

# **M**ATTHEW 27:45-54

## WHAT JESUS ACCOMPLISHED ON THE CROSS

“... Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’ . . .” (27:45-54).

In his book *The Empty Cross of Jesus*, Michael Green points out that although Jesus Christ, a carpenter and itinerant preacher from an insignificant village in an insignificant country on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, died the torturous death of a common criminal, His death is the most famous in the history of the world.

Death by crucifixion was so terrible that we cannot imagine the pain and suffering involved in it. Our word “excruciating,” often used to describe pain that is agonizing, comes from the Latin phrase *ex crucis*, which means “out of the cross.” Jesus did not die a gentle death like Socrates with his cup of hemlock, or pass on “old and full of years” like the patriarchs of the Old Testament. Martin Hengel says, “Rather, he died like a slave or a common criminal, in torment, on the tree of shame. . . . He was ‘given up for us all’ on the cross, in a cruel and contemptible way.”<sup>1</sup> An article in the March 21, 1986, edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* describes the sufferings of Jesus

---

<sup>1</sup>Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 90. This work, though brief, is packed with information on crucifixion in the ancient world, and is highly recommended.

from a medical point of view. The authors detail the medical aspects of scourging and crucifixion and conclude that the probable cause of Jesus’ death was “hypovolemic shock and exhaustion asphyxia.” All in all, it is a sobering description of what Jesus must have experienced in death on a cross.

Strangely, to us at least, Matthew shows little interest in the details of Jesus’ suffering and death.<sup>2</sup> Much of our teaching and preaching about the cross tends to focus on the physical effects of scourging and crucifixion—the pain, the loss of blood, the tearing of the flesh. But in his account of the crucifixion, Matthew fixes his attention not so much on *how* Jesus died, but on *what He accomplished* by His death on the cross. This emphasis comes through especially in 27:45-54.

### HE BORE OUR SINS

The reason for Jesus’ death on the cross is simple: our *lostness*. Our sins required a penalty, and Jesus paid the price on our behalf. It was as Isaiah, the prophet, had foretold:

---

<sup>2</sup>“As before, Matthew shows no interest in the physical nature of Jesus’ suffering, or the medical cause of death, but by a series of clear allusions to Old Testament passages continues to point to Jesus’ death as the moment of fulfillment, leading up in v. 54 to a climactic confession of faith from the most unlikely source.” R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed., Leon Morris (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 397-98.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Peter reflected this thinking:

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you. . . . He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed (1 Peter 2:21, 24).

For three hours before Jesus died, the earth was shrouded in darkness, as if God Himself were registering His displeasure at the sinfulness of men in putting His Son to death (27:45). Toward the end of that period of darkness (“about the ninth hour,” 27:46), Jesus cried out, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God,<sup>3</sup> why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Jesus’ words are taken from Psalms 22:1, the cry of an innocent sufferer who wonders why God does not intervene on his behalf.

Christians have been troubled by this “cry of dereliction” from the cross and have wondered if Jesus was really forsaken by God. How could He who was one with the Father be forsaken by Him? Several attempts have been made to evade the force of Jesus’ cry. Some people have suggested that the cry should be interpreted in the light of the *rest* of Psalm 22, which is the prayer of a righteous sufferer who confidently expects to be vindicated. But this is uncertain, since Jesus does not quote or otherwise refer to the latter part of the psalm.<sup>4</sup> J. M. Gibson maintains that Jesus was never actually forsaken by God, since He loved Him on the cross as much as ever. But, he says, Jesus

did know the *sense* of forsakenness.<sup>5</sup> We will never know exactly how to understand Jesus’ cry of agony, but His cry undoubtedly expresses a sense of forsakenness resulting from His bearing the sins of all mankind. It gives us a glimpse of what it was like for Jesus to take on our sins and experience alienation from the Father as a result. He did this in order to experience *for us* in a temporary way what we would have experienced throughout all eternity—separation from God—had He not died on the cross for us.

### HE OPENED THE WAY TO GOD

When Jesus died, “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (27:51). This curtain was the “veil” which separated the holy place (the outer sanctuary of the temple) and the holy of holies (the inner sanctuary, where the very presence of God dwelled). The tearing from the top to the bottom of that curtain signified at least four things:

First, it signified the abolition of the old sacrificial system. With Jesus’ death, atonement for the sins of all people was now accomplished, and there was no more need for the system of offerings and sacrifices such as those carried on in the temple. Hebrews 9:11, 12, 24 says:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. . . . For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.

Second, the rending of the veil signified the judgment of God on Israel’s perversion of the old covenant system. Before long, God would destroy the temple itself because of Israel’s rejection of their Messiah. The rending of the curtain foreshadowed the destruction of the temple it-

<sup>3</sup>France points out that this is the only time in the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus is quoted as addressing God without calling Him “Father.” *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>4</sup>David Hill, (*The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972], 355) says that there is some evidence that Jews in Jesus’ day interpreted the first verse of Psalm 22 as standing for the hopefulness expressed in the latter part of it. He acknowledges this interpretation as plausible but not conclusive.

<sup>5</sup>John Munro Gibson, “The Gospel of St. Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible*, ed., W. R. Nicoll (New York: George H. Doran, n.d.), 4:804. It is difficult to determine the difference between being forsaken and feeling forsaken, especially in light of the cry from the cross.

self.<sup>6</sup>

Third, it signified the abandonment of the old covenant system of the priesthood. Human “mediators” would be unnecessary in order for man to have access to God. Since Jesus had opened the way into God’s presence, the distinction between the inner and the outer sanctuaries became obsolete:

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22).

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time (1 Timothy 2:5, 6).

Most of all, it signified the opening of the way of access to God. Through Jesus, we can go into the very presence of God and know Him as “Father.” He is not remote or hidden or only represented by others. We now can have an intimate relationship with our Creator and Lord. The curtain represented man’s limited access to God’s presence. With Jesus’ death, that limited access was obsolete.

And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:17, 18).

This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him (Ephesians 3:11, 12).

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope

---

<sup>6</sup>See Matthew 23:37-39, and especially Luke 19:41-44: “And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation: “ Also, Jesus’ prediction concerning the temple, well known by His accusers at His trial, that “not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (Matthew 24:2).

both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:19, 20).

Because of the cross of Jesus, the way is now open. Nothing can hinder us from entering God’s presence and knowing Him as Father.

### HE CONQUERED DEATH ITSELF

Only Matthew records the remarkable facts described in 27:51b-53: that at the time of Jesus’ death on the cross, an earthquake occurred which resulted in the opening of the tombs of “many” of the “saints,”<sup>7</sup> and that these resuscitated individuals made their way into Jerusalem and were seen by many. It is unclear whether these “saints” were raised immediately and went directly into the city or if they were raised after Jesus’ own resurrection. It is likely that they were raised immediately but entered Jerusalem only after Jesus’ resurrection. We cannot be sure, since no other writer makes reference to this incident.

Some point to the fact that the other Gospels do not record these events as evidence that they are merely pious fiction. But this is an extreme view. The real point of this remarkable account is that by His death Jesus conquered death and made it possible for others to conquer it and live forever. And the effects of His death were immediate! Hebrews 2:14, 15 says,

Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

Note that Jesus conquered Satan *through death*, that is, He went into the devil’s stronghold, tasted death for us all, and emerged victorious over it. We do not have to fear death any more. What a graphic description of the human race occurs in Hebrews 2:15: “those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.” Death is the greatest of all our fears, but Jesus took the sting out of death by experiencing it for us.

---

<sup>7</sup>France suggests that these “saints” were Old Testament noteworthies, such as those listed in Hebrews 11 (France, *Matthew*, 401).

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

### CONCLUSION

Matthew’s account of the cross reaches a climax in 27:54, when “the centurion, and those who were with him” confessed Jesus as the Son of God.

Wonder where they went from there. Did they become followers of Jesus? Did they forget what they had seen and heard? Were they any different for having watched Him die, or did

they remain unchanged?

But how could anyone forget the cross? How could anyone remain unchanged by it? Yet it happens all the time. Unbelief and ingratitude run deep in the human soul.

What about in *your* soul? All that Jesus accomplished on the cross He did for you. But if you are not already His faithful follower, you are spurning all of that, acting as if it were unimportant, unworthy of the allegiance of your entire life.

Isn’t it time that you confessed who He is and what He has done for you? Isn’t it time to give your life to Him who gave His life for you?

—Tommy South

---

## Textual Sermon Ideas

---

Revelation 1:5, 6:

“To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

1. Introduction
  - a. What is praise?
  - b. Describe this doxology in its context.
  - c. Why should we praise Jesus?
2. Body
  - a. Because He Has Loved Us
  - b. Because He Has Loosed Us (From Our Sins)
  - c. Because He Has Lifted Us (Making Kings and Priests)
3. Conclusion
  - a. Can you praise Him for these blessings in your life?
  - b. He stands ready to give you these blessings.

---

John 11:35:

“Jesus wept.”

1. Introduction
  - a. Does Jesus care?
  - b. The context of the verse
  - c. Is Jesus really mindful of me?
2. Body
  - a. Jesus Sees
  - b. Jesus Sympathizes
  - c. Jesus Shows Us the Concern of the Father
3. Conclusion
  - a. Jesus hurts when you hurt.
  - b. He can comfort you, but you must come to Him.