

The Death of Jesus

Matthew 27:45-61

Mark Vroegop

45 Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. 46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." 48 And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

51 And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, 53 and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. 54 When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

55 There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, 56 among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. 58 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud 60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb (Matt 27:45-61).

There are some things in the Bible that seem so right, and there are others that seem so wrong and out of place. There are some things that naturally fit together and our sense of fairness, justice and sensibility is satisfied. For example, today is Palm Sunday in the church calendar, and it is the one day that the crowds actually got it right. As Jesus comes into the city of Jerusalem, the people cried out "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!" (Matt 21:9) The crowds are holding palm branches in their hands, and everything about this scene just seems right. But this kind of response is rare and doesn't last long.

There are other things that are so out of place and unnatural that even the close proximity of two words should make us uncomfortable. As we read the Gospels we should experience a visceral response to how Jesus is treated, what is said about him, and what happens to him. It just seems so wrong; and it is wrong. And that is precisely the point that the Biblical writers

like Matthew or Paul want us to see. Take, for example, two verses that talk about Jesus in terms that are just terrible:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).

13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal 3:13).

To say that Jesus "was made sin" and that he "became a curse" is just a stunning thing to say because it seems unnatural and even scandalous.

Our text today reveals another concept equally unnatural: **Jesus died**. The Son of God died. Those two words should not be so closely used together because there is nothing about Jesus's death that is fair, right, just, or sensible. Yet this is what makes his death central to the Good News of the Bible. The shocking unfairness and the utter scandal of the gospel is that **Jesus's undeserving death creates undeserving grace for us**.

So when we talk about the death of Jesus two emotions should pulse through us: horror and hope. Horror because this event is so tragic and hope because this event creates the path of forgiveness.

For those of you who were not with us last week, let me set the stage for you. Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, unjustly charged by the religious leaders, brought before Pilate, exchanged for a criminal, savagely flogged, mercilessly mocked by the Roman soldiers, forced to carry his cross, and then crucified. This day is commonly called Good Friday, and Jesus is likely crucified between 9:00 and noon. From this day we learn a number of things about God's grace in the death of Jesus:

1. God's Judgment Has Come

The scene turns dark. Verse 45 tells us that from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land. There would have been darkness from noon to 3:00 p.m. which was the brightest part of the day. What is the point here? Some have suggested that it dark because God was attempting to hide or cover the suffering of his Son. However, I think that the exact opposite is true. God is making a public statement about divine judgment. Two examples:¹

¹ See also Isaiah 5:30, 13:10-11 and Joel 3:14-15

21 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt." 22 So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days (Ex 10:21-22).

7 The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. 8 Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?" 9 "And on that day," declares the Lord God, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. 10 I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day (Amos 8:7-10).

Darkness equals the foreboding judgment of God, and the approaching death of Jesus is the greatest judgment of God upon sin. The sinless Son of God is about to absorb the fullness of God's wrath for sin. So it is no wonder that darkness comes. This is a dark moment of divine judgment.

What does this text show us? It shows us the **supremacy of God's holiness**. God has passed over sin for so long; he has tolerated the rebellion of sin, but now the time has come for judgment. This text shows us that while God's judgment is delayed, it is nonetheless certain.

2. Sin Causes Separation

After enduring three hours of this darkness and at the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.), Jesus cries out in agony. He voices his lament by crying out in Hebrew, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Because the word for God (Eli) sounds similar to the word for Elijah, some people think that he is actually crying out for the great prophet (v 47).

There was a belief that Malachi 4:5-6, the last paragraph of the Old Testament, indicated that Elijah would return in the "great and awesome day of the Lord." Therefore, one person ran to get Jesus something to drink (v 49) while the others wanted to wait to see what would happen. "Wait let us see whether Elijah will come to save him" (v 49). Even at the very end, Jesus is not fully understood. They miss the point of this moment.

So what does it mean that Jesus is "forsaken" by the Father? The words "my God, my God..." come from Psalm 22:1. Jesus, in the darkest hour of his earthly life, quotes a passage that resonates with his experience. The word "forsaken" can also be translated as abandon, and it means to leave behind or to desert.² In Matthew 11:27 Jesus said, "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son" so there is a level of intimacy here that is special and powerful. And in this moment Jesus feels the departing presence of the

² Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 720

Father. We have to acknowledge a level of mystery here in this statement. Matthew does not write this to make us understand what it felt like, but to clearly identify the reality of this separation.

Jesus's faith is not wavering here. Rather, he is acknowledging the pain of separation from the Father. He is experiencing the real consequences or the effects of sin. Separation is the immediate consequence of sin. Adam and Eve experienced this after they sinned and they became aware of their nakedness which created shame (Gen 3:7). When God comes to the garden, they hide. Listen to Genesis 3:10 – "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." And as a part of their judgment, Adam and Eve are banished from the garden – "God sent him out of the garden of Eden...he drove out the man..." (Gen 3:23-24). The Apostle Paul reflects on the condition from a spiritual standpoint when he describes the human condition this way:

11 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Eph 2:11-12)

Jesus experiences the consequences of sin; he absorbs the disfavor or the wrath of God. He embraces the consequences of sin, and that is why Paul says that "he became sin." Jesus embodied all that is wrong with sin. He experienced the full consequences of sin which was the terrifying and agonizing separation from the Father.

This is not a pretty sight which is why God's wrath toward sin is not a popular concept even with some who claim to be preachers of the gospel. Brian McClaren, in his book *More Ready Than You Realize*, suggests that the cross is a form of divine child abuse. This week, Time magazine's feature article was about Rob Bell's new book *Love Wins* which has caused a firestorm of controversy because of his apparent belief in a form of universalism.³ Bell says, "At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church, have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God." The controversy, however, is not really about Hell or even sin. The heart of the controversy is about what God is really like. Is he really holy? Is he really separated from sin? How bad is our sin? How much danger are we really in?

³ Bell denies that he believes in universalism, but he conveniently and confusingly restricts the definition of universalism to not include his views. Bell limits the definition of universalism to mean that God forces his will on people to make them believe, which he doesn't believe. In so doing, Bell limits the definition of universalism to the issue of mode or method (i.e., God makes everyone believe) when universalism is really about the end result (i.e., everyone is eventually saved). For an insightful discussion on this see: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/04/14/god-abounding-in-love-punishing-the-guilty/>

The darkness and the abandonment of Jesus make no sense unless you understand the beauty of God's holiness and the horrible treason of sin. "Are all people saved?" is the wrong question to start with. We have to start with "What is God really like?" Without an understanding of his infinite holiness, his abandonment of Jesus seems offensive. Jesus was abandoned by the Father because sin is that bad.

But if you see the cross as the intersection of God's holiness and his love or the union of his justice and justification (Rom 3:26), then this moment is not only understood; it is loved, sung about, and preached with great hope.

This text shows us that the point of the death of Jesus is for him to experience the ultimate separation that sin has caused in order to take the place of those who put their trust in him.

Central to the promise of what happens in Jesus is that this **separation is conquered** by the death of Jesus. As Paul says in Romans 8:38-39 -

38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, and Jesus is the one who made that promise possible!

3. Jesus Chooses to Die

At the end of the season of darkness, verse 50 says, "Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit." Luke 23:46 records that Jesus said, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit!" And John 19:30 indicates that Jesus said, "It is finished." If you put all of this together, we see a climactic moment as the Son of God experiences what he should never have experienced: death. Why do I say that?

Death is a product of the effects of sin. Romans 6:23 says that "the wages of sin is death" which mean that death is the ultimate consequence of sin; it is the just penalty of rebellion against God. Death was introduced to the world with the first sin with Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, and it spread to the entire created order. The world became estranged from God - "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom 5:12). Death and the realm of the dead (Hades) are the two most evident signs what is wrong with a sin-cursed world. It is no wonder that Revelation 20:14 triumphantly declares that in the final victory of God will be when "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire."

So it is almost unthinkable that the sinless, perfectly righteous Son would not only suffer, but that he would experience the single, most defining, and utterly reprehensible effect of a sin-cursed world: death. After all death is the clearest, horrific emblem of what is wrong with the world, and the Son of God experiences it personally. It is so wrong.

But equally remarkable is the fact that Jesus experienced it willingly. Matthew, in particular, makes it a point to say that Jesus “yielded up his spirit.” And the fact that Matthew records that Jesus did so with a loud voice indicates that he wants us to see Jesus courageously and intentionally charging into death. John Chrysostom (349-407), the Archbishop of Constantinople, said “for this cause He cried with the voice that it might be shown that the act was done by power.”⁴ His death is not a moment of defeat; it is the willing giving of a gift that will bring about a great victory.

This text shows us heart of Christ-likeness – **the willingness to give oneself in obedience** to God. 1 Timothy 2:5-6 says, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all.” In the cruelty of the moment and in the perceived tragedy of what it means, Jesus goes willingly and triumphantly to meet death. Jesus walked the darkest path, experienced the darkest moment, and faced the darkest foe that we know. And he does it willingly. He chooses to die!

4. Everything Changes

Matthew next records a series of events that take place immediately following the death of Jesus. He lists these elements for future reference. In other words, these are harbingers of things to come.

First, verse 51 tells us that there was an earthquake, rocks were split, and the curtain of the temple “was torn in two, from top to bottom.” The tearing of the veil is particularly important since it divided the room containing the Ark of the Covenant – called the Holy of Holies – from the rest of the temple area. This room and Ark were incredibly significant because they represented the presence of God to the people of Israel.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood on the mercy seat of the ark. This action was taken on behalf of the entire nation, and it was only the High Priest who could perform this act of mediation between God and the people.

Therefore, the act of splitting the curtain is symbolic of Jesus’s role as the new high priest and the sacrifice. Listen to how Hebrews 9:11-12 picks up this theme:

⁴ Quoted by Morris, p. 723

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Secondly, there was some kind of resurrection. Notice verse 52-53:

52 The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, 53 and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

This is a challenging text. It seems that at the death of Jesus tombs were opened, and at the resurrection of Jesus some saints were resurrected with him. And Matthew puts this here to show the reader the immense change that is taking place in God's activity. The temple curtain has been torn in two and the dead are coming to life. Jesus's death was a defining moment in God's plan.

Third, there is a confession by the centurion and others who beheld Jesus's death and the subsequent events (v 54): "Truly this was the Son of God!" These epic events are convincing to those who were formerly his abusers and mockers.

Jesus's death changes everything, and this text shows us the miraculous way that **God can change anything** – especially people – through the death of his son. Listen to what 2 Corinthians 5:17 says: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself..." Jesus changes everything!

5. More to Come

These signs combine to add volume and a future context to what is happening at Golgotha. The tearing of the temple curtain, the earthquake, the opening of tombs, and the confession of the Roman centurion all give us a picture of how important this moment is. And it is a marker of things to come.

Matthew closes out this section of scripture by starting to introduce us to the some key element in what will become the resurrection story. We have the advantage (or disadvantage) of knowing what is coming next, but we must note how awful this moment must have been.

Watching for a distance (v 55) were a number of women who were a part of Jesus's ministry. They had followed Jesus from Galilee, and they were present at his crucifixion. Three women are listed: Mary Magdalene - a woman whom Jesus had delivered from demon possession (Luke 8:2), Mary, the mother of James and Joseph – either the mother of Jesus or the wife of

Clopas (John 19:25), and the mother of James and John – the same mother who had asked about whether her sons could sit at the right and left hand of Jesus (Matt 20:20-21). These women are, no doubt, grieving the death of Jesus, and they will become featured characters in the resurrection. Matthew inserts them to demonstrate both their faithfulness (where are the other disciples?) and as a context of what is to come.

Finally, we come to the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea.

57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. 58 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud 60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb (Matt 27:57-61).

Matthew wants you to see that Jesus is actually buried and the tomb was secured. This is important because many crucified victims were just left on the cross or thrown into a trash heap.⁵ But Jesus was buried, and a great stone was rolled over the entrance of the tomb.

All of this detail is here to bring to completion the death of Jesus, and to set the stage for what will come three days later. His **death was not the end**. He will rise again.

Therefore there are only two ways to see Jesus this morning and two ways to see him in the future. You either see him as your Savior who has taken away your sin, or you see him as your judge whose wrath over sin you still bear. You either see him as the one who purchased your redemption or the one who will come as your judge.

The words "death" and "Jesus" should never have come together. Sin caused that. Your sin caused that. But the death of Jesus sets the stage for salvation – for you to know that in the death of Jesus you can be totally and eternally forgiven.

Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow

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⁵ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008), 674