

The Day the King Died (27:45-54)

Matthew 27, starting in v. 45:

*[45] From noon until three in the afternoon **darkness** came over all the land. [46] About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “**Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?**” (which means “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**”). [47] When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” [48] Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. [49] The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” [50] And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*

This is the day that the king of the world **died**. “Gave up his spirit,” in the words of the gospel writer Matthew. The one who *was* God, who was *with* God in the beginning and put breath in *all* of us, on this day, breathed *his* final breath. Due largely to the collective trauma of being beaten, whipped, tortured, and pierced, *repeatedly* over the previous twenty-four hours; all of that takes its final *toll* on Jesus and he gives up his life.

According to Matthew, the *three* hours leading *up* to that moment were **marked by “darkness”** that “came over all the land.” Now *historically*, we don’t know what exactly that means. We don’t know if the darkness was caused by some type of extended solar eclipse; if it was just thick, dense cloud coverage—we don’t even know if it can be *explained* by natural means at *all*. But **regardless of how it happened, Matthew’s focus here is more on why it happened.** With *all* of this, **God was communicating something about what was happening to Jesus on the cross:** he was experiencing a *type* of *darkness*.

And that *darkness* **is no doubt what leads** Jesus, after three hours, to cry out *these* words from the cross: ***my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*** Those words are a direct quote from Israel’s king David in **Psalm 22**. And the reason Jesus quotes that psalm, I think, becomes even more clear when you read it in its full context. Here’s the context—it says:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted

and were not put to shame. / But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. “He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”¹

So as it turns out, way more than just the first verse of that psalm applies to Jesus in this moment. Jesus is slowly dying by crucifixion as people look on, many of them mocking and ridiculing him, saying that they should wait and let God rescue him—none of them choosing to help him. That’s the situation Jesus is in...so he quotes the words of David, at a time when David was in a similar situation. At a time in his life when he felt like he was left to rot by God. Jesus adopts David’s words, to describe what is happening to him, on the cross.

And just like in David’s situation, the people looking on scorn Jesus, mock Jesus, hurl insults at Jesus. They sit back and say “leave him alone—let’s see if God helps him.” Here in this passage, they specifically say “let’s wait and see if God sends Elijah (the Old Testament prophet) to save him.” They do that because they think Jesus is calling for Elijah in what he cries out. The word for God and Elijah, in the original language, are very similar.

But Jesus is not calling Elijah; he’s asking a question. The question being, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Now, it’s important that we realize that when Jesus asks God a question, it’s never because Jesus doesn’t know the answer. Jesus had a perfectly intimate, close relationship with the Father. He’s not asking why God has forsaken him because he genuinely doesn’t understand why this is happening. He’s known this moment was coming for years. He’s asking the question because he wants those at the cross that day, and by association, us, to wrestle with the answer. And I’m going to get to the answer here shortly. But first, I want to let the passage show us the answer.

After all of this, with one final cry, Jesus gives up his life. Matthew then begins to describe what happens immediately following Jesus’ death. Verse 51:

[51] At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The temple curtain, in Jesus’ day, was what separated the holy from the common. No one was permitted to enter through the curtain except for the high priest, who had to

¹ Psalm 22:1-8

participate in all sorts of rituals and precautions in order to do so. **The curtain itself was large and dense. It was approximately 30 feet tall, and was as thick as the breadth of a man's hand. It was often said that the curtain was so dense that it would take about 300 priests to move it from place to place. The curtain was substantial because it was a way of visualizing substantial separation between God and humanity, due our sin.**

But here, in the moment Jesus dies, we're told that curtain is *torn*, from top to bottom. **Something about the way that God relates to humanity, in the moment Jesus dies, has fundamentally changed.** Something has been *altered* when it comes to our access to the Father. It's all *different* now, precisely because of what happens to Jesus on the cross. The writer of **Hebrews** actually sheds some light on this, later in the New Testament. It says there:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...²

What opened the curtain for us was Jesus' body, broken on the cross. **Because we have Jesus, we no longer need that curtain.** He *is* our access to the Father, once and for all. And specifically, his *body* is. The author of Hebrews calls this a "new and living way" for us to relate to God. *His* body provides the access that the *curtain* had limited. His body is the bridge over the chasm that is our separation from God, *due* to our sin. His body makes a whole new type of relationship possible. And therefore, the curtain in the temple is done away with.

Then, this happens. Second half of v. 51:

*The earth **shook**, the **rocks split** [52] and the **tombs broke open**. The bodies of many **holy** people who had **died** were raised to **life**. [53] They came **out** of the tombs after Jesus' **resurrection** and went into the holy city and **appeared** to many people.*

Now, it's **a little difficult to follow** from the language in the passage. But most likely what Matthew means is that when Jesus *died*, there was an earthquake and the rocks split, causing some tombs to break open. ...And *then*, three days *later*, at Jesus' *resurrection*, these unnamed "holy people" were raised to life from their tombs and went into the city. Matthew essentially jumps *forward* in the narrative by a few days—at which time some people were raised to life along with Jesus.

² Hebrews 10:19-20

And **as fantastical as that might sound** to us, this was God's way of communicating something. He was saying that Jesus' resurrection would be more than just an isolated event. It was his way of showing us that *Jesus'* resurrection was a *catalyst* for *other* resurrections. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus was "...the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep." **The point of *Jesus'* resurrection, it would seem, isn't that would be the *only* resurrection; but rather that it would be the *first* of many.** Including yours and mine one day in the *future*, if we know and follow Jesus.

But **back to that day** at *Golgotha*. Upon simply *witnessing* the earthquakes and rocks splitting—the Roman soldiers present for Jesus' crucifixion have a moment of *realization*. Verse 54:

[54] When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

Which means that **the first people to publicly, correctly** proclaim Jesus' true **identity** after his death were 1) one of the criminals dying on the cross next to him,³ and 2) the Roman soldiers who facilitated his death. **One more time in the gospel of Matthew, those who *shouldn't* get it, get it. While those who *should* get it, are nowhere to be found. //**

This is what happened the day that the king of the world *died*. These are the *events* of Good Friday. **And so much about the *meaning* of this day, as I said earlier, lies in the *answer* to the *question* Jesus asks as he dies: *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Jesus' question is this: *why?* And again, **Jesus asks that question, not because he needs the answer to it, but because you and I do.** *Why* does any of this happen? *Why* does any of it *have* to happen? What on *earth* could possibly be important enough that the God of the universe would *forsake* Jesus? What would be significant enough that God the Father would turn his *back* on his one and only son?**

What could possibly matter *that much* to God? ...And the reason we're here tonight is because the *answer* to that question is "**us**." *You* matter that much to God. *I* matter that much to God. Right relationship with us mattered *enough* to God that he would do all of *this* to make sure it was possible. *We* mattered to the point that he would go to extreme lengths to welcome us home. *That's* the point of Jesus enduring everything that he endured. As the hymn we just sang says:

³ See Luke 23:40-43

How **deep** the Father's love for us
How **vast**, beyond all measure
That he would **give his only Son**
To make a **wretch his treasure**

How **great** the **pain of searing loss**
The **Father** turns his face **away**
As **wounds** which mark the **Chosen One**
Bring **many sons** to glory

We are the reason that he would allow this to happen to Jesus. We are the *reason* that Jesus would *choose* to endure it. And not only that they would *allow* it to happen, but that they *together* would *facilitate* it. Orchestrate it. You see, the sin and pride of the chief priests and religious leaders was *instrumental* in everything that happened to Jesus. The Romans' national pride and militaristic, cruel practices were *instrumental* in what happened to Jesus.

But none of those things were decisive in what happened to Jesus. God could have stopped *any* of it, at any moment, had he wanted to. What was *decisive* is that the Father and the Son had a plan. A plan that would involve allowing Jesus to experience torture, pain, suffering, and death. A plan that would involve Jesus experiencing *separation* from God. **And he experienced separation, so that you and I could have that separation removed.** Accounted for. Dealt with and done with. **The curtain is gone for us, because Jesus' body tore it in two.**

This is **what makes Good Friday so good**, for followers of Jesus. Because on this Friday, something was *accomplished*. Something *definitive* was accomplished. Something that makes it possible for us to approach God after our darkest moments, our deepest sins, and our biggest failures. Those things, in any other type of relationship, would lead to distance, barriers, even abandonment. Being *forsaken* by the one the sin was against. But because *Jesus* was forsaken, you and I get to know that we will *never* be. We may *feel* forsaken, like David in Psalm 22. But the *truth* is that we never *are*.

If you feel a barrier—a thick curtain, of sorts—between you and God *now*, there are only two possible explanations for it. Either that curtain is there because you *haven't* yet trusted in Jesus' body that can tear it all down...or you *have* trusted in that, and the curtain you feel is one that you yourself have constructed. And to be sure, **you and I can construct some curtains.** We do it by our *sin*—refusing to live out of the freedom God's given us, and instead living in bondage to any number of different attitudes, postures,

and behaviors. We do it by misunderstanding what to *do* with our sin—as if we need to pay God back for our wrongs, rather than accepting that he’s already made it right.

There are **quite a few ways that we fabricate** imaginary curtains in our minds and hearts, that keep us out of God’s presence. And to be sure, those curtains can **seem dense and heavy too**. But Jesus is *also* capable of tearing all of *those* down. We know that because the *real* curtain has already been torn. It’s been *removed*. The Scriptures tell us as much. We *know* that because of the cross.

So **this evening**, we’re invited out of the common, and into the holy. We’re invited out of *distance*, and into his presence. All of that is made possible because of who Jesus *is*, and what he’s *done* on the cross.

So we’re going to take the rest of this evening to **respond** to those realities. We’re going to sing and remember what Jesus did and why. We’re going to go to the tables and take communion, internalizing the bread and the cup that stands for his body and his blood, both broken and shed on the cross that Friday a long time ago. And as we do, you’re invited to experience the *access* that all of that has made possible for you, the day the king died.

I’ve asked Joe and Jordyn to first **sing a song first** that I think narrates all of this quite beautifully. It’s likely not a song most of us know, and not even really a song to sing along with. But as they sing it, I’d love for you to follow along with the lyrics on-screen and just spend some time thinking and processing on the words, and on the events those words describe. Then we’ll sing and celebrate through some songs together.

Let’s pray.