

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 37: The Crucifixion

Matthew 27:27-56

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this is the most important lesson in the entire study, because the cross is the center of the Christian faith. What is at stake here is the meaning of the atonement: not merely that Jesus died, but why He died and what His death accomplished. Matthew gives us the interpreting clues himself. The mockery, "he can't save himself," unwittingly states the gospel logic that He would not save Himself in order to save us. The three hours of darkness signal that this is no ordinary death; the judgment of God against sin is being poured out. The cry of forsakenness reveals the awful price: the sinless Son bearing our sin and tasting the God-forsakenness we deserved. And the torn veil declares the result: the barrier between God and humanity is removed, and access to God is opened through the death of Christ. The centurion's confession seals the truth of who this dying Man is. A teacher must help the class see the cross not as a tragedy but as the deliberate, saving work of God.

At the same time, this passage is designed to do more than inform; it is meant to break and remake the heart. You cannot stand honestly at the foot of the cross and remain unchanged. It exposes the true cost of our sin, sin we are tempted to excuse and minimize. It overwhelms us with the love of a Savior who would not come down. It speaks tenderly to the forsaken and the alone, assuring them that Christ entered that darkness so they would never be abandoned by God. And it summons us through the torn veil into a nearness with God we too often hold at a distance. The goal is that students leave not merely understanding the cross but undone by it and drawn to it.

So teach for both targets, and let the weight of Q9 carry the central truth. Make sure your students can say clearly what the cross accomplished: Christ dying in our place for our sins, opening the way to God. And make sure they feel it: that this was for them, by name, and that the only fitting response is to give themselves wholly to the One who gave Himself wholly for them.

Question 1

Student Question:

The soldiers and the crowd mocked Jesus as a powerless, failed king, jeering, "He saved others, but he can't save himself!" (27:42). What were they unknowingly revealing about the true nature of His kingship and His mission?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the bitter irony that Matthew presses on us. The mockery comes from every direction. The soldiers crown Him with thorns and hail Him as king in jest (27:29). The sign over His head names Him King of the Jews as a charge of crime (27:37). The passersby and the religious leaders sneer, "He saved others, 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" (27:42).

Help your students hear what the mockers cannot. They imagine they are exposing a failed and powerless king. In fact they are confessing the deepest truth of the cross. He saved others, that part is true. And it is precisely because He was saving others that He would not save Himself. To come down from the cross would have been to abandon the very mission He came to accomplish. His refusal to save Himself was not weakness; it was love holding Him there more firmly than any nail.

This redefines kingship entirely. The crowd wanted a king who would seize power, crush enemies, and prove himself by spectacular self-deliverance. Jesus reigns from a cross. His crown is thorns, His throne is an instrument of execution, and His victory comes through laying down His life. This is the upside-down kingdom Matthew has been showing us all along, now displayed in its fullest, most costly form.

There is also a sharp lesson about faith hidden in their taunt, "Let him come down, and we will believe." They wanted proof on their terms. But the greater glory was that He stayed. Faith that demands God act on our terms will always be disappointed; faith that trusts the crucified King sees the deepest power and love of God exactly where the world sees only defeat.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's kingship displayed through self-giving sacrifice rather than self-deliverance
- The deliberate, voluntary nature of Jesus' death out of love (John 10:17-18)
- The upside-down kingdom: victory through the cross, a crown of thorns, a throne of suffering
- The error of demanding God prove Himself on our terms before we will believe
- The mockers unwittingly proclaiming the gospel: He would not save Himself in order to save us

Discussion Prompts

- How does the cross redefine what real kingship and power look like?
- Why was Jesus refusing to save Himself an act of strength and love rather than weakness?
- Where are you tempted to demand that God prove Himself on your terms before you will trust Him?

Question 2

Student Question:

It would have taken only a word for Jesus to call down deliverance, yet He stayed on the cross out of love for us. Where in your life is God calling you to lay down your own rights or comfort for the good of someone else?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the love that held Jesus on the cross and turns it toward the student's daily life. Jesus could have called down deliverance in an instant; He told Peter earlier that He could appeal to the Father and at once be given more than twelve legions of angels (26:53). He stayed anyway, out of love for us.

Help students see that the way of Christ is the way of self-giving love. We are called to lay down our rights, our comfort, and our preferences for the good of others, just as He did for us. Paul roots this exact appeal in the cross: have the same mindset as Christ, who did not grasp at His rights but emptied Himself and became obedient to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

Press for specifics. Where is each student being asked to lay something down? It might be a parent setting aside personal time for a demanding child, a spouse choosing to serve rather than insisting on being served, a believer forgiving an offense rather than clinging to the right to be angry, or a Christian giving sacrificially of money or comfort for someone in need.

Be honest that this is costly and runs against our instincts. We are wired to protect our rights and seek our comfort. The cross does not merely command sacrificial love; it empowers and motivates it. We give ourselves away because He first gave Himself away for us. Self-giving love is not how we earn His; it is how we echo it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to self-giving love modeled on the cross (Philippians 2:5-8)
- Laying down our rights and comfort for the good of others (1 John 3:16)
- The cross as both the model and the motive for sacrificial love
- Christian love as concrete action, not merely sentiment (1 John 3:18)

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to lay down a right or comfort for someone else's good?
- What makes self-giving love so hard, and how does the cross help you do it?
- Who in your life most needs you to love them sacrificially this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

From noon until three, "darkness came over all the land" as Jesus hung dying (27:45). What is the significance of this darkness, and what does it tell us about the seriousness of what was happening on the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Turn now to the darkness. Matthew tells us that “from noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land” (27:45). At the brightest part of the day, when the sun should have been at its peak, the light failed. This is no incidental detail; Matthew records it because it interprets what is happening on the cross.

Throughout Scripture, darkness is a sign of judgment and of the awesome presence of God in wrath. In Egypt, a plague of darkness fell before the final judgment of the firstborn (Exodus 10:21–22). The prophets spoke of the day of the Lord as a day of darkness (Amos 5:18–20; 8:9). The darkness over Golgotha signals that this is the hour when the judgment of God against sin is being poured out, not on the world, but on the Son who bears it.

Help students feel the seriousness this signals. The cross is not merely a Roman execution; it is the place where the sin of the world is being judged. The darkness is the visible sign of an invisible reality: the holy God dealing with sin in full. We tend to treat sin lightly. The three hours of darkness will not let us. Sin is so serious that bearing its judgment plunged the Son of God into darkness.

And yet even here there is mercy. The judgment fell on Christ so that it would not fall on us. The darkness Jesus entered was the darkness we deserved. He went into it so that we could walk in the light. Let your students sit in the seriousness, but lead them out toward the grace: He bore the dark hour in our place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Darkness in Scripture as a sign of divine judgment and the day of the Lord (Amos 8:9)
- The cross as the place where God’s judgment against sin was poured out on Christ
- The seriousness of sin revealed by the cost of bearing its penalty
- Christ enduring the darkness of judgment so we could walk in the light (Colossians 1:13–14)
- Creation itself bearing witness to the cosmic significance of the Son’s death

Discussion Prompts

- What does the three hours of darkness tell us about the seriousness of sin?
- How does it change things to see the cross as the place where sin was judged?
- How does knowing Christ bore that darkness for you affect your gratitude?

Question 4

Student Question:

The cross confronts us with how costly our sin is to God. How does looking honestly at what your sin cost Jesus change the way you think about the sins you are tempted to treat as small?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the seriousness signaled by the darkness and applies it to how lightly we tend to treat our own sin. We are experts at minimizing. We call it a mistake, a slip, a small thing, a private matter that hurts no one. The cross will not allow that comfortable accounting.

Help students look honestly at the price. Every sin we are tempted to wave off as minor is part of the weight that pressed on Christ at Golgotha. The gossip we excuse, the resentment we nurse, the lust we feed, the dishonesty we rationalize, the pride we defend, all of it cost Him this. Sin is never as small as it feels in the moment when we measure it against the cross.

Be careful to aim this at the heart, not merely at the behavior. The goal is not to load students with shame but to give them a truer sense of what sin is, so that they hate it rightly and flee it more readily. When we see what our sin cost, the appeal of it begins to lose its grip.

Then point to the same cross as the place of cleansing. Seeing the cost of sin should drive us not to despair but to the Savior. The blood that shows us how serious our sin is, is the same blood that cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). Let the seriousness deepen both our repentance and our gratitude.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of minimizing sin that the cross exposes as deadly serious
- Seeing the true cost of sin in what it required of Christ
- A right hatred of sin as fruit of seeing the cross clearly
- The blood of Christ as the cleansing for the very sins that cost Him so much (1 John 1:7)

Discussion Prompts

- Which sins are you most tempted to treat as small or harmless?
- How does looking at the cross change the way you see those sins?
- How can the seriousness of sin and the grace of the cross work together in your heart?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27:46). What was happening in that cry, and how can the eternal Son experience God-forsakenness while remaining the beloved Son?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Approach this question with reverence, for it touches the deepest mystery of the cross. Out of the darkness, Jesus cries with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which Matthew translates, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27:46). This is the only place in the

Gospels where Jesus addresses the Father not as “Father” but as “My God,” and the change is staggering.

First, note that Jesus is quoting Psalm 22:1, a psalm that opens in forsakenness and moves toward vindication and praise. He is not in confusion or unbelief; He is praying Scripture in His agony, taking the words of the forsaken sufferer onto His own lips. The psalm’s details, the pierced hands and feet, the divided garments, the mocking onlookers, are unfolding around Him as He speaks.

Then come to the heart of the mystery. The sinless Son, who had never known a single moment out of fellowship with the Father, now bears the sin of the world. Paul says God “made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21), and Isaiah says “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). In bearing our sin, Jesus tastes the God-forsakenness that sin deserves, the separation from God that is the true horror of sin and the true sentence against it. He experiences in our place what we deserved to experience forever.

Hold the mystery carefully and do not over-explain it. Even in the cry, He says “My God, my God”; the relationship is not destroyed. The eternal love between Father and Son is not broken. Yet in His genuine human suffering, bearing our sin, Jesus enters the depths of forsakenness so that we never will. Teach this on your knees, with more wonder than analysis. He was forsaken so that we could be received.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus bearing our sin and the God-forsakenness it deserves in our place (2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:6)
- The cry as the prayer of Psalm 22, taking the forsaken sufferer’s words onto Himself
- The horror of sin as separation from God, tasted by Christ for us
- The mystery of the Son remaining the beloved Son even while bearing our forsakenness
- Christ forsaken so that we would never be finally forsaken by God (Hebrews 13:5)

Discussion Prompts

- What was truly happening when Jesus cried, “Why have you forsaken me?”
- Why is it significant that Jesus bore the God-forsakenness our sin deserved?
- How does it help to know He addressed God even from the depths of that cry?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus tasted abandonment so that we would never be finally abandoned by God. When you feel most alone or forsaken, how does His cry from the cross speak to you in that place?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the cry of forsakenness and offers it as comfort to the lonely and the desolate. There are seasons when believers feel utterly alone, when God seems silent and far away, when grief or depression or suffering makes us feel abandoned. Many in your class know this feeling firsthand.

Help them see what the cross says to that experience. Jesus Himself entered the deepest forsakenness, real and not pretended. He knows from the inside what it is to feel God-abandoned. So when we cry out in our own darkness, we do not cry to a distant God who cannot relate, but to a Savior who has been there, who understands our cry because He once cried it Himself.

Then offer the deeper assurance. Because Jesus was truly forsaken in our place, we who are in Christ will never be finally and ultimately forsaken by God. He has promised, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Our feelings of abandonment are real, but they are not the final truth. The cross guarantees that God will not let go of His own.

Be tender here. Do not rush anyone past their pain or imply that a true believer should never feel alone. Jesus felt alone. The gift of this passage is not the denial of the feeling but a Savior who meets us in it and a promise that anchors us beneath it. The forsaken One ensures we are never forsaken.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's sympathy with us in our suffering, having entered our darkness (Hebrews 4:15)
- The promise that God will never leave or forsake His people (Hebrews 13:5)
- The difference between feeling forsaken and being forsaken for those in Christ
- The cross as the ground of assurance in our loneliest seasons

Discussion Prompts

- When have you felt most alone or abandoned, and how does Jesus' cry speak to that?
- What is the difference between feeling forsaken and actually being forsaken by God?
- How can the promise that God will never forsake you steady you in dark seasons?

Question 7

Student Question:

At the moment Jesus died, the temple curtain "was torn in two from top to bottom" (27:51). What did that veil represent, and what is God declaring by tearing it open at the death of His Son?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now come to the torn veil, one of the most theologically loaded moments in the Gospels. At the instant Jesus dies, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (27:51). Help

students picture this curtain: a massive, thick veil that sealed off the Most Holy Place, the inner room of the temple where the very presence of God dwelt. Only the high priest could pass behind it, only once a year, only with sacrificial blood.

The veil was a vivid sign of separation. It declared that sinful people could not simply walk into the presence of a holy God. The way was barred. The curtain stood there, year after year, saying in effect, “You cannot come in.” It was a constant reminder that sin had cut humanity off from God.

Now watch what God does at the death of His Son. The veil is torn, and Matthew is careful to note the direction: from top to bottom. This is not a human act of vandalism from below; it is the act of God from above. God Himself rips open the barrier. The Hebrew writer explains the meaning: through the death of Christ a “new and living way” has been opened for us to enter the presence of God, “through the curtain, that is, his body” (Hebrews 10:19–20).

Let the wonder of this land. The death that looked like the end of Jesus is the opening of the way to God. The barrier that stood for centuries is gone. Because Christ died, we can now “draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings” (Hebrews 10:22). The cross does not merely satisfy justice; it opens the door. Through Christ, the presence of God, once sealed off, is now open to all who come to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temple veil as a sign of the separation between sinful humanity and a holy God
- God Himself tearing the veil from top to bottom at the death of His Son
- Access to God opened through the body and blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:19–22)
- The end of the old sacrificial system, fulfilled and surpassed in Christ’s one sacrifice (Hebrews 10:11–14)
- Christ our great High Priest who brings us into the very presence of God (Hebrews 4:14–16)

Discussion Prompts

- What did the temple veil represent before it was torn?
- Why is it significant that the veil was torn from top to bottom?
- What does it mean for you that the way into God’s presence is now open through Christ?

Question 8

Student Question:

Because the veil is torn, you now have open access to draw near to God through Christ. Are you actually living in that nearness, or are you keeping your distance from God as if the curtain were still hanging?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the open way through the torn veil and asks whether the student is actually walking through it. The tragedy would be to have full access to God purchased at infinite cost and still live as though the curtain were hanging, keeping our distance, approaching God timidly or not at all.

Help students examine their prayer life and their nearness to God. Some hold God at arm's length out of guilt, feeling unworthy to come close, as if they must clean themselves up first. But the veil is torn; we come not on the basis of our worthiness but of Christ's sacrifice. Others keep their distance out of neglect or busyness, treating the open door to God as if it were not even there.

The Hebrew writer turns the torn veil into an invitation and almost a command: since the way is open, "let us draw near" (Hebrews 10:22). The proper response to the torn veil is not admiration from a distance but actually drawing near, daily, freely, confidently. The access was bought; it is meant to be used.

Press gently for honesty. Is each student living in the nearness the cross provides, or keeping a polite distance from God? Then encourage one concrete step: a renewed practice of prayer, a return to honest communion, a coming near in the very area of guilt or fear that has kept them away. The Father whose veil is torn is not waiting at a distance; He is inviting us in.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to draw near to God through the access Christ has opened (Hebrews 10:22)
- Approaching God on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, not our own worthiness
- Guilt, neglect, and busyness as ways we keep distance despite the open way
- Confident, regular communion with God as the fruit of the torn veil (Hebrews 4:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Are you living in the nearness to God the cross provides, or keeping your distance?
- What tends to make you hold God at arm's length?
- What is one concrete way you can draw near to God this week through the open way?

Question 9

Student Question:

Watching how Jesus died, a hardened Roman centurion confessed, "Surely he was the Son of God!" (27:54). Drawing together the mockery, the darkness, the cry of forsakenness, and the torn veil, what does the cross mean, what did Christ's death actually accomplish, and how does the New Testament say we come to receive it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest and most important question of the lesson, and indeed one of the most important in the whole study, so give it your fullest care. Gather up everything the scene has shown us: the mockery, the darkness, the cry of forsakenness, the torn veil, and the centurion's confession. Together they answer the question, what does the cross mean and what did it accomplish?

Start with what the cross accomplished. At the cross, Christ died in our place, bearing the penalty our sins deserved. The darkness shows that the judgment of God against sin was being poured out. The cry of forsakenness shows that He bore the God-forsakenness sin deserves. This is the atonement: "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ did not die as a tragic martyr or merely as a moral example. He died as our substitute, taking what we deserved.

Then show what the cross opened. The torn veil declares that the barrier between God and sinful humanity is removed. Through the death of Christ, "a new and living way" into the presence of God has been opened (Hebrews 10:19–20). The cross both pays the penalty for sin and opens the door to God. Justice is satisfied and fellowship is restored. And the centurion, watching how Jesus died, gives us the right confession: "Surely he was the Son of God!" (27:54). The One who died is no mere man; He is the divine Son, which is why His death has infinite worth and can save us all.

Now turn to how a person comes to receive what the cross accomplished, and let Scripture set the pattern clearly and graciously. The salvation Christ purchased is received as we respond to the gospel: hearing the good news of His death and resurrection, believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, repenting of our sins, confessing Him as Lord, and being baptized into Him for the forgiveness of sins. Paul ties our union with Christ's death and resurrection directly to baptism: "all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death... we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3–4). When Peter's hearers, cut to the heart, asked what they must do, he answered, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

Teach this as a free gift received through an obedient, living faith, never as a wage we earn. The cross does it all; we could add nothing to it. We are saved by grace through a faith that trusts and obeys, gladly coming to Christ on His terms (Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16). Keep the whole conversation soaked in wonder. The Son of God was mocked, plunged into darkness, forsaken in our place, and torn the veil open with His death, all so that we, by name, could come home to God. The only fitting response is to fall before Him and give Him everything.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The atonement: Christ dying in our place, bearing the penalty for our sins (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24)

- The great exchange: our sin laid on Christ, His righteousness given to us (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- The torn veil: access to God opened through the death of Christ (Hebrews 10:19–22)
- The deity of Christ confessed at the cross, giving His death infinite saving worth (27:54)
- Salvation received through hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4)
- Salvation as a free gift of grace received through an obedient faith, never earned by works (Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16)

Discussion Prompts

- In your own words, what did the cross of Christ actually accomplish?
- How do the darkness, the cry of forsakenness, and the torn veil each help explain the cross?
- How does the New Testament describe the way a person comes to receive what the cross secured?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this whole scene at Golgotha. Name one specific way the cross of Christ is reshaping your heart this week, whether your view of sin, your sense of God's nearness, or your gratitude for the One who died in your place.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole scene at Golgotha and press it toward the heart. The class has stood at the cross and watched the mockery, the darkness, the cry, the torn veil, and the centurion's confession. The aim now is not to add information but to invite transformation. No one should leave the foot of the cross unchanged.

Encourage students to be specific. A real answer might sound like, "I have been treating certain sins as small, and this week I will see them in light of the cross and turn from them," or "I have been keeping God at a distance, and I will draw near through the open way He purchased," or simply, "I will let the wonder that He died in my place reshape how I live and what I live for."

Give people room to let it land. A moment of silence to write a single sentence before sharing often yields more honest and lasting fruit. The goal is that each person leaves with one clear way they are responding to the crucified Christ.

Close in worship. The deepest response to the cross is not first resolve but adoration. He was forsaken so we could be received; He died so we could live; He tore the veil so we could come home. Lead your class to marvel, and let every act of obedience flow from a heart undone by His love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of doctrine and daily transformation
- A changed view of sin, of God's nearness, and of gratitude as fruit of the cross
- Worship and adoration as the proper response to the crucified Christ
- The lifelong process of being formed into the likeness of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from the cross that God most wants to work into your heart?
- What specific step will you take this week in response to what Christ did for you?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?