

Darkness and Light - the glory of the cross unveiled

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Darkness and light, the glory of the cross unveiled. It hasn't been a good week for Pope Benedict XVI, has it?

Following his remarks about Islam, taken totally out of context, of course, and yet causing an extraordinary violent backlash around the world from those vehemently defending Islam, the religion of peace, as they call it.

It is ironic, isn't it? Following that, he found himself in trouble again, this time for offending the Jews. His crime was to quote 1 Corinthians 1 verse 23, We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.

It's now apparently scandalous even to mention that the cross and its message is scandalous to the world. And of course, the message of the cross and of Christ crucified is scandalous to our world.

It's scandalous to the Jew, or indeed to the religiously zealous person in general, including the ever stronger Islamic religion. To such a person, the cross is an absolute scandal, because their conception of God is such that almighty God simply could not possibly stoop so low as to humiliate himself at the hands of men, even to humiliate himself in death at all, let alone death on a cross.

[1 : 26] And to the Gentile, to the secularists, the cross is equally scandalous, although in a different way. For such, there could never be any need for the cross as a place of sin bearing, because there's no sense of sin at all as something needing to be dealt with in that sense.

And so in the church today, especially in the West, where older denominations like ours are fighting a rearguard action, there's a great pressure to rewrite the cross, to remove the scandal, to pave the way for interfaith relations on the one hand, and to make peace with an ever scornful secularized world.

A world that will be happy to pat the church on the head for social work and charity work and so on, but will never ever accept the message of sin and repentance and holiness.

But, you know, right back in the first century, all these same pressures were there facing the apostles, like Paul and like Matthew. They knew that their message was just as offensive to their world as it is today to our world.

But they said, we preach Christ crucified, stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. We have no other gospel. What made the message of the cross so offensive?

[2 : 52] Well, not the fact of Jesus' crucifixion. History is just history. Josephus records Jesus' death, but that isn't offensive to the world. No, the offense of the cross is caused by its interpretation, by its meaning, and therefore its challenge to the world, the world of Jews and Gentiles alike.

It's not just the events of the crucifixion, but its interpretation that the apostles proclaim, and that's what makes it an offensive message. But that, and that alone, is what makes it a gospel.

Good news, the very power of God for salvation. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 3, I deliver to you as of first importance that which I also receive, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

You see, to preach Christ died, and that alone, that's not a gospel. Josephus tells us that, but he's not an evangelist. But Christ died for our sins, well, that's an explanation, that's meaning.

And in accordance with the scriptures, that fills the whole meaning with an interpretation. An interpretation that's absolutely unmistakable, that describes Jesus' death in terms of the whole Old Testament teaching about sin and punishment, and the anger of God, and the judgment of God, and the sacrifices of atonement, that alone can bring forgiveness, and peace, and reconciliation, and restoration.

[4 : 22] And we've seen Matthew does exactly the same thing here in his gospel. Probably written five or ten years or so after Paul wrote to Corinth. And Matthew's passion is not like Mel Gibson's passion, is it?

His passion is focused on the gore and the brutality and the physical horror of the crucifixion. Well, Matthew doesn't hide that, but no, the focus of Matthew's gospel is on the meaning, on the message of the cross as an interpretation according to the scriptures.

Matthew's passion is preaching. He's preaching Christ crucified. He's already proclaimed Jesus' death to us as a Passover sacrifice in chapter 26 that delivers his people from bondage of the enemy and into the promised future.

It's the inauguration of a new covenant through his own blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. It's a redemption, a great setting free by the payment of a price, a ransom price of the precious blood where the guilty prisoner goes free and Christ, the innocent one, is put to death.

And as we saw last time, it's a great reconciliation of enemies. In the mocking slander at the cross, we saw the hatred of the world unleashed.

[5 : 47] And yet the amazing wonder that while we were yet enemies, as Paul says, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son. And now in the very climax of the passion, in the actual death of Jesus, Matthew's message reaches its climax too.

He tells us that it's Christ crucified that is the only answer to sin's guilt and to sin's power and to sin's slavery.

But also, it's the removal of sin's ultimate penalty. It's the removal of death itself. And the way Matthew preaches the cross to us here in these poignant verses makes his message absolutely clear.

If he was in the Cornhill preaching class giving this sermon, I might ask him for a theme sentence to sum up his message. And Matthew might say this, Well, I've borrowed a verse from Paul's letter to Timothy, 2 Timothy 1 verse 10.

That's my theme sentence. Our Saviour, Christ Jesus, has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. That's the message of Christ crucified here in Matthew 27, 45 to 61.

[6 : 57] It's the death of death in the death of Christ. One of the questions we have on the assessment sheet for Cornell students is, was there a clear structure to the message?

Well, we've come to see, haven't we, that Matthew's a stickler for structure. He loves symmetry. One of the ways he shapes his message. And it's so clear here, isn't it? His message is all about a great unveiling of the glory of the cross in the midst of the hatred and the shame of the cross.

And so he wants us to see that wonder. And he wants us to see how it is a message of darkness and light. Stark contrast. The darkness of dereliction and death for Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

That there might be light and life and immortality for those he's come to save. I wonder if you can see the symmetry once again. Do you see how the darkness brackets the light?

See verses 45 to 50. They speak of the darkness of dereliction, of Jesus' abandonment by God, a darkness of real spiritual death, a darkness that's witnessed so clearly by the bystanders.

[8 : 13] And then in verses 55 to 61 there's another bracket. Again, these speak of the darkness of death, this time of real physical death. Jesus' body is sealed in the cold and the dark tomb when it is evening as darkness is falling.

And again, it's witnessed by Joseph and by the women. There's no mistaking he's dead and buried. But you see in the middle in verses 51 to 54 there we have a message that breaks forth like glorious day in the midst of the darkness.

There's light. There's the light of life. And the glory of the cross is revealed for those that Jesus came to save. And it's a truth that's gloriously witnessed also and that's the climax really of the whole gospel in verse 54.

So let's listen to Matthew as he proclaims to us Christ crucified. First of all, the darkness. And in verses 45 to 50 we're faced with the darkness of dereliction.

Verse 45 tells us that from the sixth hour, that's about noon, to the ninth hour, three o'clock in the afternoon, there was total darkness over the land. But because the darkness we're not told.

[9 : 29] There's no point in speculating. But there is no doubt what it signified. Darkness is a sign in the Bible of God's presence in judgment. Remember the plague of darkness over Egypt in Exodus 10?

Exodus 10.21 speaks of a thick darkness that could be felt. The prophet Amos in Amos 8 and 9 spoke of a great day of judgment to come for God's people Israel when their sin and their rejection of him would be judged.

A day when Amos says, quotes, I will make the sun go down at noon and darkness over the earth in broad daylight. There's no doubt that this is a dark day for Israel.

The day they delivered up the Messiah, the Son of God, to death. The darkness here speaks of God's judgment. But you know there's more than that. You see how the focus in this whole section here is on Jesus' words on the cross.

Do you see that? Well, if it's dark, of course you can't see, can you? But you can listen. And Matthew's saying to us, listen, listen to Jesus Christ. Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.

[10 : 44] What does that mean? Well, we're not left in the dark hour, but given a clear explanation. It means that the darkness of judgment is not just upon Israel for her rejection of the Messiah.

It means that the judgment of utter darkness is on Jesus himself. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And once again, we have a direct quotation from Psalm 22, don't we?

It speaks of utter rejection and forsakenness of the man of God by God. Now, many people have tried to explain this away because it seems impossible that God the Father could forsake his Son, the one in whom he's well pleased.

And in one sense, it is impossible, it's unthinkable, and yet, unless Jesus is utterly confused and mistaken and wrong, that is exactly what we see in the crucifixion.

It would be impossible for God the Son to die, to be killed, unless God had given him up to be crucified. And that's exactly what Jesus confirms by his words.

[11 : 58] One writer says, this is the most mysterious enigma of biblical revelation. And yet, it is entirely consistent with everything Jesus has taught about his death as a death for sins.

He became a curse. This is Galatians 3. He became sin. This is Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21. This is the fulfillment that we're seeing of the agony that Jesus anticipated in Gethsemane.

It explains the agony of Gethsemane. And yet, it supersedes that, even that dreadful experience. It supersedes it infinitely.

It is a real abandonment of Jesus by the Father. He is utterly forsaken in the separation, in the darkness, in the darkness of sheer hell.

This is the darkness of real spiritual death. As he hung on the cross in physical agony, it was a far greater agony that Jesus experienced.

[13 : 06] The agony of utter abandonment by his Father. The Father really did turn his face away from his beloved Son, as the hymn says, because he became sin.

He became a curse for us. And therefore, the judgment of God became real and terrible in his experience. He experienced hell, the judgment of hell, before judgment day.

And the agonized cry speaks of the darkness of that real spiritual death. As the Creed says, he descended into hell.

And his cry, why, it's not a cry of ignorance in the sense that he was looking for an intellectual answer. Jesus knew the answer. That's why he agonized in Gethsemane.

No, it was a cry of agonized dereliction. A cry that gave evidence of the awfulness of the judgment that was upon him.

[14 : 10] That was the real reason for his cry. It was true and real in his experience. He became sin. He was the scapegoat. He was the one set out to wander in the darkness and the wilderness, absolutely outside the orbit of God's people and of God himself.

outside the whole universe of life itself. And for Jesus there was darkness, utter darkness, no light at all.

A loss of all sense of conscious communion with the Father. Even in Gethsemane he'd been able to pray my Father, but here he can't even call him Father.

It's only my God. And yet that is evidence that even in the darkness, the despair of judgment, Jesus still has faith.

He's still his God. Even though he is the God who has turned his face away, he obeys his Father. He is faithful to his Father right to the end, even in the deepest darkness.

[15 : 19] And his darkness of dereliction is witnessed by the bystanders. They only add to the darkness, of course, the darkness of total misunderstanding and mockery.

He's calling Elijah, they say. The Jews had a belief that Elijah would appear to save the faithful in their hour of need. He needs a saviour. That's what they're saying.

Sell them off a drink, perhaps to give help. But others continue to mock. Wait and see if Elijah will come to the likes of him. But no, they're totally wrong.

They're in the dark. He is the saviour from sin. And yet he's mistreated and mocked even in his darkness of dereliction.

But they are witnesses of the agony, of the real and terrible darkness, of the experience, of utter separation from God, of the one who became sin, who became a curse.

[16 : 21] He descended into hell. And yet there was one more cry. Verse 50. Matthew doesn't record his words as John does.

It is finished. It is accomplished for the words. Matthew doesn't record the words, but he makes the same point. He tells us not that Jesus lapsed into unconsciousness.

No. In full consciousness he cried out and yielded himself up to death. It's a cry of faith. It's a cry of triumph and of accomplishment. It's not a cry of despair.

Matthew's plain. Jesus is yielding up his life despite the darkness of dereliction and of desolation and of utter spiritual death and separation from God.

And he's doing it in order to accomplish the salvation of those he came to save. He came to save his people from their sins and he endured the darkness of spiritual death for them.

[17 : 24] And it was witness. They heard the cry and misunderstood it totally. Who can comprehend the death of the horror of that darkness?

But Matthew's also determined, isn't he, to see that we see clearly that Jesus endured not only the darkness of desolation and spiritual death but secondly the darkness of death as a real and physical death.

That's the point of verses 55 to 61. Once he has been crucified on the cross Matthew records that Jesus truly was dead and buried as the creed says.

And that fact is witnessed by Joseph who buries Jesus and by the many women that verse 55 tells us were around the cross and now verse 61 says are watching the ceiling of the tomb the two Marys watching the whole scene.

There's no mistaking Jesus' last cry. It was a cry of real physical death. There's no mistaking the reality of a dead body as evidence. Jewish custom wouldn't allow a corpse to remain in view on the Sabbath the next day.

[18 : 37] That's why Joseph goes to Pilate says verse 57 in the evening notice in the gathering darkness. The Romans couldn't care of course they would leave bodies on the cross for days as a deterrent.

But of course Pilate had a bad conscience about this body didn't he? Perhaps that's why he let his body cool. We're told that that would never normally be done in a case of treason as Jesus had been accused of.

But in verse 58 Joseph gets the body notice a body dead. In Mark's account we're told Pilate made absolutely sure that Jesus was dead first.

There were no mistakes here. And this man Joseph attends for the burial. It's interesting Matthew alone tells us he's a rich man. Once again he's reminding us of the Old Testament scriptures that Jesus died in accordance with the scriptures.

Isaiah 53 he's quoted from so much. Verse 9 says he made his grave with the wicked that is he had a criminal's burial on his own not with others and with a rich man in his death.

[19 : 48] Though he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth. He's laid in a new tomb says verse 60 a great stone seals the tomb in verse 61 the women who see it all are watching the tomb.

There's no mistake is there? This is the darkness of real death. There's darkness at midday on the cross the darkness of dereliction the agony the forsakenness the chill horror of spiritual death.

He descended into hell that's clear and now there's darkness at evening amid the enclosing night and alone and enshrouded in the cold dank darkness of bodily death the stone seals the tomb in utter darkness He was crucified dead and buried.

And the witnesses this time are not mocking but mourning and ministering to Him in His death. And yet still in a way there's darkness and misunderstanding isn't there? He needs servants they're saying to tend His body.

But no says Matthew He is the servant. He shall make many to be counted righteous He shall bear their iniquity that's what the prophet said.

[21 : 08] The Son of Man came not to be served even in death but to give His life as a ransom for many. To give His life He yielded up His Spirit says Matthew in verse 50.

And you see friends that brings us out of the darkness into the light doesn't it? into the very center of Matthew's message in verses 51 to 54 where He leaves behind the darkness of death and shows us in the midst of it the light of life.

Brings us to the light that shines forth in dazzling brightness around and amid the deepest darkness of the cross. In verse 51 Matthew shouts look behold well how can you look in the dark?

Well you can't of course. That's His point. Darkness has been banished. Light has come now you can see. You were told the darkness was from the sixth hour to the ninth hour but at the ninth hour Jesus cries out the first time and then the final time and the implication is from Matthew light has returned.

That's why in verse 57 we're told that evening comes well it got dark again in the evening. So clearly between the ninth hour three o'clock and sunset it had got light again.

[22 : 37] And certainly Matthew's words in verses 51 to 54 are filled with the light of glory. This is the explanation of Jesus' second cry.

Not now words in the darkness but mighty signs in the light of day that all can see. They speak of the accomplishment of Jesus' death on the cross. two great signs from heaven shine light into the darkness.

They interpret with all the authority of almighty God the meaning the achievement of the death of Christ. The curtain of the temple is torn in two notice from top to bottom from heaven to earth and the tombs are opened and the dead are raised to life.

Two great signs. What do they mean? Well, says Matthew, Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

This is what the scriptures promise. This is what all the law and the prophets until John the Baptist were looking for. And this is what Jesus came to fulfill. You see the temple curtain it speaks of restoration.

[23 : 52] Restoration of relationship between God and man accomplished from God's side by God's act in the cross. As you know the curtain was part of the temple it separated the holy of holies the innermost part of the temple from the world of men outside.

No one could enter. Only the high priest and only once a year on the day of atonement and only with the blood of bulls and goats as sacrifices to make atonement for the sin of the people.

Entrance at any other time for any other reason or entrance without that sacrifice meant immediate death. And the curtain you see was the barrier symbolizing the utter separation of God from sinful people.

People couldn't enter and only sacrifices again and again and again and again. Only that could keep the people of God alive even outside the holy place anywhere near the presence of God.

That's what the tabernacle symbolism meant. Hebrews chapter 9 tells us that by this symbolism the Holy Spirit was indicating that the way into God's intimate presence was not yet open.

[25 : 09] There's estrangement, there's separation from God because of sin. The tabernacle and the temple represented the place where God dwelt on earth. It was a reminder of the Garden of Eden, God's dwelling place where once upon a time man did dwell in the intimate presence of God but he was banished.

The gate was closed and it was barred with the sword of the angel. In the tabernacle and in the temple by God's grace he drew near and he dwelt near his people but even at the end of the exodus when the tabernacle was finished and God's presence in glory came to dwell on it right from the very beginning.

Not even Moses could enter because of the fierce glory of God's holiness. The curtain represents the barrier, the broken relationship, the distance of God from sin and from his people.

But now the temple curtain is torn down from top to bottom, from heaven to earth. As Hebrews 10 verse 9 inputs it, we are enabled now as sinful beings to enter the most 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, it's a sign of restoration, of spiritual life, of access to God in his presence. It's the gate of Eden being reopened, it's darkness defeated and Eden restored as we sing.

[26 : 43] heaven and earth reunited forever and forever in the very moment of the death of Jesus Christ for sins. He tasted death as dereliction, as the agonizing separation of God.

He tasted hell that we might taste again of the tree of life and the infinite presence of God. Look, says Matthew, behold, all things are new.

The old covenant with its sacrifices and its temple and its barrier, it's finished, it's gone, it's obsolete. Because the new covenant, the eternal covenant is sealed forever in his blood.

There is restoration in heaven and earth. And therefore, there is also resurrection. resurrection. Verse 52, the theological earthquake, if you like, of the birth of the new age, causes an earthquake that reverses the curse of death itself.

The tombs are opened and the dead are raised. Matthew says that all of this was the result of Jesus' death itself. I think the most natural way to read this is as the English Standard Version has it, with a full stop after the tombs also were opened.

[28 : 12] In other words, it was after the resurrection of Jesus that the bodies actually appeared to people and were witnesses in Jerusalem. But it was at the very moment of Jesus' death that the hold of the tombs was broken.

The death of death in the death of Christ. That's what Matthew is telling us. As C.S. Lewis put it so remarkably and memorably in Narnia, do you remember? When Aslan explains what has happened in his death on the stone table, it's death working backwards, he says.

The prisoners are set free from bondage to sin and death itself because heaven and earth are reunited. Therefore, body and souls are reunited. Do you remember the curse at the beginning?

To dust you will return. But the death of Jesus reverses that curse. You see, Matthew is saying it so clearly to us. Three times in verses 60 and 61, Jesus is laid in the tomb.

The stone seals the tomb. The women look at the tomb. But at the very moment of his death in verse 52, the tombs are rent asunder.

[29 : 24] They're open. Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, abolished death and brought life and immortality to life in the gospel. For all the saints, for all of those who from ancient days were longing for that great day and, my friends, for every believer in the world who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

For you also, he has abolished death. Just listen. Just listen to the promise way back in Isaiah chapter 25 and chapter 26.

Listen to these words. He will swallow up death on this mountain. The covering that is cast over all the peoples, the veil that is spread over all the nations, he will swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away all tears from all faces.

And this, your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy for your dew is a dew of light and the earth will give birth to your dead.

And this sign, this sign of real resurrected believers is just a foretaste of the great resurrection of all the saints forever when Jesus comes to reign.

- [30 : 50] Christ himself, says Paul, the first fruits, and then at his coming all who belong to Christ. But it's made certain, it's accomplished, it's assured in the very moment of Jesus' death. Because in his death is the death of death. He has opened the tombs. He's abolished death and brought life and immortality to light in the gospel.
- Death is working backwards. Friends, I hope you can see the glory of that reality. Can you see the difference that it makes in the world?
- One of you was just telling me that this week you've had to go to a humanist funeral. What a bleak and what a devastating occasion it was. Grief with no hope.
- When the utter despair, cold and lightless corpses being laid into the dust, a lifetime of joy and love and belonging and meaning, robbed by the jaws of death, utter darkness, an inconsolable grief.
- [32 : 01] But how different for those of us who see the truth. Luke says that you behold light, life and immortality, heaven and earth reunited, body and soul reunited forever in resurrection life.
- That's the explanation of Jesus' cry of death. It's restoration to the universe, restored relationships with heaven and earth forever. restored spiritual life.
- And it's resurrection of the body, bodily life restored forever. And Matthew tells us most wonderfully, it's revelation.
- Revelation of the glory of God to the world in all its fullness. It's as though light now shines into the most holy place and reveals everything.
- The curtain, the veil, into the very heart of God is flung open in the cross of Jesus Christ and God is made known to the world and he is the God of absolute holiness who cannot look upon sin.
- [33 : 06] He is the God of absolute justice before whom the whole world is guilty before him. Guilty before the tablets of the stone of his eternal law that are at the heart of the temple that accuse all flesh.
- he is these things but in the cross we also see that he is the God of absolute love and his love is revealed in that great act of love.
- You know that the New Testament always speaks of God's love for us in the past tense. He loved us because it means that his love was in that great act of love in the cross.
- Ephesians 5 2, Christ loved us. And gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Galatians 2 20, the Son of God loved me, says Paul, and gave himself for me.
- That is the revelation of God. The revelation of God to the world. Here in the midst of the cross of Christ crucified and here alone the blind and scornful and sinful human beings walking in the darkness of sin and death have their eyes opened to see the light of life.
- [34 : 24] And again do you see Matthew records for us witnesses. Witnesses of Christ crucified and this time there is no darkness, no misunderstanding, no confusion, revelation leads to recognition and response.
- Verse 54 in many ways is the climax of Matthew's whole message. The Roman centurion, the Gentile, the pagan and all those pagan Romans with him.
- When they saw what took place, the revelation of God's judgment and his mercy, his weakness and his power, his death at work's life, when they saw they were filled with awe and said truly this was the Son of God.
- salvation. Because in Christ crucified is the restoration of heaven and earth, relationship with God restored.

In Christ crucified is the resurrection of the body, death working backwards forever. And in Christ crucified is the revelation that shines the light of life into the darkest, dearest, pagan souls.

[35 : 37] that's Matthew's message, that's his gospel. It's in the darkness of the cross that the light of life is to be found and only in the darkness of the cross.

And that's why he and Paul and all the other apostles preach Christ crucified and nothing else. However scandalous to the world, however offensive to the world, that's their gospel and that's our gospel.

friends, have confidence in the gospel of the cross. It's in the darkness of this awful message that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ shines into hostile pagan hearts to bring them the recognition of the one true God and relationship with the one true God.

This message will always seem like foolishness to the world. It will always be a scandal to the world, scorned by the world. But remember the centurion.

Remember that the foolishness of God is wiser and stronger than men. And remember that it pleased God through the folly and the scandal of this message to save those who believe.

[36 : 57] It's the gospel of Christ crucified that opens heaven, that restores hostile pagans to fellowship with God. And friends, if these hardened, hostile, pagan enemies can be touched by the cross of Christ, so can your friends and your family and your workmates.

But only the gospel of Christ crucified has that power. power over the world. And it's the gospel of Christ crucified that opens the graves and restores the bodies of the saints forever.

What a comfort that is for all of us, isn't it? Some of us for whom the grave is an open wound, an ever-present running sore in our lives.

only the gospel of the cross has power over the grave. But it does have that power. The graves were open and the dead were raised.

Our Savior, Christ Jesus, abolished death and brought life and immortality to life through the gospel, the gospel of the cross.

[38 : 14] 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 and the tombs also were opened.

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.

We preach Christ crucified. A stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called both Jews and priests, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Amen. May we rejoice always in the gospel of Christ crucified.

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[39 : 53] going to esse world's going to happen.