

Light that overcomes all Darkness

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Date: 14 April 2017

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[0 : 00] We turn on our sheets to our reading, which is from Matthew's Gospel, and verses 45 to 61. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land, until the ninth hour.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, that is, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And some of the bystanders hearing it said, this man is calling Elijah. And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.

But the others said, wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him. And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened.

[1 : 13] 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. 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.

There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock.

And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

[2 : 29] Well, do keep your sheets open with me, if you would, at the page that contains that reading from Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew's book about Jesus is called Matthew's Gospel, not Matthew's biography of Jesus. And that's because he doesn't just document the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus. He declares the explanation of it all. He is first and foremost the Gospel preacher. And he's a very fine one at that.

And in this portion we read about the death of Jesus on the cross, if we asked Matthew to give us his theme sentence, what he's talking about, as we ask our aspiring preachers in the Cornhill preaching classes to do, then Matthew might just say to us this, well, I've borrowed a sentence from the Apostle Paul's letter to Timothy.

2 Timothy 1, verse 10. Our Savior Jesus Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.

[3 : 43] Because that is the message of the cross of Jesus. It's the death of death itself in the death of Christ. And his death brings a light that overcomes darkness in the world of human beings.

And Matthew shapes his message here in front of us very deliberately to make it plain to us, this light that shines out in the midst of the darkness of the darkest day that our world has ever seen. He shows us the darkness and the dereliction of death for Jesus Christ the Savior, so that there might be life and immortality for those he came to save.

Darkness brackets the whole passage. Darkness surrounds the events at Calvary. But at the center, at the very heart of the message, shines the light of life.

It breaks forth in glorious day. So let's be guided by Matthew as he shows this to us so vividly. The light that overcomes all darkness in the death of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

[4 : 55] First of all, see how he shows up the vivid darkness of that day. In verses 45 to 50, you see, we are faced with the darkness of dereliction that engulfed the Savior, the Son of God himself. From the sixth hour, that's noon, to the ninth hour, 3 p.m., there was total darkness in the land. Now, we don't know what caused it, we're not told, but there is absolutely no doubt what it symbolized.

All through the Bible, darkness. Darkness is a sign of God's presence in judgment. Remember the plagues of darkness in Egypt.

The ninth plague spoke of a thick darkness that could be felt as God's final judgment approached, the death of every firstborn in that land. The prophet Amos spoke of a great and terrible day of judgment to come upon Israel for their sin, for their rejection of God.

In that day, he said, I will make the sun go down at noon and darkness cover the earth in broad daylight. Now, there's no doubt that this is a great day of darkness for Israel as they deliver up their own Messiah to the cross to death.

[6 : 12] And so the darkness speaks loudly of God's judgment. But more than that, notice all the focus in this section is on Jesus' words from the cross.

Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? Because in the darkness, you can't see anything, but you can hear. And it's as though Matthew is saying to us, well, listen, listen to Jesus Christ, verse 46. Eli, Eli, lama, sabachthani.

What does that mean? Well, it means that this darkness and judgment is not just upon Israel for their sins in rejecting the Messiah.

This is a dread darkness of judgment upon Jesus himself. My God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus is quoting from Psalm 22, which speaks of a sense of utter rejection and forsakenness. And the speaker is God's king, his anointed one. Jesus is saying, this is me. Now, many seek to explain away these words of Jesus here because it seems so impossible.

[7 : 22] How could God the Father forget his Son, the one in whom he is well pleased? In one sense, I suppose it is impossible. It's unthinkable.

And yet, unless Jesus is wrong, unless he's mistaken, that is exactly what we do see in the crucifixion of Jesus.

It would be impossible for the Son of God to die unless God himself had given him up to be crucified.

But that's exactly what is confirmed in these words. As one writer puts it, it is the most mysterious enigma of all biblical revelation.

And yet, it is entirely consistent with everything Jesus himself has taught all the way through the gospel. His death, he said, was to be a real death for sins.

[8 : 26] This is what explains Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as he contemplated it, although this supersedes even that because this is the darkness of real spiritual death.

This is the darkness of sheer hell. As Jesus hung on the cross in physical agony, the real agony that he experienced was that.

It was the utter agony of abandonment of all consciousness of his Father's presence. The Father really did turn his face away from the beloved Son, the one in whom he delights.

Because, well, as the Apostle Paul tells us so clearly, he became sin for us. He became a curse. And therefore, the judgment of God upon him was real and terrible in his experience. He experienced the judgment of hell itself. He descended into hell, says the Creed.

[9 : 41] Because he knew that utter darkness of real spiritual death, of utter separation from God the Father himself. His cry there, why?

It wasn't a cry of ignorance in the sense of looking for an intellectual answer because Jesus knew the answer. That's why he was agonized in Gethsemane as he thought of it. No, it is a cry of agonized dereliction that speaks of that awful judgment of darkness descending upon him as he became sin really and truly for his people.

as he became the scapegoat, sent out, cast out into the wilderness to wander endlessly in the desolate wasteland of darkness, outside the orbit of God's people, outside the purview of God himself, outside the very universe of life.

And so for Jesus, there was utter darkness. No light at all. All conscious communion with his Father lost.

You see in his cry, it's no longer Father. It's just God in verse 46. And yet, even in that darkest hour of judgment, still, he does have faith and trust.

[11:06] He is crying out to God. He is committing himself to God. Even the God who has turned his face away from him, he obeys his Father utterly to the last.

And notice verse 47. This darkness of utter dereliction is witnessed. Although the bystanders just add to his darkness with their misunderstanding and with their mockery.

He's calling Elijah. The Jews believe that Elijah might appear to save the faithful in their time of need. So what they're saying is, he needs Elijah. He needs a savior. That's what they think.

No, he is the savior. But he is mocked and misunderstood, even in his experience of the infinite horror of utter separation from God.

As he became sin. As he became a curse. And descended into the experience of hell itself. And yet there was one more cry.

[12:13] Verse 50. Do you see? Matthew doesn't record his words as John does. It is accomplished. It is finished. But he makes the same point another way here.

By telling us that Jesus didn't involuntarily lapse into consciousness. No, despite the darkness. Despite the dereliction. Despite the desolation of separation from his Father.

He willingly yielded up his life. This was a great cry of accomplishment. This is what he came into the world to do. To save his people from the utter horror.

Of what he was now enduring. For their sins. On the cross of Calvary. Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Endured the darkness.

Of utter dereliction. The darkness of real. Spiritual death. And it was clearly witnessed. They heard his cries.

[13:14] Although they totally misunderstood it. And who can understand? Who can comprehend fully? The horror.

Of that infinite darkness. But you see Matthew is also determined. That we should see clearly. That on the cross. Jesus endured the darkness of death. As real physical death.

And that too was unmistakably witnessed. Look at verses 55 to 61. Having been crucified on the cross. Under Pontius Pilate. As the Creed said.

Jesus really is dead. And buried. As witnessed by Joseph. Verse 57. Who buried him in the tomb. And by the many women.

Verse 55. Who witnessed his death. And now also. Verse 61. At the end. By the two Marys. Who are observing it all. Without any doubt. At all.

[14:10] There is no mistaking. Is there? The cold reality. Of a dead body. As evidence. Of real. Physical. Death. Joseph.

As a pious Jew. Wouldn't want a body. To be left hanging on the Sabbath. So. In the gathering darkness of evening. Notice verse 57. When it was evening. He asks Pilate.

For the body. And Pilate gives it. Notice. It is a body. Pilate. Is in no doubt. That Jesus is dead. And this rich man.

Joseph. Attends to the burial. In his own tomb. And again. Matthew is reminding us. That this death. Is according to scripture. Isaiah had foretold. That the Messiah. Would in fact.

Have his grave. With a rich man. In his death. But notice verse 60. He's laid in a new tomb. And a great stone. Seals the tomb.

[15:05] And verse 60. The witnesses all saw it. Sitting opposite. The tomb. There's no mistake. Is there? The tomb. The tomb. The tomb. Speaks of the finality.

Of the darkness. Of real. Physical. Death. Darkness at midday. The darkness of dereliction. The agony of forsakenness.

The chill horror. Of real. Spiritual death. He. Descended. Into hell. And the darkness. In the evening. Amid the. Enclosing night.

Alone. Enshrouded. Cold. In the darkness. Of bodily death. The stone. Seals the tomb. In utter darkness. He was crucified.

Dead. And buried. And again. Witnesses. Not this time. Mocking. But mourning. And ministering to him.

[16:03] In his death. And yet still. They. Too. Are in a darkness. Of misunderstanding. Aren't they? He's needing servants. To tend to his body. That's what they think. But no.

Says. The scriptures. He is. The servant. Whom Isaiah said. Shall make many. To be counted righteous. Because he. Will bear.

Their. Iniquities. The son of man. Came not. To be served. Said Jesus. Not even. In. His death. But to give.

His life. As a ransom. For many. To give. His life. He yielded up. His spirit. Says verse 50. And you see.

That brings us. To the very. Glorious. Center. Right at the heart. Of Matthew's message. Here. Do you see. Look at verses 51. To 54. Right. In the heart.

[16:58] Of it all. Where Matthew. Focuses. Our gaze. Here. Not on darkness. But on light. On the light. Of life itself. On the light. That shines forth.

In dazzling. Brightness. Amidst. The deepest. Darkness. Of the cross. In verse 51. Matthew shouts. Behold. Look. How can you look.

When it's dark. Well of course. You can't. That's his point. Isn't it. Darkness is banished. Light has come. In the death of Jesus. You see. We're told. Aren't we. That darkness. Was from the sixth hour.

To the ninth hour. When Jesus cried out. That final time. And the implication. Then. Is that the light. Returned. After that. And that's why.

In verse 57. That we're told. When evening came. And it got dark again. So obviously. Prior to that. It had been light. Once again. And certainly. You see. Matthew's words.

[17:53] In verses 51 to 54. Are filled with light. Filled with glorious light. This is the explanation. He is giving us. Of Jesus second cry.

Not now in words. In the darkness. But in two great signs. From heaven. In the bright light of day. Two great signs. Which interpret. With all the authority.

Of almighty God. The meaning. And the accomplishment. In the death. Of Jesus. Look at verse 51 first. Which tells us. That the temple curtain.

Is opened. And that tells us. That there is restoration. Between God and man. Accomplished. Through the cross of Jesus. Now that thick curtain.

Separated in the temple. The holy of holies. Where God's presence dwelt. From all that was outside. The only person. Who could ever go beyond that curtain. Was the high priest.

[18:51] And only one day in the year. The day of atonement. With the sacrifice of atonement. For the sins of the people. Entry by anyone else. Or on any other day. Meant instant death.

Because that curtain. Symbolized the barrier. Between God and man. Ever since Eden. It had embroidered on it. The cherubim. With a flaming sword.

That you read about. In Genesis chapter 3. He guarding the way. Back to the tree of life. Stopping man. From entering. The near presence of God. But you see.

Now Matthew is saying. Look. Look. See. The temple curtain. Has been torn apart. From top to bottom. From heaven to earth. You can't see the temple.

Can you? From Calvary. But Matthew insists. That we see. The light. The light. Streaming out. From the dwelling place of God. Into the world.

[19:47] Of human beings. Through. What happened. That moment. When Jesus Christ died. On the cross at Calvary. Now. He's saying.

Now. Because of what Jesus has done. As the book of Hebrews puts it. Sinful people. Can. Again. Enter. The holy place. By the blood of Jesus. By a new.

And living way. Opened up. Through the curtain. That is. Through his flesh. You see. The gates of Eden.

Have been opened. Once again. Darkness is defeated. Eden is restored. Through the death. Of the Lord Jesus Christ. The moment he died.

And heaven and earth. Are now reunited. Forever. Through Jesus. The curtain is opened. And it proclaims. Restoration. He.

[20:42] Tasted death. As dereliction. Agonizing. Separation. From God. That we. Might taste. Again. Of the tree of life. In the intimate.

Presence of God. Look. Behold. Says Matthew. All things are new. The curtain is open. There is a restoration. And therefore.

Look at verse 52. Therefore. The tombs are opened. And there is resurrection. There is a restoration. Of body and soul. For man. Forever.

The earth shook. The rocks were split. And the tombs. Were opened. And the rest of verses 52. And 53. There are. A parenthesis. Telling us.

What that sign. Of shattered tombs. Meant. Something utterly. Extraordinary. Was witnessed. In Jerusalem. After Jesus rose. From the dead. The bodies of many saints. Of old. Were raised.

[21 : 37] And came into the city. And appeared. To many people. It was just a little preview. If you like. Of the reality. That now. Is certain. To come.

At the last day. When Jesus returns. And through his own resurrection. All who are his. Will likewise. Know the resurrection. To bodily life.

That Jesus himself knew. But Matthew is telling us. Plainly here. That it was at the very moment. Of Jesus death. That the hold.

Of the tombs. Of this earth. Were broken. Forever. For all the saints of God. For all. Who are Christ's people. Look says Matthew. The death of death. In the death.

Of your Lord Jesus Christ. C.S. Lewis it is. I think. Who puts it so memorably. In his book. The Lion. The Witch. And the Warder. When Aslan explains.

[22 : 31] You remember. If you read it. He explains. To Susan and Lucy. The girls. What the meaning. Of his death. On the stone table. Was. After he is risen. It's the beginning. He says. Of death.

Working backwards. And all those. Animals. Who had been. Turned to stone. By the. Wicked magic. Of the white witch. Begin to come to life again.

As Aslan. Breeze. Upon them. And that's what Matthew is saying. In reality here. Those who are imprisoned. By death.

Because of sin. Are set free. Forever. From that. Bondage. To sin and death. The bondage of the tomb. The moment. That Jesus death.

For their sins. Is accomplished. Because the curtain. Is opened. And heaven and earth. Are restored forever. In reconciliation. And so the tombs. Of earth. Are opened. And the body.

[23 : 28] And souls. Of human being. Can be reunited. Forever. In resurrection. The curse of sin. Remember. Was. To dust. You will return. But the death of Jesus. Has reversed that curse.

Forever. Forever. You see how Matthew makes it so clear. This great exchange. That takes place at the cross. Look at verse 60 and 61 again.

Jesus is laid in a new tomb. A stone seals the tomb. The women sit looking at the tomb. But in the moment of his death.

Verse 52. The tombs of believers. Are broken apart. Forever. Forever. The darkness of death. Is flooded. With the light of life. Our savior.

Jesus Christ. Abolished death. And brought life. And immortality. To light. Through the gospel. For all. His saints. For all who are his.

[24 : 24] For those who died. Long long ago. Like these people. Longing for the coming. Of the Lord Jesus. And for those. That we have loved. And have gone to sleep.

To await the Lord Jesus. Return. Those who we miss. So dearly. And. For those who are staring. That tomb. That grave. In the face. This very day.

And this very week. Death. Is already. Working backwards. Death. As the wages of sin.

For all. Who Christ came to save. Has been done away with. Its power. Broken. Shattered. God. Like those tombs. In Palestine. Isn't that a wonderful thought.

That. Amid all those tears. Of those who had been bereaved. In Jerusalem. At that time. Not only of Jesus. But of other loved ones. Those who mourned.

[25 : 22] And who grieved. And these saints. Rose up. And came into the city. And said. No. No. You're wrong. Rejoice. At last. God's promise has come to pass.

There is resurrection. Sure and certain. For all. Who are his. Because the death of Jesus Christ. Has broken. The power of death. For you. Forever.

Forever. I'm sure we've all been at funerals. Where there's no hope. Where there's no future.

Where there's only utter darkness. Utter despair. Utter loss. The misery of. Of a lifetime. Of joy. Of. Of belonging. Of meaning. Of fellowship. Of family. Robbed.

Robbed. By the jaws. Of that great enemy. The grave. But how different it is. Isn't it? At a thanksgiving service.

[26 : 18] For those who know. The light. That has banished. The darkness of death. Forever. Of course. There are still tears. Rightly so. Death is our last enemy.

Still to be. Finally defeated for us. As we wait. The day of resurrection. But there is. Sure. And certain. Hope. Because.

We have seen the preview. The tombs have been opened. And there is resurrection. For all. Who will trust themselves. Into the safekeeping.

Of Jesus Christ. The Savior. That's the light. Of Easter. That's the light. Of Easter. Matthew is telling us. Behold. The death of death. In the death. Of Jesus Christ.

But there's a final shaft. Of light. That Matthew draws our eyes. To here. And it's. Verse 54. Which in many ways. Is really the climax. Of the whole account here. Because. He's telling us.

[27 : 15] That it is in understanding. The message of the cross. That Matthew wants us to see. It's in that. That eyes are opened. And there's revelation.

When they saw the earthquake. And what took place. They were filled with awe. And said. This truly was. The son of God. Do you see what he's saying to us. He's saying it's here. It's at the cross. That we will see. The full revelation. Of who God really is. And indeed. Of who we really are. In his sight. It's at the cross.

That we see. Don't we. That God is. A God of absolute holiness. Of justice. Who must punish sin. And we see. In Jesus death. The absolute horror. Of the penalty.

That our sins. Yours and mine. Truly deserve. Because he stood. In our place. Wounded. For our transgressions. Crucified. For our iniquities.

[28 : 15] What that means. Friends. You see. Is that. We see. In the cross. What God really. Thinks. Of our lives. What God. Truly says.

Our lives deserve. It's a revelation. Isn't it? It's an eye opener. There's no hiding. At the cross. It's all exposed. In the horror. Of that terrible judgment.

But the cross. Also opens our eyes. At the same time. To the God. Of absolute love. Because this is. The great. Act of love. In all time.

In all eternity. That reveals. The depth. Of God's heart. For wayward people. For undeserving people. For rebellious people. Like you and me. Christ loved us.

And gave himself up for us. As a fragrant offering. And sacrifice to God. The son of God. Loved me. And gave himself for me. Says the apostle.

[29 : 16] And it's the cross of Christ. That shows us also. Just how much. God values. God values. Your life. Despite everything. That would separate you from him.

All your sin. All your real guilt. That must be punished. Because he came. To save. His people. From their sins.

The cross of Jesus. You see. Is the great place. Of revelation. It's the ultimate. It's the unique. It's the full. Revelation. Of who God really is.

And what he has done. In the judgment. Of the cross. We nevertheless. See his. Infinite mercy. Towards us. And in the weakness.

Of the cross. We nevertheless. See his mighty. Power. To save us. And in his. Death. On the cross. We find. His eternal.

[30 : 12] Life. That is offered. To us. And that's why Matthew. Records. These final witnesses. In verse 54. The marveling witnesses. Of these soldiers. Their eyes.

Saw the light. In Christ crucified. They saw the light. Of the cross. Because it's in the cross. It's in the message. Of Christ crucified. That eyes are opened. It's in the cross.

And the message. Of the cross. That darkness. Is banished. That light dawns. Into the souls. Into the hearts. Of men and women. And if those.

Hardened. Pagan soldiers. Can be touched. By the message. Of the cross. Of Jesus Christ. Like that. If their eyes. Can be opened. To see. The light. Of the glory.

Of God. In the face. Of Jesus Christ. Then surely. Surely. So can your. Hardened friends.

[31 : 08] And neighbors. And family. And loved ones. Surely. Their eyes. Also can be opened. By this message. The gospel. Of Jesus Christ.

Has. That power. It is the power. Of God. For the salvation. Of all. Who believe. All. Who believe. Friends.

This message. Alone. Is the message. That opens. Heaven. That brings. Reconciliation. With God. That brings. Restoration. To this dark world.

This message. Alone. Can break. The power. Of the grave. And can promise. Resurrection. And life everlasting. In the cross.

In the death. Of our Lord. Jesus Christ. Is the light. That overcomes. Darkness forever. Forever. So let us.

[32 : 04] Rejoice. In the cross. Of Jesus Christ. Our Savior. Amen. Let's pray. O merciful God.

Who made all people. And hates. Nothing. That thou hast made. Nor wills. The death. Of a sinner. But rather. That he should be. Converted. And live. Have mercy.

On all. Who are still in darkness. And take from them. All ignorance. Hardness of heart. All contempt. Of thy word. And so.

Fetch them home. Blessed Lord. To thy flock. That they may be saved. Among the remnant. Of true Israelites. And be made one fold.

Under one shepherd. Jesus Christ. Our Lord. Who lives. And reigns with thee. The Holy Spirit. One God. World without end.