

“The Plowing of Hell”
Matthew 27:51-54
June 14, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

It's been a difficult week and a half for our church family. This past Tuesday, we lost our oldest church member, 97 year old Bob Heimburger. Just eight hours before him, one of our younger members, Elle Campbell, was called home before any of us were ready for it to happen. She had fought for months against this tumor in the middle of her brain that was prone to rupture, which is what finally led to her passing. Then the week before, two parents of church members came to the end of their earthly lives. Romina Foster's father passed on Thursday, just a day before Marian Wilson's mother.

We are not accustomed to dealing with death as frequently as we have encountered this dreadful enemy within the past week and a half. I am reminded of some pastoral advice given by Martin Luther. He said that the best time to think about death is when you are not under the immediate threat of dying. And he said that when you do come face to face with death, that's the time to think about life, not death. Let's take to heart Luther's counsel. Since we are feeling somewhat under a cloud of death, let's think about life.

Before we think about life, though, I would like to reinforce the cloud of death. So let me ask you to think about the living person who is closest to you. Perhaps it's a spouse or a child or some other family member. Maybe it's a close friend. For me, it's my wife. The day will come when either I will attend her funeral or she will attend mine. With such dreadful certainty, how do we know that Bertrand Russell wasn't right? Russell struggled to know whether he should regard himself as an agnostic or atheist. He once said, "When I die, I rot." At one level, it's hard to argue with that. It is an obvious truth. But is it the whole truth? Russell did not believe in an afterlife, so he believed that the rotting of his corpse would be the end of him. How do we know he's not right? Have you ever had the thought that perhaps all this stuff we tell ourselves about the afterlife is nothing more than a way to cope with the pain associated with death? That's what many believe. That's not what Christians believe, but how do we know they're not right?

I want us to address these questions today by looking at this remarkable passage from Matthew's gospel. He describes an earthquake that occurred in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. This earthquake had two effects, both brought about by God's hand. First, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Second, many tombs around Jerusalem were opened, and three days later, when Jesus rose from the dead, many bodies of believers who had died in the Old Testament came to life and appeared to many in Jerusalem. This passage describes three enemies, two that have been defeated already and a third that is still at large.

I. Enemy #1 Dispatched

The first enemy to be defeated in the death and resurrection of Jesus is one you may not expect. The defeat of this enemy is indicated by the tearing of the temple curtain from top to bottom. The enemy dealt with here is God himself. You may be wondering, “How could God be an enemy?” The Bible is clear in saying that our relationship with him, apart from Christ, is one of enmity. Romans 5:10 says, **“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”** God did not start out being our enemy, and it was not his idea to become so. The Bible teaches that mankind became God’s enemy by our act of rebellion through Adam and Eve’s sin. What they attempted in the first sin, spoken of in Genesis 3, was nothing less than a mutiny against God, the Creator. They were convinced by the lies of Satan that true satisfaction in life comes not through submitting oneself to God and his ways, but by throwing off his restraints and doing what you want. That’s what they did, and all of their children ever since then have done the same thing. We are all born with something called a sin nature, by which we want to go our own way instead of God’s way.

Illustration: Our sin does to God’s world the very same thing that cancer does to the human body. Cancer cells, as you know, are living cells inside your body. Do you know, though, what makes them cancer cells that bring death instead of normal cells that bring life? Cancer cells do not submit to the order imposed on the body by the central control of the brain. They reproduce in rebellion against the brain. Sin is a spiritual cancer, causing us to rebel against God’s order for creation. As such, sinners become like cancer cells. What do we do with cancer? The same thing that God’s holiness does with sin. We destroy cancer cells any way we can, and God in his holiness must destroy sin whenever he comes into contact with it.

This event of the tearing of the temple curtain shows that something happened in the death of Christ that ended this enmity, turning God from our enemy to our friend. The curtain Matthew means is the one closing off a room in the temple known as “The Holy of Holies”. It is the place where the Ark of the Covenant was located, and this ark was where God chose to dwell in the Old Testament. No one was allowed into this room except the High Priest once a year on the Day of Atonement. If anyone else came at any other time, they would die, because sinners cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. Even the High Priest on the Day of Atonement could not come on his own merits. He had to bring with him the blood of an innocent lamb as payment for his sin.

It is this curtain that is now ripped in two, signaling that the way is now open into God’s presence. Matthew’s point is not that God is no longer a holy God and that we are no longer sinners deserving to be radiated out of existence like cancer cells. His point, rather, is that Jesus is the new temple. The old has been made

obsolete by Jesus. We enter God's presence now through the blood of Jesus, not the blood of a sacrificial lamb. We are not radiated out of existence when we enter God's presence because Jesus is the sacrificial lamb of God. Notice, too, that this curtain was torn from top to bottom, indicating that this is God's action. God himself has acted to end the enmity between us.

Whenever an enemy is overcome, there is reason to celebrate. The dispatch of this enemy is no exception. Because Jesus is the new temple, we have peace with God through the blood of Jesus. Hebrews 9:14 says that the blood of Jesus is able to cleanse the guilty conscience. There is no other remedy for a guilty conscience than the blood of Jesus.

II. Enemy #2 Obliterated

Death is the second enemy to be obliterated, an enemy conquered through Jesus' death and resurrection. There are several questions that arise as we look at these verses. Given our translation, Matthew seems to be saying that these saints were raised at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, but didn't leave the tombs until the resurrection of Jesus. I think it more likely that what Matthew means is that the earthquake at the time of the crucifixion caused the tombs to be opened. But the resurrection of those inside the tombs occurred after Jesus' resurrection on the first Easter Sunday.

The text is silent on things we would like to know to satisfy our curiosity. For example, were these resuscitations like Lazarus in John 11, or were they resurrections like that of Jesus? If they were like the raising of Lazarus, then those raised died again because their bodies were still mortal like ours. But if they were resurrections, then they were given immortal bodies that would never die again. In that case, they would need to be translated into heaven and are there now with their resurrected bodies. We don't know because Matthew doesn't tell us. What we do know is that there were many of these Old Testament believers who were raised. The Bible is not given to the exaggeration that is characteristic of our language. In the Bible we read things like, "And after Jesus fasted for forty days and nights, he was hungry." So when it says that *many* were raised, I imagine it was a large number. Furthermore, he tells us that this was not a quiet matter. They appeared to many in Jerusalem, Israel's capital city.

Jesus, through his death and resurrection, is plowing through hell, creating a furrow right through the middle of it. This leads to an important application. Those who come to God through Jesus no longer need to fear death. The author of Hebrews says that through his death and resurrection, Jesus destroyed **"the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery"** (2:14-15). The fear of death keeps us in bondage throughout life. In spite of the denials of people like Bertrand Russell and more modern-day atheists like Sam Harris, belief in an afterlife is nearly universal throughout all cultures and religions. Michael Green

talks about seeing an ancient tomb in Lebanon in which the dead were buried with their knees tucked tight against the chin and the whole body entombed in an earthenware egg. The symbolism expresses an obvious expectation that this life will give birth to another in the future.

The idea of a future life, though nearly universal, is also quite frightening. It opens the door to personal accountability to God. That's why the author of Hebrews says that the devil uses the fear of death to keep us in bondage. John Piper says that it is the bondage of skydivers who exit an airplane at 10,000 feet without a parachute. In the minute or two it will take them to plunge the two miles to the earth, they will be in bondage to the fear of hitting the ground at terminal velocity. They will be unable to enjoy the freefall and the scenery along the way. Even if they manage, like many, to live in denial of what will happen at the end of their 10,000 foot fall, the effort of denial is also a type of slavery.

The application of this is quite simple. Jesus has conquered death and released us from this slavery. Prepare now for your death by putting on the parachute he offers through putting your trust in Jesus. And if you are to do that, you will need to make preparation for it now by dealing with Jesus and his claims. That brings us to our final point.

III. Enemy #3 Still At Large

The third enemy appearing in this passage is anyone not responding as the centurions did. After witnessing the earthquake, they said, **“Truly this was the Son of God!”** Though they hadn't yet witnessed the resurrection of Jesus, they confessed the deity of Christ. They were converted by what they saw. Let me return for a moment to the question that plagues many today. How do we know that Bertrand Russell is not right, that when you die, you rot? How do we know that the atheists and agnostics are not right when they claim that all this talk of an afterlife is just something we tell ourselves to cope with the pain associated with the death of loved ones? We have to recognize right at the outset that we cannot know one way or the other through human reason. The atheists try to occupy the high ground on this by saying that our beliefs are just that, religious beliefs with no scientific proof. They want us to believe that there is scientific proof for their position that any talk of an afterlife is a fairytale. But of course, it cannot be proven scientifically that there is no afterlife. At the end of the day, their conclusions are based on a belief system just as much as ours.

How can anyone know for sure about an afterlife? It can only be known if we follow the path of the centurions. If Jesus is indeed the Son of God, then we can know what is true simply by listening to and believing him. If he's not the Son of God, then we are foolish to give him a place of any authority in our lives. But do you see that if Jesus really were raised from the dead as he said he would be, then he really is who he claimed to be, the Son of God? And if he is the Son of God, then everything he says ought to be received. The resurrection is a first

priority issue. If Jesus was raised, he is the Son of God who can be looked to as an authority. Hell is the greatest tragedy to be avoided because Jesus said so. Heaven is the place of everlasting joy to be received as God's gracious gift because Jesus said so.

So if the resurrection of Jesus is a matter of such priority, how do we know that he really was raised from the dead? Let me mention just one reason that flows from the verses of our passage. There were witnesses to the appearances of the resurrected Jesus, as well as to the Old Testament saints who are described in this chapter. Notice that verse 53 says that these resurrected saints **“appeared to many.”** Witnesses to these events were still alive at the time Matthew wrote these words. Since that is true, had Matthew been making all this up, the resurrection stories would quickly have been discounted.

Illustration: When our daughter, Kathryn, played high school soccer, my wife volunteered to call the *Birmingham News* after all of Oak Mountain High School's girls soccer games in order to report the scores for publication in the next day's newspaper. At the end of the call, they always asked for her name and phone number. She was a witness. If for self-serving reasons she were to report that our team won when in fact they lost, and that our daughter scored all the goals when in fact she didn't, there would be an undeniable trail leading back to her and exposing her as a false witness. She would quickly be discredited and no longer believed when calling in a score. The same is true with the witnesses to the resurrection. They were reporting a fact as objective as a soccer score. Jesus and these others had been raised and had appeared to many people in a public way.

CONCLUSION:

I want to invite you to let the resurrected Jesus conquer you now, moving you from his enemy to his friend. An African man stood in an evangelistic meeting and told the story of how he was brought to Christ by his dying seven-year-old daughter. One day he heard her praying for his salvation, though she lay in bed debilitated by tuberculosis and malaria.

“Dad, do you believe in God?” she asked as he sat beside her.

“Oh, yes, darling; only a fool would deny God's existence.”

“If you believe in God, you should also believe in eternal life.”

“Oh, yes; if there is a God, there must be eternal life.”

“But, dad, you don't have eternal life, for Jesus is not in your heart.”

He reported, “Then my little daughter begged me to kneel beside her deathbed. I recited her words as she prayed for my conversion. ‘O God, let Christ come into my heart. Please save my soul; give me eternal life.’” (CT, Apr, '07, p. 67).

This little girl faced death with no fear because of the resurrected Jesus. You can too. May God help you to do so!