

This coming Friday is good Friday and next Sunday is Easter. So I thought that I would preach a sermon suitable for good Friday this morning and an Easter sermon next Sunday morning. Good Friday is about remembering Jesus' death and Easter is about remembering his resurrection from the dead. I thought it would be good for us to hear God speaking to us from one of the passages that describe Jesus' death with a few of the events surrounding it that give us insights into its significance. Basically what we want to do this morning is thankfully remember Jesus' death.

Remembering Jesus' death is more somber than remembering Jesus' resurrection. It seems appropriate to celebrate Jesus' resurrection, but it does not seem appropriate to celebrate Jesus' death. There is a sadness that surrounds Jesus' death. Sadness because it was necessary. Sadness because it involved unspeakable suffering on the part of our Lord. Sadness because our sins the reason for Jesus' death. Sadness because death is a terrible thing. And yet Jesus accomplished so much good by his death. Nothing else in the history of the world resulted in as much good as the death of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus' death our sins are forgiven. Because of Jesus' death we are reconciled to God. Because of Jesus' death sin and death and Satan have been defeated. But at what a cost! We can't comprehend the cost because we can't comprehend how much Jesus suffered to pay the penalty for the sins of his people. No one else in the history of the world suffered as Jesus did on the cross. And so we don't cheer. We thankfully remember how Jesus suffered for us so that we might be spared that suffering and be reconciled to God through it.

The verses we are going to look at begin part-way through the story. Jesus is already on the cross. His back has been beaten raw. He has been laid on his cross. The nails have been driven through his hands and his feet. The cross has been hoisted up and set in its hole and the dirt pushed around it to keep it upright. Jesus had been hanging there for some time in unspeakable agony. This physical suffering was not unique. Two robbers were being crucified next to him. Perhaps crucifixion was not even the most painful way to die that has been devised by the human race. It shows us something of the horrible nature of sin in that humans have put considerable effort into devising the most exquisite forms of torture to cause the greatest possible agony of their fellow humans. The cruelty of humans towards other humans is unfathomable. But the cross was a very effective form of torture and Jesus would have been in agony the whole time he was on it.

But Jesus' crucifixion had a significance that no other crucifixion had. And some of that significance is indicated by the sights and sounds that accompanied it. Our text mentions three hours of darkness. There was darkness over all the land from the sixth hour to the ninth hour – so from 12:00 noon until 3:00 pm. Darkness over all the land. It was a supernatural darkness. God was saying something by causing 3 hours of darkness in the middle of the day. At the very least God was saying that the crucifixion of Jesus was far more significant than any other crucifixion had been.

Darkness is sometimes associated with God's judgment upon sinners. When God was sending his plagues upon Egypt in the process of delivering his people from slavery, one of the plagues had been supernatural

darkness over the land for three days. In the book of Amos, in a passage in which God is threatening to punish his people for their sins, he says, 8:9, “And on that day ... I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.”

Here is the darkness of God’s judgement upon Jesus – the lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world. He was the beloved Son of God – the one in whom the Father was well-pleased – the One who had never sinned. But there he is – hanging on a cross – and he is in the supernatural darkness that signaled the judgment of God. In that darkness Jesus is suffering the wrath of God against the sins of his people. He is experiencing the hell that we deserve.

And then near the end of the three hours of darkness, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Those words come from Psalm 22. They were originally penned by David who at various times in his life had felt himself to be forsaken of God. By crying out these words, Jesus is crying out to God in anguish. He knows that he has been forsaken by God because he is enduring the wrath of God for the sins of his people. We can’t imagine what this must have meant for Jesus. For all eternity he had lived in intimate love with his Father. Remember that Jesus had said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” (John 4:34). A number of times God had spoken from heaven saying, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.” The Father’s love for Jesus was no doubt Jesus’ greatest joy. And now it is turned away. Now instead of love Jesus is experiencing wrath. Before the Father had always been pleased with him and his greatest desire had always been to please his Father. And now the Father’s face is turned away. Or it is turned toward him in wrath – not because of anything he had done or failed to do, but because of what we have done and failed to do.

It is significant that Jesus addresses God as God rather than as Father. He does this because he feels that the Father has turned his face away. He is not warmed by the love of his Father, but he is experiencing instead the wrath of God. But he still cries out. And he still addresses God as his God. God has turned away from him, but he has not turned away from God. He is still crying out to God in the depth of his agony.

Now we need to understand that while Jesus was suffering the wrath of God for our sins, there was also a sense in which the Father was loving him more than he ever had. In John 10:17 Jesus had said, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.”

It is important that we understand that while Jesus was truly forsaken by God for the time that he was enduring God’s wrath for our sins, the whole plan of salvation was motivated by the Father’s love. Just think of John 3:16 which says that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” So we have the Father so loving the world that he gave his only Son and we have the Father loving his Son because he laid down his life. We must never think of the Father as somehow needing to be persuaded to forgive us by the sacrifice of the Son. It is the love of God that sent the Son to die well as the love of the Son who was willing to die.

So when Jesus says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, he has truly been forsaken in the sense that he was truly bearing the punishment for the sins of his people. But at the same time it was the Father who gave him up for us and the Father loved him even as he was experiencing the Father’s wrath.

When Jesus spoke those words of being forsaken by God, he did so in Aramaic. “Eli, Eli lema sabachthani?” Matthew has recorded his words in Aramaic and then has given a translation in Greek which is the language in which the NT was written. Some of the bystanders did not understand what Jesus was saying and thought that he was calling for Elijah to help him. The reason that they thought that was that Elijah had been taken up into heaven and some people at least thought that Elijah could help people on earth. That was not true and Jesus was not calling out to Elijah, but that is what some of the people thought.

The fact that some of the bystanders were thinking that Jesus was calling out to Elijah for help shows how profoundly they misunderstood what was going on. The people thought that Jesus was helpless and was crying out for help. The reality was so much different. We know better. In John 10:17-18 Jesus says, “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” Jesus was not calling out for help as he was suffering and dying on the cross. He was in the process of laying down his life for his sheep. As the God-man he could have come down from that cross had he wanted to. He was there voluntarily for the salvation of his people. Again and again we are told in the NT that Jesus gave his life for us.

Jesus was not dying on the cross because he had been overpowered and crucified against his will. Think of what Jesus said as he was being arrested. Matthew 26:53, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” The Father could have rescued him. Jesus could have escaped arrest. Jesus could have come down from the cross had he wanted to do so. Jesus remained on the cross because this was his Father’s mission for him. He remained on the cross because he was suffering and dying in the place of his people. He was doing that voluntarily. He was doing that motivated by love for sinners who deserved what he was experiencing.

Next Matthew describes someone filling a sponge with sour wine and offering it to Jesus. It is not known whether this was an act of mercy or an act of cruelty. The sour wine would give Jesus a tiny comfort and it may have slightly prolonged his life thus adding to his agony. Earlier, as recorded in verse 34, Jesus had been offered wine mixed with gall while they were nailing him to the cross and he had refused. In that case it is clear that Jesus was determined to suffer all that he had to suffer as the substitute of his people. In the case of our text it appears that Jesus took the sour wine – possibly to enable him to cry out with a loud voice as he died. Perhaps the main significance of this for us is that it fulfills Psalm 69:21 where the righteous sufferer says, “for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” This is one more indication that Jesus’ suffering and death were part of the plan of God for the salvation of his people.

Verse 49 records some of the bystanders making fun of Jesus. "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." So there is further mocking. Jesus was voluntarily suffering in the place of his people and he is being made fun of as he does so. On the one hand this shows once again how cruel people can be. A man is dying in agony and they are there watching for entertainment and having a little fun at his expense. Again we see how ugly sin is. But it also shows the grace of God in Christ because later on after Pentecost the salvation that Jesus is accomplishing as he is being mocked will be offered to these same people as we see in the Book of Acts.

That is one of the glories of the gospel. Forgiveness and reconciliation with God are offered to people who are profoundly underserving. We were not there that day. We have not sinned in the exact way that these people sinned against Jesus as he was dying on the cross. But we have sinned grievously against the Lord. If we think of what God requires of us and how far short of that we all come, it is comforting to think of how many of the people who mocked Jesus on the cross and were directly involved in his suffering and death, were later forgiven on the basis what Jesus accomplished through his dying on the cross. We can be confident that Jesus is willing to save us as well regardless of how terribly we have sinned against him.

Verse 50 describes Jesus' actual death. "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit." One commentator has this interesting thing to say about this verse. "None of the Evangelists [by that term he means the authors of the four gospels] uses any of the usual ways of saying that Jesus died, and this may be part of the way that they bring out the truth that there was something in his death that set it apart from all other deaths." Most of those who died by crucifixion got weaker and weaker until they just faded away. Jesus is relatively strong right to the end. He has the strength to cry out with a loud voice and then he is active in giving up his spirit. This serves to emphasize the voluntary nature of Jesus' death. It is not taken from him. It is given up by him. Again we are reminded that Jesus gave his life for us.

Now immediately after Jesus yielded up his spirit a number of things happened that give us insight into the significance of Jesus' death. Matthew records three of them. First, he tells us that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (verse 51). This, of course, is highly significant. The temple was the meeting place between God and his people. The layout of the temple was designed by God to emphasize the fact that God was dwelling in the midst of his people, but also to emphasize the distance that had to be maintained between God and his people due to their sinfulness and his holiness. God dwelt among his people in the temple, but the curtain that separated God's throne room from the rest of the temple was a barrier to keep the people from coming too close to God. The high-priest as the representative of the people could enter the presence of God only one time per year and he had to bring the blood of a sacrifice otherwise he would be consumed by the holiness of God. So the curtain was a symbol of the barrier that there had to be between God and his people to keep them as a sinful people from being destroyed by the holiness of God.

We need to understand this to understand the significance of the tearing of the curtain of the temple from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus's death. This meant that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was like no other sacrifice. It meant that Jesus' death on the cross opened the way for a much greater intimacy with God than had been possible before Jesus gave his life an atonement for sin.

Hebrews 10:19-22 spells this out. ¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

Before the death of Jesus, the curtain in the temple was a barrier between God and his people. Hebrews 9:8 says. "By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as the first section was still standing." The reason for this, as the book of Hebrews tells us, was that the blood of the animal sacrifices could not really atone for human sin. The blood of the animal sacrifices pointed ahead to the sacrifice of Christ which would actually pay the penalty for the sins of the people of God. Hebrews 10:14 says, "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." And it for that reason we are encouraged to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...." That is the significance of the curtain of the temple being torn from top to bottom at the moment of Christ's death. On the basis of Jesus' sacrifice for sin, God opened the way for believers into the very presence of God.

We can draw near to God since Jesus' death has actually taken away our sin. We do that in prayer. We do that in worship. We do that by assembling as God's people. We come into God's presence with the awareness that there is no barrier between us and God. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 7:25 says, "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

All of these verses speak about being welcomed into the presence of God. We are sinners and God is a holy God who must punish sin. But if we are trusting in Jesus, our sins are forgiven because Jesus has died in our place. And so we have these invitations to draw near to God with confidence knowing that our sins have been forgiven and we are welcomed into God's presence. That is the significance of the curtain in the temple being torn from top to bottom at the moment that Christ died.

The next few verses are puzzling. "And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many." The first part is clear enough. "And the earth shook, and the rocks were split." The earth shook at the death of Christ. God is emphasizing that the death of Jesus was the most significant event of all time.

But the way that Matthew describes what happened next is confusing. He seems to be saying that many of the saints who had died were raised at the moment that Jesus died and then came out of their tombs when Jesus rose from the dead. The answer to this confusion is that Matthew's concern here is not the timing of these saints being raised and coming out of their tombs, but rather to relate the raising of these saints to both Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' death and resurrection are distinct but inseparable. Without Jesus' death there would have been no resurrection. And without Jesus' resurrection Jesus' death would be no different than any other death. It is likely that these saints were raised and came out of their tombs when Jesus rose from the dead, but Matthew here is making the point that Jesus' death is the basis for the resurrection of his people.

So this mysterious sentence that describes many dead saints being raised and coming out of their tombs is describing a kind of firstfruits of the final resurrection of the people of God. This is what will happen at the end of the age. On the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection the saints of God will rise from the dead and come out of their graves. Jesus' death leads to life. Jesus died that his people might have eternal life and rise from the dead at the end of the age.

Verse 54 describes the response of the Roman soldiers who were witnessing all this. "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!'"

Back in verse 43, Matthew has recorded the mockery of the chief priests, with the scribes and elders. "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" Now after Jesus death and all that happened surrounding it, a Roman soldier is filled with awe and says – "Truly this was the Son of God!" We do not know how much the soldier understood of his own confession, but Matthew is inviting his readers to make that confession their own. "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Finally Matthew mentions that a number of women were there watching from a distance. The male disciples are not there, but the women are. The women are more faithful and brave than the men are in the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. In a society in which women were not held in high esteem, the accounts of women in the story of Jesus, life, death, and resurrection highlight the importance of women among the followers of Jesus Christ.

We have spent a little time reflecting on the death of Jesus on the cross. Matthew's description of Jesus' death and the events surrounding it, give some insight into its significance. The darkness over the land indicating that Jesus was suffering the wrath of God against the sins of his people. Jesus cry of anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" indicating something of the agony of soul that Jesus was experiencing. The indications that Jesus was voluntarily offering his life. The curtain of the temple torn in two indicating that through Jesus' death the way to God has been opened.

The earthquake. The saints being raised from the dead. The confession of the Roman soldier. The faithfulness of Jesus' female followers.

The story is intended to nurture our love for Jesus and our faith in Jesus. Jesus gave his life that our sins might be forgiven. Jesus suffered the penalty that we deserve to suffer. The Father sent him out of love for sinners. Jesus offered himself out of love for sinners. Jesus died that we might be reconciled to God – that we might live. Let us thankfully remember. Let us believe in him. May his love for us nurture our love for him.