

The King is Dead

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[0 : 0 0] Now, we're coming to the fourth of our studies in the King's Suffering and Glory, and we come today to Matthew 27, verses 45 to 61.

This is the actual death of the King himself, and you'll find that on page 834.

Page 834 began, those of you who've been here the last few weeks in Gethsemane, we moved through the trial with Pilate, and now we've come to the actual death of Jesus.

So, Matthew chapter 27, verse 45, reading to verse 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, lemma sabachthani, that is, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[1 : 0 9] So the bystander's hearing 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.

The other said, wait, let's see whether Elijah will come to save him. And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. Behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. Many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, he 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.

[2 : 1 8] 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.

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. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to our hearts and to our lives. Now let's pray. Now that as we meet today in the shadow of the dreadful bombings in Brussels, we once again are horrified and sickened at the violence of those who hate so much and whose only object is to maim and to destroy and to kill.

We ask indeed that you, with the grieving people of that city, and indeed with all the people whose lives have been affected by this, that includes us, because such an atrocity makes us all vulnerable.

[3 : 37] And as we look today at the cross, we realize that the cross is an example of human violence, of human hatred, of human prejudice, and yet it is the way by which these evils and sins can be forgiven, and the way back to God opened, and the sinners redeemed and made fit for the kingdom of heaven.

And so bless us, Lord, as we look at this passage today in profound, powerful words. We ask that you will speak to us, that you will challenge us, you will encourage us, you will indeed open our eyes and open our hearts.

In Jesus' name. Amen. I'm sure you'll agree that every time we switch on the news these days, we wonder what other atrocity there is going to be.

And obviously, the Brussels tragedy, which comes so near to our own doors, is one which particularly affects us. And as I said in the prayer, here we have both the ultimate example of human prejudice, of human ignorance, of human violence, and yet here we have the way by which that violence is going to be broken, death is going to be defeated, and sin is going to be forgiven.

And this week and next week, as we look at the resurrection, the glory of the King, we keep all this in mind, because it's very, very practical.

[5 : 15] It's not just high theology, deep theology, although it is, it's very practical to our lives in this world. And not just to these big events like the bombing in Brussels, all of us face these kind of events on a smaller scale in our own lives.

All of us face tragedy, suffering, and death. And there's a culmination of Matthew's picture of the cross, where the King dies. And now Matthew is digging down to a deeper level, if you like.

So far, everything has been going the way of the establishment. Pilate, Caiaphas, the soldiers, all of them have wreaked their worst.

All of them have apparently defeated the Son of Man, the King of Glory. But Matthew's now placing it in a far wider context. What actually was happening?

The theologian Jim Packer, many years ago, wrote a booklet called, What Did the Cross Achieve? And that's what this passage is talking about. What did the cross achieve?

[6 : 21] Now, it's interesting, the Gospels never dwell at any length on the physical suffering of Jesus. I think that's deliberate. If we dwell on the physical suffering, which was horrific, and sadly uncommon at that time, and the awful story of torture and death that runs like a bloodstained river through humanity's history, then we begin to really to lose the plot.

What is it about? So the focus is on what does the cross mean? What did it achieve? What's its importance for time and for eternity?

And I want to suggest this passage tells us there are three ways in which the cross profoundly affected, not just what came after it, but what came before it.

Because if Jesus can save us who live thousands of years after his death, so of course he can and did save those who live thousands of years before it. This is an event happening in space and time.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate around about A.D. 30, A.D. 33. We're not even certain of the date. That doesn't matter. It's an event that affects the whole of eternity.

[7 : 41] And first of all, it affects God himself. In a profound way, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity, are working to restore creation and to forgive sin.

And we have the profound mystery of this cry in verse 46. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That's quotation from Psalm 22, a psalm of David, and clearly in its original context, referring to some traumatic event in David's life, perhaps the rebellion of his son Absalom or some other such event.

Now, some have argued that Jesus meant us to understand the whole psalm, because the psalm ends in triumph, the psalm ends in victory. But that's not very likely at this point, because we can't jump ahead at this moment to chapter 28, can we?

Others have said, Jesus is a pious Jew, dying with the words of the psalm on his lips. Many Jews would do that, of course. This is a very odd psalm to use.

If you're a pious Jew, dying, confidence in God, being far more likely to have quoted Psalm 16, You will not abandon me to the grave, nor leave my soul in the hand of your right hand.

[9 : 06] There are pleasures forevermore. We must assume this was a natural experience of Jesus. This is not an imaginary experience.

This is an actual experience. A profound mystery. It is mystery all. The immortal dies. Who can explore a strange design? As Wesley sang, we can't see everything about it.

It doesn't mean we can't see anything about it. And I want to say two things particularly. And the first thing is this. Jesus was forsaken by God because he took your place and mine.

Our sin separated us from God. Our sin was deserved and deserves the judgment of God. And we could not find a way back.

We could not stand before God, face his judgment, take his judgment, and be forgiven. As you write at the beginning of this gospel, chapter 1, you are to give his name Jesus because he is to save his people from their sins.

[10 : 15] And in chapter 20, he did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. Jesus is forsaken by God because he is taking the judgment of the world.

Let me put it as starkly as possible. Jesus went to hell for us on that cross. He took upon him sin, judgment, death, and hell so that we need not suffer judgment and hell.

That's the first thing. The second thing is extremely important as well. Please don't get the idea. This is a kind son placating an angry father.

God does not love us because Jesus died for us. Jesus died for us because God loves us. It's so important to grasp that.

It's so important not to sentimentalize it. God is angry with us. Jesus intervenes. You see, because God is angry with us, you see, if God were only angry with us, he could just judge us, blot us out.

[11 : 28] But God loves us as well. And because God loves us, God, in Christ, takes our place. He's not placating an angry father.

There was a distasteful phrase used a number of years ago that the cross was cosmic child abuse. Now that is dreadful. There is nothing here comparable to child abuse.

Child abuse. Jesus went to take this knowing what was going to happen. There is no question of a division between father and son and spirit in this.

And I think the reference to Elijah here is very important. This man is calling Elijah. Verse 47. This helps us to place it in the storyline of the Bible.

A few chapters ago, Elijah and Moses had appeared with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. And what had they spoken about? They had spoken about the salvation, the exodus that he would carry out at Jerusalem.

[12 : 34] This is the event now happening. And once again, the shocking misunderstanding of the unlookers. Verse 40. Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him. Elijah, like the rest of us, could not come to save Jesus.

Elijah, like the rest of us, is saved because of what Jesus is doing here. So, it affects God. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are involved.

And the letter to the Hebrews talks about Jesus offering himself through the eternal spirit. So, it's not, there is no division here. Jesus is separate from God for those hours only because he is taking our place.

So, that's the first thing. It affects God. But secondly, it affects creation itself. In verse 50, he cried with a loud voice and gilded up his spirit.

And it's interesting sometimes to read the Gospels as if none of the rest of them had been written and get the particular distinctive teaching of them. Of course, we have four.

[13 : 40] And of course, we must not ignore them and the light they throw on each other. In the case of Mark, almost certainly that would be the case to the first readers of Mark because Mark, it's widely and I think directly believed, was the first Gospel to be written.

So, but here, Matthew, in these next verses, is giving us details that are in a different emphasis from the other writers.

First of all, there is the darkness, of course. Verse 45, the darkness, which is a sign of God's judgment.

Probably the background here is Amos chapter 8, prophecy of judgment on the land and very probably also an echo of the plague of darkness in the book of Exodus.

A sign of God's anger, as I say, and paradoxically also the way out of the darkness for all who will believe. This is supernatural darkness.

[14 : 44] There's no point in searching the records of the first century A.D. to find account of the eclipse of the sun any more than searching for what the star of Bethlehem was telling us it was Halley's comet or a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.

I mean, obviously God used the heavenly bodies, but here, this is a supernatural darkness and we mustn't water it down by saying it was just a routine eclipse of the sun.

So, first of all then, the darkness covers the land. Darkness. And, of course, that darkness is a spiritual darkness as well, is it not? It's the darkness of evil, the darkness of the demonic.

And yet, it is the darkness ultimately controlled by God. The second thing is the tearing of the curtain. Verse 51, behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Now, this curtain, the older translations unfortunately say veil, which suggests something flimsy. This is not. This is a huge, heavy curtain, about 30 feet high.

[15 : 51] And in both in the old temple and before that in the tabernacle, it stood shielding the most holy place where the Ark of the Covenant was.

Read in the book of Leviticus. It's everywhere there is danger. Do not touch. Don't go beyond this point. Don't linger here.

And in the Old Testament, only the high priest was allowed to go there, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

And we read in the book of Leviticus in chapter 10 of how the high priest's own sons were destroyed because of their presumption in bursting into the Holy of Holies and offering illegal sacrifices.

Once a year on the Day of Atonement. Now, you see what's happening here. The no-entry signs are removed, and the way is blazed into the presence of God.

[16 : 53] But the Hebrew says, we have a great high priest who has gone into heaven, Jesus, the Son of God. And that's what's happening here, symbolized by the tearing of the curtain.

And notice the careful language. It's torn from top to bottom. It's not humanity who opens the way into God's presence. It's God who calls humans into his presence.

The fulfillment of the old covenant, the new covenant in Christ's death. From top to bottom, there is a way back to God.

That's what we're being told here. So there's the darkness. There is the tearing of the curtain. And there's the earthquake and the emptying of the tombs.

Now, earthquake is often a symbol both of judgment and divine glory, they're calling Sinai and so on. And commentators will tell us that the temple area lies in a geological fault.

[17 : 56] I'm not quite sure how that helps, as it doesn't actually fill me with wonder, love, and praise. You know, the temple lies in a geological fault line. Once again, this is a unique event. But Matthew has this detail which none of the other gospel writers have.

Many bodies of the saints who had fallen, the holy ones who had fallen asleep, were raised. Now, were they raised to the life immortal or back to mortal life?

Now, remember already, Jesus had raised three people back to mortal life. Jairus' daughter, an unnamed young man from the town of Nain, and Lazarus.

We don't know. But the point is, this is pointing forward to what will be as a result of Jesus' death. Jesus' death tears open the curtain.

But Jesus' death also tears open the grave. Jesus' death means that access is open to God and death is defeated. And remember, even in the fallen world, and we learn this from Enoch and Elijah, the death only operates under God's permission.

[19 : 13] Now, I know that's only two, but two are enough. Indeed, one is enough to show that God is not bound by rules and regulations. Their resurrection, whatever the event fully means, is dependent on Christ's triumph, dependent on Christ's death and rising again.

Christ becomes the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. The whole of salvation history depends on this moment. So it affects God himself.

Jesus stands between us and the anger of God takes our place. Jesus opens the way to God. And thirdly, it affects human destiny.

Now, all the gospel writers are very concerned with the human responses to this event. We've already seen a number. The hatred of the religious establishment. The prejudice and malice of Ennis and Caiaphas, the high priests.

The brutality and nastiness of the soldiers. The cynicism of Pilate. Let's look briefly now at three responses we find here.

[20 : 25] First of all, the centurion. Now, notice here in other gospels we learn the centurion. Here we learn that one or two around him also were moved by the event.

A confessing group to balance the mocking group, if you like. Now transformed into a statement of faith. Last week we saw how Jesus' various claims were mocked.

They mocked his claim to be king of Israel, to be saviour, to be the way to God. And above all, they mocked his claim to be the son of God. Here we have pagans confessing him as son of God.

Dissipating the great confession we'll look at next week. Go and make disciples of all nations. So here, these people look at the events and they are transformed.

They realize that nothing can be the same again. Then there's the women in verses 55 to 56, who of course include, who of course, as we learn, includes his own mother.

[21 : 42] Their silent grief and their courage. Their unspoken belief that this is not the end of the story. And I think that's the point here. It's not specifically said.

These women standing there realize the story doesn't end here. This is not a terminus. So, as in the other Gospels, we see how these believing women are quite often contrasted with the cowardly disciples.

And finally, there's Joseph. Verse 57. When it was evening, there came a rich man named Joseph, who was a disciple of Jesus. John tells us that another senior figure, Nicodemus, came as well.

And I think that's hugely important because, first of all, it's fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, isn't it? Isaiah 53, verse 9. He was with the rich in his death.

An expensive tomb, laid in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. A kind of cave and a slope to roll the stone down.

[22 : 57] Very easy to roll the stone down. Very easy to shut the tomb. Very, very difficult to open. That's going to be the point of the final chapter.

And you'll notice the burial of Jesus is so important. It's often ignored. But it is important. He really died. There was a ridiculous theory that grew up in the late 19th century, a product of 19th century rationalism, that Jesus only swooned in the tomb and later on revived in the cool of the tomb.

His disciples helped him. Hard to believe that someone who had suffered what Jesus suffered would then manage to convince his followers that he was the Lord of life and of death.

Buried is a literal fact. Remember in the Apostles' Creed, crucified, died, and was buried. A literal fact.

Which could only be set aside by another literal fact. On the third day, he rose again. So you see, this story looks like, looks as if it's run into the sand.

[24 : 10] We've run into a terminal. We've smashed into the buffers. But really, this is the way back to God. The chorus of my youth said, there is a way back to God from the dark paths of sin.

There's a door that is open that I may go in. At Calvary's cross is where I begin when I come as a sinner to Jesus. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that all this chapter, this incident ends in death. The next chapter is glorious with the light of resurrection.

We thank you for the wonderful truth that God became flesh, suffered and died for us, and rose again for us.

And we pray that as we, once again, travel through those days of Easter, that these great truths will encourage us, strengthen us, and help us to continue to live for him in this dark and dangerous world.

[25 : 14] We ask this in his name. Amen.