

The Cross: The Place

Matthew 27:32-44

March 31, 2019

Welcome and intro to the series...

Well, as we look at this series on The Cross today, we come to The Place. [Pic of Israel in Jesus Time] We are looking at why Jesus came in a particular time period. Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem during the Roman Empire in about 0 AD.? Why did Jesus die on a cross in approximately 33 AD? And what does this mean for our lives. In many ways, we see Jesus as the person he was because of where he was and the time period, he lived his earthly life. That's how people see us today and it's important for us to know that Jesus looked and spoke and acted the way He did because of where and when he lived. We do the same thing...we are who we are because of where we live. And this morning we are going to unpack all of that. We are going to look at Jesus and his times and why it was important that Jesus came during the exact time he did. And then we are going to look at the meaning of the cross during that time period and how that still changes our life today.

You are who you are because of where you are.

The world in ancient Israel influenced how Jesus would live and it would set up his death. Around 14 BC. the Roman Empire started a 200-year time of relative peace and much prosperity. Called the Pax Romana. [Pic of the Roman Empire] The people of Israel were simply another conquered province called Judea and were whipped into submission like every other conquered land. For the next 200 years, instead of wars and fighting and spending their money on the military industrial complex, Rome would spend its money on infrastructure. To give you an idea of how large the Roman Empire was, look at the map on the screen. Rome was the first dominant world power – the largest empire up until that time. China in the east was growing in dominance but, didn't reach this size for several hundred more years. An empire as vast as our US and kept all together without any form of modern-day communication.

Aqueducts were built to bring water to every part of the empire and the first national highway system that can still be seen today. There was one system of money and one language. These two improvements alone unified all those under Roman rule and created two commonalities among very different peoples so that everyone in the Roman empire would have starting points to begin connection. All of these inventions developed to create the perfect opportunity for Christianity to spread like wildfire in this empire. The roads made it easy for missionaries to spread the gospel to all those large prosperous cities. And the common language and cultures created by the Romans gave people a beginning point to share the Good News. At no other time in history could Christianity have spread so quickly.

After Rome becomes a Christian state, the Roman empire splits in two. The Eastern half splits and becomes what we westerners call the Byzantine Empire, while Christianity in the west is known as the Holy Catholic Church. In certain parts of the world, the Roman Empire provided a cover for Christianity for a very long time. In just 200 years, without electricity, telegraphs, trains or even the internet, Christianity became the dominant religion in that part of the world. Meaning that those early followers were so on fire with a passion to make disciples that they truly lit up their world with the Gospel. That's what a passion for Jesus can do, no matter where it's at because...

God uses passion in every place.

Now that information gives us the context for why Jesus and that time period. In Matthew 27, there is only one short reference to the actual cross and crucifixion. **After they had nailed him to the cross.** There are details like the bitter wine and the soldiers and the sign above, but no detail about the cross. That's because everyone in that day would have understood the cross and what a crucifixion was like. Early Christians would have seen that horror in person, heard the real screams of someone being crucified on a very frequent basis. That's why the Romans chose this kind of punishment, because it was terrible and horrific. And we know that the Romans only crucified people on main thoroughfares. [Pic of Golgotha] That's why verse 39 talks about the passersby who shouted at him. Because anyone wanting to go into town or go to the market or do business would have had to walk right by those criminals on the cross. Imagine every day on route 22 having to drive past people suffering on a cross. The Romans wanted crucifixion to be a deterrent for anyone who was thinking about stepping out of line. This death was so horrid that it was reserved for the lowest classes and the worst political threats. In fact, if you were a Roman citizen, you couldn't be crucified unless on order by the emperor himself.

And then what do those crazy Christians do, they take that torture device and they wear it around their necks. They display it while they worship. And they mark themselves with the sign of the cross. Now this wasn't cute or some fad. The

sign of the cross doesn't shock us or bring back memories of someone screaming in agony but, it did to them. If you haven't seen it, maybe watch the Passion of the Christ to get a better idea. Remember how Jesus took this horrible device for killing and revolutionized it and turned it into a symbol of hope.

Jesus takes the horror of the cross and turns it into hope.

Matthew doesn't specifically mention it, but Mark and Luke make clear that Pilate wrote King of the Jews in Latin (the Roman Language of the day), Greek (which everyone in the world spoke) and Hebrew, (the official language of the Jews). Pilate writes the title of Jesus in this way so no one can wonder who he is. The ROMAN EMPORER was considered the reigning God and the King of every conquered culture of that day, including the Jews. And yet, the irony is that when Pilate and the Romans hang Jesus from the cross, we Jesus' followers are very aware that he is the ruling power of the day, not Caesar, not Pilate and not the emperor.

Pilate writes King of the Jews in the most common languages of the day. Sounds kind of strange because the Romans ruled the world. Here is where Jesus turns everything, we think we know up on its head. To be King of the Jews for the Romans denies everything the Roman Empire relies upon. It means the emperor is a mere mortal like the rest of us and that everything they have known means nothing when the King of the Jews comes to power. And when this message becomes too powerful, Pilate demands Jesus' death. And so, when Pilate thinks he is being ironic by writing that Jesus is King of the Jews, instead he is speaking a truth and reminding the people that there is a King above all kings.

And WOW, here is where God wants to speak to each and every one of us this morning.

- While the Roman Empire was the perfect place and time, we have so many devices at our disposal to tell our story in our place and time. The question we have to answer this morning is...do we have the passion. Do we believe that what happened back then, over there has a lasting, life changing affect on us today and will you share that with others?
- Jesus is Savior, Messiah and Conqueror of this world. When the King of Kings is posted as a swear word, we embrace that title as THE Word.

When I consider what Jesus did for each and every one of us by dying on the cross, he gave absolutely everything. And this isn't just my story, but this is each and every one of our stories who believe in Jesus. He died to give each of us freedom, forgiveness and eternal life.

So ... when you leave this room today. You've got a King. It isn't a president, or a party leader or and Attorney General. You've got a leader whose only purpose is to point you to Jesus Christ.