

**“The Heart of the Bible”**  
**Matthew 27:45-61**  
**May 10, 2020**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Is it possible for one little prayer to change the world forever? It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Jesus’ prayer in verse 46 of our text. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” One indication of the importance Matthew assigned to this prayer is the fact that this is the only quote of Jesus in Aramaic, even though New Testament scholars believe Aramaic was the language Jesus and his disciples spoke on a daily basis. It is as if Matthew is saying, “What Jesus is saying here is so important that I want to give it to you just as he spoke it.”

I believe this verse is the heart of the Bible. It is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament verses about the sacrifices offered at the temple. It is the turning point of all of human history. Everything is different now and for all eternity because of the truths found in this short little prayer. It is as clear a statement of the holy love of God as you will find anywhere in the Bible. And yet its significance was missed by so many who witnessed it. Some of the bystanders misunderstood Jesus to be calling for help from the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. You may remember that Elijah was taken up alive into heaven in a chariot. Based on that, there was a belief in Israel that he could be called upon to help those in trouble. These bystanders wondered if they might witness a spectacle here that they could go and tell their friends and relatives about. One of them went to get a sponge soaked in sour wine and offered it to Jesus. I don’t understand this to be an act of kindness. Rather, it was used to temporarily revive Jesus for their own sadistic entertainment. The last words Jesus hears, according to Matthew, are these words that represent a gross misunderstanding of Jesus. **“Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”** They have it completely backwards. Elijah will not come for Jesus, because Jesus came for Elijah.

These bystanders are as clueless as a spider in an art museum. All day and all night, the spider is in the midst of incredible beauty, and all it can think of is to wait on its next meal to be trapped in its web. In this text, we are face to face with the greatest love ever. Lest we miss its staggering import, let’s study it in its context and learn what God has for us in this familiar prayer.

**I. Judgment for the Innocent**

Jesus’ prayer is a quote from Psalm 22, and it is filled with trust in God. Though God has abandoned him, he still refers to him as “My God.” He is an

innocent man who has done nothing but honor God throughout his life, and now, at the moment of his greatest need, he is being abandoned by the God he has honored. It makes no sense. But still he trusts this God and calls out to him in prayer. Jesus does not desert the one who is deserting him. We see in this prayer not just trust in God, but also humility. Note that it's a "why" question. He doesn't fall into the trap of Job's friends who are full of confidence that they know the answer to their friend's suffering.

The primary word in this prayer is the word "forsaken." Jesus is being abandoned by his Father. Some of you know the pain of this better than I. Perhaps it's known through the abandonment of an earthly father or of a spouse in a divorce. It is a deep darkness, and such darkness is reflected here in literal darkness. Matthew informs us that darkness came over the entire land from the sixth hour until the ninth hour, which equates to noon to 3:00 p.m. in our time. At the time when things should be their brightest, they are their darkest.

This abandonment of the Son by the Father is made even more significant when we remember the nature of their relationship. The Bible teaches that God exists as a trinity. There is one God existing eternally in three persons. Loving relationships lie at the core of reality because the God of the universe is marked by loving relationships within the trinity. In his book on prayer, Tim Keller describes the love within the trinity like this.

It means, to begin with, that God has always had within himself a perfect friendship. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are adoring one another, giving glorifying love to one another, and delighting in one another. We know of no joy higher than being loved and loving in return, but a triune God would know that love and joy in unimaginable, infinite dimensions. God is, therefore, infinitely, profoundly *happy*, filled with perfect joy—not some abstract tranquility but the fierce happiness of dynamic loving relationships (p. 67).

So the love and friendship being lost here brings unimaginable pain. Why did God do this? If he had perfect fellowship and happiness within the trinity, why lose it? Jonathan Edwards sought to answer that question in one of his works, called *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*. Edwards says that God created the world not to *get* love, because he already had it in a perfect way within the trinity. Rather, he did it to *share* love. God is other-oriented in the very core of his being.

So this prayer of Jesus reveals that the love of God lies at the heart of the Bible and at the heart of life itself. But notice that it is a holy love. What I mean by that is that this love doesn't sacrifice the demands of justice. If God is to be God, he can't just say, "It's true that these humans have sinned against me. But I will just choose to overlook it and forgive them anyway." He would cease to be God if he did so. The many sacrifices of the Old Testament, in all their

tedious detail and repetitiveness, make this abundantly clear. An innocent victim must suffer in payment for sin. The book of Hebrews makes it clear that all these sacrifices looked forward to the one true sacrifice of God's Son. The Old Testament sacrifices were unable to take away sins. **"But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified"** (10:12, 14).

The application of this is clear. Let the heart of the Bible be the heart of your life. Our biggest need is to know the love of God as portrayed right here in the sacrifice of the innocent Jesus for us. This is how much God has loved us—not with a sentimental, cheap love, but with a holy love. Your greatest need is not for the Covid-19 pandemic to ease, but to know and rest in this love. The reason we pray, the reason we read the Bible, the reason we gather for worship is to bring glory to God by receiving this love.

## **II. Life for the Guilty**

The Father's response to Jesus' prayer was silence. All he heard before he died were the words of the bystanders who completely misunderstood him. Jesus, though he was innocent of all wrongdoing, was completely abandoned by both heaven and earth. But as soon as Jesus died, God speaks through some remarkable actions.

The first act is the tearing of the veil. **"And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."** This was the curtain in the holy of holies, the inner sanctum of the temple, behind which was located the ark of the covenant. This part of the temple was the very presence of God, and it was off limits to everyone except the high priest, who was only allowed into that room once a year. But with the death of Jesus, access is opened up. And it came at God's initiative, not man's. Note that the curtain was torn from the top to the bottom.

Two truths are taught by this rending of the temple curtain. The first is God's clear statement that the time of the temple is over. The temple had its time and place in the Old Testament, a place of picturing what Jesus, the true temple, would accomplish. But with the death of Jesus, the reality that the temple could only portray has now arrived. This is the second truth taught by this curtain. Salvation is open to all through Jesus. We can now enter the holy of holies, the very presence of God, through Jesus. Again, the author of Hebrews speaks of this. **"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from**

**an evil conscience**” (Hebrews 10:19-22). The author of Hebrews suggests that not only is there a curtain in the temple that separates man from God, but also one in the human conscience. This inner curtain says that God is too holy to be approached by sinful humans. We should believe our conscience when it speaks to us of our sinfulness. But we should believe God when he says that he has torn down this barrier. All who lay hold of Jesus by faith are allowed into the inner sanctum of heaven, the very throne room of God. And when we enter that room, we find a God who smiles upon us because of Christ.

God’s commentary on the death of Christ doesn’t end with the torn temple curtain. **“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”** (v. 51-53). Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers describing this remarkable event. It would seem that the earthquake Matthew describes had a particularly dramatic effect on the tombs near Jerusalem. The rocks securing these tombs were split open, and those whose bodies were residing in the tombs were raised up, to emerge from the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday. It’s like God can’t wait for Easter morning. The message is clear and unmistakable. The death of Jesus makes possible the death of death. Now every funeral of a follower of Christ is to be marked by both grief and hope. The next time you attend a funeral of a friend or family member who has believed in Jesus, remember that one day you will attend another funeral. It will be the funeral of death, made possible for us by the death of Jesus. So here we have the defeat of our two greatest enemies, sin and death. The enemy of sin is defeated as we see the curtain torn in two. And the enemy of death is defeated in this earthquake and resurrection.

### **III. A New Direction for the Redeemed**

After God’s commentary on the death of Jesus, Matthew records three different responses to Jesus’ death. All three are responses of faith and are completely opposite those clueless bystanders who thought Jesus was calling Elijah. The first to respond are the last ones you would expect to believe: Gentile soldiers. The centurion and those with him, the very ones called upon to carry out the order for Jesus’ crucifixion, respond in faith. They simply observed everything that happened surrounding the death of Jesus—namely the darkness at noon and the earthquake—and rightly concluded, **“Truly this was the Son of God!”** They may have been the first Gentiles to believe in Jesus, but they would not be the last. Matthew had begun his Gospel with an account of Gentile Magi coming to honor Jesus, and now he concludes it with Gentile soldiers believing in Jesus.

Next are these faithful women. They had followed Jesus from Galilee, which would have been no small feat. Galilee was 80-100 miles from Jerusalem, a

distance they traversed on foot. They did so in order to minister to Jesus. And they were still following Jesus during his terrible crucifixion. Two things stand out to me about these women. The first is their simple faithfulness. Matthew reports simply that they were there. Put simply, one of our chief duties as followers of Jesus is just to keep following Jesus no matter what. Even in the darkest of times, we just continue to say, "I'm sticking with Jesus." A second thing that stands out to me is the fact that the only enduring honor we will have comes from honoring Jesus. We would not know of any of these women apart from these texts. But as a result of their honoring of Jesus by their faithfulness to him, Matthew honors them here because God honors them.

Joseph of Arimathea is the third one who responds in faith, seen in his giving of his own tomb for the burial of Jesus. Socially, Joseph is on the opposite end of things from the women named earlier. He was rich and well-connected, able even to achieve an audience with Pilate. He is one of whom Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. But with God all things are possible, even faith in the heart of a rich man.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Our closing application is the same as the chorus of our closing hymn. "Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, 'til all the world adore his sacred name." What does it mean to lift high the cross? I read recently of something of an arms race between churches to build the highest cross in the nation. In 1993, the highest cross in America stood at 100 feet tall. Since then, several churches have nearly doubled that height, building crosses that reach 198 feet in height. There is now a church in Texas that is building one that will be 230 feet, the height of a 20 story building. I think we can all agree that this is not what it means to lift high the cross.

So what does it mean? I think Paul said it well in Galatians 6:14. **"But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."** To lift high the cross is to boast in the cross. To boast in something is to trust in it, delight in it and speak of it to others. A person who boasts in accomplishments is trusting those accomplishments. That person then also delights in the accomplishments and makes sure to point them out to others. So we boast in the cross by trusting in Jesus' death for our forgiveness, delighting in it at a daily, heart level, and speaking of him to others.

## **Small Group Discussion Questions Matthew 27:45-61**

1. In Matthew's Gospel, the last words of Jesus before his death are a question that is a direct quote from Psalm 22:1. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It was mentioned in the sermon that these words from Jesus form the very heart of the Bible. What evidence do you see in the Bible to support that claim?
2. The main word in Jesus' question is the word "forsaken." Did Jesus just feel forsaken, or was he actually forsaken? [Answer: he was actually forsaken, because he became sin as our substitute. He was forsaken that we might not be.]
3. Note what Tim Keller wrote of the fellowship and love enjoyed within the trinity.

It means, to begin with, that God has always had within himself a perfect friendship. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are adoring one another, giving glorifying love to one another, and delighting in one another. We know of no joy higher than being loved and loving in return, but a triune God would know that love and joy in unimaginable, infinite dimensions. God is, therefore, infinitely, profoundly *happy*, filled with perfect joy—not some abstract tranquility but the fierce happiness of dynamic loving relationships (p. 67).

In light of this, describe what you can of what it must have been like for Jesus to be abandoned by his Father. It may help you in doing this to remember times either you or someone you know has been abandoned by someone.

4. Jesus was forsaken that we might never be. But we sometimes feel forsaken, though we are not. Have you ever felt forsaken by God? How can we resist that feeling?
5. After the death of Jesus, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This is the curtain preventing access to the presence of a holy God. In our own hearts, there is a curtain that does the same thing. It is a guilty conscience. What does this suggest about how we should fight against a guilty conscience?
6. Paul tells us in Galatians 6:14 how to lift high the cross. "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." What would it look like for you to boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus?