



the thrice repeated temptation Jesus faced on the cross

Matthew 27.³³⁻⁵⁰

³³And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, ³⁴they gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink. ³⁵And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots. ³⁶And sitting down they watched him there; ³⁷And set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁸Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.

³⁹And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, ⁴⁰and saying, "Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross."

⁴¹Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, ⁴²"He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. ⁴³He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God." ⁴⁴The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

⁴⁵Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. ⁴⁶And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying,

"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is to say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

⁴⁷Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, "This man calleth for Elias." ⁴⁸And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, "Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him."

⁵⁰Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

When we think of Jesus' crucifixion, we think first, perhaps, of his personal experience of pain and suffering, endured for us. We think of the pain of nails piercing flesh, the twisting of the body, the cramping of muscles, and the struggle to find breath. But Matthew does not focus on any of this. His narrative of the crucifixion is dominated by a challenge, a temptation thrice repeated to Jesus. Could it be that the possibility found in the challenge was a greater test of Jesus' character, and provides greater insight into the divine character than the physical suffering that took place on the cross?

The first issuance of the challenge/ temptation came from the mouths of "they that passed by."

These seem to have been individuals who were not an active part of the whole ugly proceedings. Like the passing traffic that slows down to see a wreck on the highway, they came by to gawk and then be on their way. But before leaving, they could not resist having a bit of fun. They looked to obtain some form of twisted pleasure by adding insult to one already injured. Humans who become part of a group, crowd, mob, often cease being human, and act in ways that they would not normally act alone. Anyway, it is such passers-by that first issued the thrice repeated challenge.

“Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

What must Jesus have thought? They were right, of course. He had the power to “come down from the cross.” Should he exercise that power? Show everyone once and for all?

The second issuance of the challenge/ temptation came from a more “intimate” place. The chief priests were not passers-by. They were a part, an integral part of the proceedings. They were gathered around the cross, more like a pack of wolves than uninvolved commuters on their way home from work.

“He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.”

What must Jesus have thought? This challenge had more teeth. He *had* saved others. Many others: lepers, the possessed, the blind, the deaf, the mute, women with an issue of blood, the palsied, even the dead. What would such people think if he did not save himself? Would they question the virtue of their encounter with him? Would they think that their encounter with Jesus bore no more importance than the merely physical? Healed in body, their souls remaining unsaved? He, Jesus, lacking the power to save the soul?

And what of the priests’ cynical invocation of God? He *did* trust God. If he did not “come down

from the cross” would this cause some to lose their “trust in God”? And would some conclude that he, Jesus, was not, never had been a man of God, let alone “the Son of God”?

And, yes, besides all this, the cross was hell: physically, yes, but emotionally and spiritually too.

Just as Satan had tempted Jesus with three temptations in the wilderness, the challenge to “save thyself” and “come down from the cross” was repeated a third time. This third challenge was the most intimate of all. It came flying at him from close range, from either side of him, from the two “thieves... crucified with him.” It came at him like a slap to the face—they “cast the same in his teeth.”

Passers-by, religious leaders, and common criminals all agreed. His reputation, his prestige, and his life were at stake. His God’s reputation and prestige was on the line. Yes, there were reasons to “come down from the cross.” But neither he, nor his Father, whom he so faithfully imitated, cared about their own reputation or prestige. Prestige and power were not found in one’s ability to serve and save oneself. Their sole concern was with doing what needed to be done to illustrate the true nature of God and to make possible for all a meaningful and enduring existence. And such an existence could only come by putting others before self; sacrificing one’s reputation, prestige, power, and even life in the cause of advancing the interests and needs and benefits of others.

Many, many months earlier, Jesus had warned his disciples that this day was coming. He reminded them that this day was coming during moments when his reputation and prestige and powers were, in their eyes, at their peak—during his transfiguration on the mount, for example. He seemed often worried about them misunderstanding who and what he was. And so,

“from that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.”¹

¹ Matthew. 16.²¹

In such moments, they did not like what they heard. Perhaps they sensed the threat that such humiliation represented toward them. So, Jesus did not leave it at that. They would, indeed, be expected to follow him.

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”²

In a million little ways and words, Jesus would repeat himself, again, and again, and again. He said it the final time in mortality, and most powerfully, from the cross; the cross from which he refused to come down.

Jesus’ crucifixion, or “the cross” as Paul speaks of it, is a bundle of revelations. We think first of its revelation of God’s love: “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us.”³ John’s statement of the nature of revelation found in the cross, however, does not end here. It continues with, “and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” Thus, the revelation of the cross includes not only God’s love for us, but the love we are to have for others—John’s “brethren,” if thought of in terms of Church members is far too restrictive; all are children of God and thus related and worthy of love—and our willingness to suffer to fulfill it.

But the cross’ revelation of God’s attribute, love, is only part of Jesus’ larger revelation concerning the unmatched character of God. John reminds us that throughout his life, including during those agonizing hours on the cross, Jesus was revealing, introducing God.

“No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”⁴

Jesus’ crucifixion reveals, then, both who God is and who and what we are called to be through

² Matthew. 16.²⁴⁻²⁵

³ 1 John. 3.¹³

⁴ John. 1.¹⁸

that revelation. God is love, and we are supposed to be love too. But the revelation of the cross does more than reveal an attribute—love—it reveals the nature of love, the tract it takes. A love like that of Father and Son denies self. These two denied and continue to deny themselves many a satisfaction. This denial is not endured for masochistic reasons. It is endured because it is the only way to live a healthy and full life in this world and to live and endure in the world to come.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: November 6, 2024)