



They were at the Cross....

Bible Study Series for Groups

Week 1: (11/12 March) Simon of Cyrene

Week 2: (18/19 March) The Soldiers

Week 3: (25/26 March) The Thieves

Week 4: (1/2 April) The Women and John

Week 5: (8/9 April) Unexpected visitors

and one who should've been there.

Week 6: (15/16 April) We were there.

Inside Cover

Introduction.

Welcome to our study “They were at the Cross.” It is a six week study that will help us to explore the implications and meanings of the Crucifixion in preparation for Good Friday. The study makes use of a synchronised reading of the Gospels (where all four Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion have been blended together to become one reading but each gospel is printed in a different colour.) This is available as a separate handout.

Each study will be in four parts:

1. A very brief introduction and background to the character(s).
2. A study on the relevant section of the Synchronised Reading.
3. A focus in on the character and application to our lives
4. A meditation on one of the “Seven Words” of Jesus on the cross.

We are hoping that this series will have a profound influence in our lives.

Week 1: Simon of Cyrene

1. Introducing Simon of Cyrene

Cyrene was a Greek colony in what is now modern day Libya and there was a large Jewish Community there. Simon would have come to celebrate the Passover and Mark tells us that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. There is a Rufus and his Godly Mother that are mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:13 and early Christian tradition holds that Alexander and Rufus had become Christians after their father Simon had committed himself to Christ.

The picture the gospels paint is of this father of two who has made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He's expecting to celebrate the Passover which is a wonderful and hope-filled commemoration of how God delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. But as he walks the streets of Jerusalem he is caught up in a crucifixion procession.

It was the practice of the Romans to force condemned prisoners to carry the *patibulum* (cross-bar) of their crosses through the streets. It was meant as a deterrent – a way of keeping the masses in fear of the might and power of Rome.

Jesus has already been flogged. A practice that shredded the flesh and muscles on his back and shoulders and resulted in serious blood-loss. Now, as He carries his cross, He collapses – exhausted and in great agony¹.

Simon is press-ganged into carrying the cross for Jesus.

Let's follow with him and look at the experience he has.

2. Having a look at the passage

Please read Section 1 in the Synchronised reading.

1. John uses the word “Finally Pilate handed him over...” - what does the word “Finally” imply – what has already happened – in what ways has Jesus already suffered? Get different members of the group to browse through Matthew 26:31-27:31; Mark 14:27-15:20; Luke 22:39-23:25; John 18:1-19:16 and identify moments that indicated Jesus' suffering.

¹ For an article written by a Doctor in 1965 about the medical aspects of Jesus crucifixion, go to http://www.thecross-photo.com/Dr_C._Truman_Davis_Analyzes_the_Crucifixion.htm

2. It's difficult to decide whether the wailing women are sincere or not – especially in the light of the crowd that cried “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday and “Crucify Him” on Good Friday. What do you think? Do they understand what is going on? Does it matter?
3. What do we make of Jesus' strange answer to them? What future event do you think He is speaking about? And if barrenness, which was usually considered a curse, is now considered a blessing, how severe could the situation He is describing be?
4. What does He mean when He talks about the green and dry tree?
5. What is Jesus basically implying when He asks them to weep for themselves and not for Him?
6. Tradition indicates that the women of Jerusalem would provide this mixture of wine and gall – which was a narcotic – to ease the suffering of those being crucified. Why would Jesus refuse this?

3. Thinking about Simon...

7. Why is it important that Simon is from “out of town”?
8. How do you think Simon experienced being forced to carry the cross? Should he have refused?
9. What do you think Simon would make of Jesus comments to the women and His refusal to drink the narcotic?
10. Do you think Simon fled the scene after arriving at Golgotha, or do you think he stayed? What conclusions do you think he drew? What would you have done?
11. Why is it important that someone else was involved in the carrying of the cross?

4. Jesus' first word from the Cross.

12. Although Jesus' first word isn't in our section, we find it in Section 2.3: *“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”*
Do you think this was an easy prayer to pray?
What emotions do you think Jesus is feeling?

5. Application.

13. Watch Ray Boltz's song “Watch the Lamb.”
Although the singer is taking some creative leaps – it's a feasible interpretation.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzPoEiWZbWQ>
14. Put yourself in Simon's Shoes – we've all helped Jesus get to the cross. How will it change our lives?

Week 2: The Soldiers

Introducing the Roman Soldiers

The Roman army was made up of professional men, who had dedicated their lives to the Roman emperor of the time. Many had come from poor backgrounds and so a life in the army was an appealing way to improve one's status and lot in life.

While we tend to view the soldiers in a negative light, it appears that the writers of the New Testament didn't necessarily. Bible times were harsh and little value was placed on people's lives. The violence and brutality perpetrated by the soldiers is recorded by the Gospel writers in a very matter-of-fact way – it was the norm.

Crucifixions were also common place at the time. In fact when Jesus was a teenager, there was a rebellion in Jerusalem and the Romans in response crucified 1500 of the insurrectionist along the 15 kilometer stretch leading to Jerusalem, one crucified man per every 10 meters. The stench would have filled Jerusalem for days. The soldiers crucifying Jesus would have been well experienced in the art and thus very unmoved by it – another day, another crucifixion.

Interestingly the Centurions² we meet throughout the New Testament are all portrayed positively, we think of the Centurion who came to Jesus asking for healing for his servant (Matt 8:5-13, Luke 7:3-10) or Cornelius the Centurion who received a vision and invited Peter to his home and was converted (Acts 10). The Centurion at the cross is no different as he offers the clearest identification of Jesus that is recorded.

Thus the soldiers at the cross are an interesting mix of cruelty and nobility. While some gambled for his clothing, others tried to quench his thirst.

Having a look at the passage

Please read Section 2 in the Synchronised reading.

1. The record of the crucifixion happens in only one line, "There they crucified him..." (vs.1). Since it was such a big deal why do you think they didn't go into more detail?
2. We looked at this line (vs.3) that Jesus prays last week. Who do you think the 'them' refers to? Could it be more than just those standing around there?
3. Notices with the criminal's crime written on were at times made and nailed above the crucified persons head. Why do you think Pilate had this notice prepared? Why do you think he refused to change the wording?
4. What significance is there in the sign been written in three separate languages? Read John 19:15 – what is the irony in all of this?
5. Why do you think people (passers-by, soldiers, chief priests and the other criminals) mocked Jesus as he hung on the cross? Surely the fact that he was being crucified was enough? Why kick a man when he's down?
6. When the chief priests and elders mock Jesus by saying, "He saved others but he can't save himself" they are speaking a truth far deeper than what they realise. How do you understand this statement?

² Centurions were in charge (as their title denotes) of a company of 100 soldiers. They were a carefully selected group of wise, strong, expert soldiers who were well respected. Their rank was both functional (commanding 100 men) and placed them in a higher social class to the common man.

Thinking about the soldiers...

7. The soldiers don't only play a role in the actual crucifixion, they have been present from the moment Jesus is arrested, have members of the group to look at Matthew 27:27-31, Mark 15:16-20, Luke 23:11, John 18:3-12, 19:1-5, 23-24. What are some of the ways they participated in this crime?
8. The brutality and cruelty shown in Matthew 27 and Mark 15 is unnecessary. What is the significance of the violence shown here?
9. It is likely that since Jesus was crucified over lunch time and so the soldiers would have been eating and drinking while waiting for those on the crosses to die. In section 4:7-11 we read about some of the soldiers offering Jesus some wine vinegar on a sponge – the common drink of the time. Why do you think they did it? Is it possible to have compassion for someone who you have just nailed to a cross?
10. Read section 4:21-23. What was it that made the Centurion believe? What is the significance of the statement being made by a Roman?
11. Were the soldiers good or bad? Were they responsible for their actions or simply doing what they were commanded to? What would you have done if you were one of the soldiers among this guard?

Jesus' fifth word from the Cross.

We find Jesus fifth word in Section 4:10: *"I am thirsty."*

12. Why would Jesus have been thirsty?
What is the significance of Jesus crying out in thirst?
13. Read Psalm 69:20-21. Was Jesus fulfilling this?
14. Read John 4:10-14 and 7:37-38. What is the implication of Jesus now crying out in thirst after making these statements?

Application.

15. In the filming of the movie "The Passion of the Christ", Mel Gibson the director of the movie insisted that in the scene where Jesus hands are nailed to the cross, that his hands (Mel Gibson's) would be the ones doing the nailing. He said this was because he felt that all of our sins (including his own) had nailed Jesus there. How would it change things for you if you were to actually experience holding the nails against Jesus to nail him there?



Week 3: The Thieves on the Cross

1. Introducing the Thieves

We don't know all that much about the two thieves that were crucified alongside Jesus. Some commentators would call them robbers or insurrectionists.

William Lane points out that while the Greek word (*lestai*) used here is translated as "robbers" in the rest of the New Testament, Josephus the historian uses the same word to talk about "zealots" or "insurrectionists." The Romans used Crucifixion as a punishment for treason and rebellion, but *not* for robbery. It is probably better to talk of them as criminals than robbers.

It is not apparent if these men also underwent the same flogging that Jesus had. If not, they would have been in a much better physical condition than Him and more than likely were able to carry their own crosses to the Place of the Skull. We know that the soldiers eventually had to break the legs of the two to "get" them to die, so it probably proves that they were not flogged or subjected to exactly the same treatment that Christ experienced.

Section 2 verse 13 of the Synchronised reading reveals that initially both robbers were heaping insults on Jesus.

2. Having a look at the passage

Please read Section 3 in the Synchronised reading.

1. Why was Jesus crucified between two criminals? What was the significance of this? What does Isaiah 53:12 tell us about this?
2. Consider and contrast the behaviour of the two thieves. What has caused the change of heart in the second? Consider the irony of justice which is taking place in the face of injustice.
3. Discuss the significance of Jesus' response to the request of the penitent thief. Is this consistent with Matthew 20:1-16? Is God's way of handling things fair?
4. Why were the soldiers dividing up Jesus' clothing? What was the method they used? Were the soldiers acting totally on their own initiative, consider this in light of Psalm 22 vs 18.
5. Why is John drawing so much attention to the under-garment? What is the significance of this garment? Refer Exodus 28:31-32 and Exodus 39:27-29. What is John trying to highlight?
6. William Barclay makes the statement: "The Jews see God in power – Jesus shows God IS sacrificial love." Discuss this statement in light of the text just read.

3. Thinking about the Thieves

7. In what way do the two thieves on the cross represent the world we live in today?
8. What does the penitent thief show us about how we should approach Jesus?
9. The thieves on the cross are witnesses of the darkness, the earthquake, Jesus' words and His final act of giving up His Spirit, how do you think this affected them?

4. Jesus' second Word from the Cross.

10. What do we understand about the word "today" in: "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*" How does this work?

11. In what way do you think Jesus said these words: mockingly, quietly, directly, triumphantly, sincerely, lovingly?
12. What do we understand about the word "*paradise*"

5. Application.

13. Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYmucQyOBuA> by Don Francisco. Put yourself in both thief's shoes – we've all acted and said things that mock Jesus, but what will it take for us to turn to Him like the penitent thief?
14. If you put yourself in the place of the penitent thief, what is it about the way of Jesus on the cross that would have you turn to Him in absolute trust?

Week 4: The Women & John

1. Introducing the women

John 19:25 tells us that standing near the cross was "his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene." Matthew and Mark also speak of Mary Magdalene but mention three other names: Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph (Joses), Salome and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Who were these women?

Many commentators try to figure out whether there is an overlap here, whether Salome is the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Whether Mary the wife of Clopas is also mother to James and Joseph (or is this Mary the mother of Jesus?³). The reality is that we cannot know. There were a group of women at the cross, a small party of those who loved and served Jesus who in their love for him refused to desert him in his hour of need.

Mary, Jesus mother was there, and we cannot imagine the agony she experienced while watching while her child is crucified.

Mary Magdalene was one of the women who followed Jesus and is the only woman to be mentioned in three of the crucifixion accounts. Luke 8:2 talks of Jesus having freed her from seven demons. She is mentioned as being there at the burial of Jesus and three of the Gospels record her as being the first to discover the resurrection and to see the resurrected Christ.

Mary the wife of Clopas is unknown except to say that it is possible this is the same Clopas we hear about on the road to Emmaus. It is thus possible that Jesus appeared to Cleopas⁴ and Mary in that story.

The Mother of the sons of Zebedee would have been James and John's mother. The other two women, the other Mary and Salome we know nothing about except for some speculation.

³ Jesus had a brothers named James, Joseph (Joses), Judas and Simon. See Mark 6:3

⁴ Although John and Luke spell Cleopas/Clopas differently, this is not sufficient to prove that they were not the same person.

Standing with them was John, 'the beloved disciple'. Commentators agree it was probably because he was so young (he was most likely still a teenager) that he would not have been seen as a threat, which is why he is there and the rest of the disciples aren't.

2. Having a look at the passage

Please read Section 4 in the Synchronised reading.

1. Our reading begins with the women who were at the cross. How do you think it must have felt for Jesus to see his mother's anguish?
2. Why was it important for Jesus to have made John, Mary's 'new' son?
3. What unusual events or miracles are associated with Jesus crucifixion and death? Why do you think these things occurred?
4. One of the miracles that occurred was that the Temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. What is the significance of this? Why was it torn from the top down?
5. Jesus moves from saying "God why have you forsaken me" to "Into your hands I commit my Spirit". How does this happen? How is he able to entrust his Spirit to a God whom he feels has forsaken him? What can we learn from this?
6. Crucifixions could take days to kill a person. Why does Jesus die so quickly? (3-6 hours) Do you believe in committing his Spirit to God he chooses to die at that point?

3. Thinking about the women & John...

7. Where are the other disciples? Why are they not there?
8. Why then were the women and John there? Were they simply braver than the others?
9. Understanding that the culture of the time was so patriarchal, what is the significance of the women being mentioned, many even by name? What is the implication of Jesus appearing first to Mary after his resurrection?
10. Do you think seeing the women there who loved him so much, was a source of comfort or of heartache for Jesus?

4. Jesus' fourth word from the Cross.

11. Jesus fourth word is in verse 3 of our section tonight:
"Dear Woman, here is your son,... Here is your mother"
Why do you think Jesus called his mother 'dear woman' instead of mother?
12. What emotions do you think Jesus is feeling?
13. What is the significance of Jesus doing this?

5. Application.

14. Would you have had the courage to stand by the cross, even if it placed your life at risk?
15. At this point the disciples are all terrified and are in hiding but a few short years later they are proclaiming the Gospel with courage and were all with the exception of John (who was exiled) ultimately martyred for their faith. What made the difference? What transformed these men? How can this transform us?

Week 5: Unexpected visitors and one who should have been there.

1. Introducing Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and Barabbas

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were members of the ruling Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus' public ministry and crucifixion. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, is found in the Gospel of John coming secretly at night to visit Jesus. Later in John's gospel see that Nicodemus attempted to stand up in defence of Jesus. It could be argued that it was a "half hearted" attempt and it appears Nicodemus again retreated into the shadows as a secret follower of Christ.

We are told that Joseph of Arimathea is a rich man, this leads some to believe he is the rich young ruler who comes to speak to and question Jesus. Jesus tells this ruler to sell all he has and give it away. The ruler leaves, unable to part with his comforts.

Barabbas is described for us as a notorious criminal, a robber, insurrectionist and murderer. The ESV Study Bible suggests he may have belonged to one of the rural guerilla bands that victimised the wealthy upper class of Israel as well as the Romans. For these reasons he might have been popular with the common people. The two criminals that were crucified with Jesus could have been members of this same band of robbers. It is ironic that the chief priests and elders encouraged the crowd to suggest Barabbas to be released, when they would have been the very people he would have terrorised. This shows their deep hatred for Jesus.

2. Having a look at the passage

Please read Section 5 in the Synchronised reading.

1. Why were they so hasty to take the bodies down? See Deut 21:22-23.
What is the purpose of breaking their legs?
2. Why is it significant that the legs of Jesus were not broken and that water and blood flowed out from him once He was pierced with the spear. Numbers 9:9-12, Zech 12:10, Psalm 34:19-20
3. What does Joseph risk by going and asking for the body of Jesus. In what way is he actually fulfilling the law and customs of the Jews?
4. Why do you think Pilate is surprised to hear that Jesus is already dead?
5. What do you think about the timing and appearance of Nicodemus and what is the significance of the quantity of spices he is bringing?
6. The meaning of Barabbas is "son of the father". In what way is this ironic especially in light of him not being at the cross? How does this mirror Lev14:1-8?

3. Thinking about Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and Barabbas

7. If Joseph was the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and then left him, what do you think has happened to him now that he is willing to come take the body and bury him in his own tomb? In which way do Joseph's actions confirm Old Testament prophecy. (Isaiah 53:9)
8. Do you think Nicodemus has finally come "out hiding"? Consider he came at night initially to Jesus, spoke up in defence of Jesus and now appears just before Passover with Spices and Herbs. What seems to be Nicodemus' great fear?
9. Why do you think Barabbas is not there at the cross?

4. Jesus' fourth Word from the Cross.

10. The 4th Word as spoken by Jesus is perhaps the most dramatic of all spoken. We find the 4th Word in Section 4. Jesus cries out in Aramaic: "*Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani?*" which means, "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*" - What is the significance of Jesus speaking in Aramaic? Do you believe Jesus is just quoting Psalm 22 or is this something He is feeling deep inside himself. What does it mean that Jesus has said He has been forsaken by God?

5. Application.

11. If you had to equate and evaluate where you are in your relationship with Jesus right now who would best describe you? Nicodemus (in the shadows), Joseph (changed person) or Barabbas (missing)

Week 6: We were there

1. We were there.

The old hymn goes: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

We know that ultimately the answer to this hymn's haunting question is "Yes – I was there." I held the hammer that nailed his hands, I shouted those words of humiliating insult, and I was the one of those for whom Jesus prayed forgiveness. But let's think this through more carefully...

2. Who were we?

Please read through sections 1-5 again.

1. (The Crowd) This is the crowd that shouted "Hosanna" on Palm Sunday and now, 5 days later, they are yelling "Crucify Him!" In Matthew 27:25 we read: *All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"* One wonders if they realised that their prayer was answered, but quite differently to what they had meant. Discuss this in the group.
2. (Simon) In years to come to you think Simon felt pride or shame for helping Jesus carry His cross? Why do you think that was? How do you think Simon told his wife about what had happened when he got back home?
3. (The women and John) Women were marginalised in Graeco-Roman society. They must have felt pretty powerless. In all likelihood John was a teenager⁵ and wasn't considered a threat. How does Jesus' crucifixion to to our sense of powerlessness?
4. (The Roman Centurion) It is quite important that it is the Roman Centurion who says: "Surely this was the son of God!" Why do you think so?

5 This would explain why he was still alive in 90AD and still writing letters to the church from the Island of Patmos (The Mediterranean's "Robben Island") when reaching 70 was considered a ripe old age...

5. (The Crowd in General) In Section 5:23 we see the reaction of those who witnessed the crucifixion. What do you find striking?
6. (Pilate) Some have suggested that Pilate was not as weak as we think him to be. Although he “washes his hands” of Jesus, he:
 - Gets the high priests to name Caesar as king on the eve of the Passover
 - Puts the sign on the cross, that Jesus was King of the Jews
 - Grants permission for Jesus to be taken away and buried when the bodies of the crucified were mostly dumped as refuse.What do you think? Were his “acts of defiance” a sufficient show of faith? In what ways are we sometimes like Pilate?

3. His Sixth and Seventh Words.

7. The Greek “It is Finished” is the Greek Word “Tetelestai.” This word has an interesting background. In the marketplace it meant “The debt is paid in full.” In the justice system it meant “The penalty or sentence has been served or paid.” What does it mean to you that Jesus would say this on the cross? Can I withhold forgiveness from myself or others in the light of this?
8. Jesus committed Himself into God's hands and gave up His Spirit? Why is this so significant?

4. Responses and Choices.

9. The account of the Crucifixion faces us with many choices:
 1. The crowd shouted “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday, “Crucify” on Friday, and walked away beating their breasts.
 2. The priests (who should have known better) hardened their hearts and mocked. Even after the earthquake and curtain-tearing.
 3. One criminal repented, the other continued to mock.
 4. Pilate sat on the fence.
 5. The Roman Centurion understood and worshipped.What will we do?
10. Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU97IpTGct0> (The clip contains scenes from “The Passion of the Christ” and are quite realistically graphic. But it probably tells it as it happened.)
11. Take some time as a group to reflect on the wonder of the cross.