of how the Son bore the Father’s wrath without that wrath being a disruption of the eternal Trinity. Preach the forsakenness in full — and let the congregation feel the weight of what was borne on their behalf.
- **Reading Matthew 27:25 (“His blood be on us and on our children”) in a way that implies ethnic or generational guilt for Jewish people.** This verse has been weaponized in Christian history to catastrophic effect. The preacher must be explicit: Matthew is recording a scene of covenantal accountability, not issuing a divine decree of permanent ethnic condemnation. The blood that is “on them” is the same blood that is available to cleanse them — and the book of Acts records thousands of Jewish people receiving exactly that cleansing at Pentecost and afterward. Preach this verse with historical seriousness and theological care.
- **Focusing so heavily on the divine orchestration of the cross that human moral responsibility disappears.** Matthew 27 is full of responsible agents making terrible choices: Judas, Pilate, the crowd, the religious leaders. The Reformed doctrine of divine sovereignty does not erase this — it holds it in tension. Pilate’s cowardice is real cowardice. The crowd’s bloodlust is real bloodlust. Judas’s betrayal is real betrayal. The preacher who flattens human agency in service of divine sovereignty will produce a congregation that is unclear about the nature of sin, repentance, and moral accountability.

- **Failing to connect the burial and the guarded tomb (vv. 57–66) to the resurrection that follows.** These closing verses are often treated as administrative footnotes. In fact, the sealed and guarded tomb is Matthew's setup for the most powerful anti-objection in the resurrection narrative: the people who had the most to gain from the body staying put were the very ones who secured the tomb, and they could not keep it sealed. The guard becomes the resurrection's best witness. Do not lose these verses — they are load-bearing for Matthew 28.