UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS

Matthew 27:32-54

The cross, the cross of Jesus Christ -- Alexander McLaren, a prominent Scottish preacher in the 19th Century said this: “The cross is the center of the world’s history; the incarnation of Christ and the crucifixion of our Lord are the pivot round which all the events of the ages revolve.” Paul, the apostle, declared to the Corinthians: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Cor 2:2). Paul said this to the Galatians: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal 6:14). Peter proclaimed, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the [cross], that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Pet 2:24) The writer of Hebrews tells us: “looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb 12:2)

Today I would like for us to take a closer look at the cross. Not that I am necessarily going to tell you anything you don’t already know. But sometimes it’s good for us to be reminded of the significance of the cross. As we pick up the narrative in Matthew Chapter 27, Jesus has already been tried and convicted in a mock trial. He’s been handed over to the Romans for execution. He’s been beaten and scourged and so He’s physically very weak and now He is being forced to carry His own cross to the place of crucifixion, just outside the city gates. He’s exhausted and unable to continue...

READ Matthew 27:32-37

It’s 9 AM when Jesus is nailed to the cross. Matthew spares us all the gory details. Suffice it to say that Roman crucifixion was a horrible means of putting someone to death. It was a slow, agonizing death. It was not unusual for a condemned criminal to take several days to die. Not only was there the excruciating pain of having your hands and feet nailed to the cross but the writer of Hebrews reminds us of the shame involved (v 35 dividing His garments, Jesus and the two thieves hang naked on the cross). It’s an awful scene and not one we like to think about. And yet Jesus willingly went through it for us. As Paul reminds us in Philippians, “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Every time I revisit the scene of the crucifixion the thought overwhelms me that Jesus would do this for me!

Comment on the charge against Jesus, that He was the King of the Jews. Jesus never actually made this claim. Matthew points to Jesus as the Messiah King. Jesus was always talking about His coming kingdom which would not be of this world (the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven). The Jewish leaders argued with Pilate about the wording. How appropriate that it is what they posted on the cross!

READ Matthew 27:38-44

From 9 AM to noon, for 3 hours this is what’s going on. Jesus is being mocked and cursed by the two robbers (one of them would later repent and get saved), by the Jewish religious leaders, and by those who are passing by. Matthew doesn’t record any statements made by Jesus during these first 3 hrs on the cross, but the other accounts mention 3 of them. The first is in Luke 23:34: “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” Later Jesus responds to one of the robbers who is being crucified with Him who says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Luke 23:43: “And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” The third statement recorded by Jesus is what He says to His own mother. John 19:26-27: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”

Three statements are recorded which Jesus makes in the midst of His pain, shame and suffering derision – all statements of love and grace.

I want to spend the rest of our time this morning looking at the last 3 hours on the cross, from noon to 3 PM. There are several unusual events that Matthew records taking place during this time. I believe that these events offer us spiritual insight into the significance of Jesus’ death. So let’s look at them.

READ Matthew 27:45

The first event that takes place is darkness. What time of day is it? It is from noon to 3 PM. Normally the sun would be high overhead beating down on the people of Jerusalem. So two questions immediately arise when you read this. What causes this darkness and why the darkness? Matthew doesn’t offer an answer to either question but we can learn more when we go elsewhere. There have been a lot of attempts to explain what caused the darkness – clouds, eclipse, smoke. Well, I believe that this was a supernatural act of God. God blots out the sun. Why do I say that? We can go to several passages in the Bible where God manipulates the sun for His own purposes. Joshua 10:12-13 God causes the sun to stand still. God did this so that Joshua’s forces could complete their victory before the enemy had opportunity to regroup. 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38: God causes the shadow on the stairway of Ahaz to go back ten steps, which means God caused the sun to move differently than normal. Exodus 10: one of the plagues in Egypt was darkness over all the land for 3 days. I believe God blotted out the sun while at the same time supernaturally providing light for His own people in the land of Goshen. Joel 2:31 prophecy about the coming day of the Lord: “the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood.” Revelation 6:12-17: the sixth seal is broken and the sun becomes black and the moon becomes like blood, the stars fall to the earth and the sky is split apart. So, with that said, God is powerful enough to do whatever He chooses with the sun or any other created thing. So I firmly believe that the darkness we see here was supernatural darkness caused by God.

Why darkness? Was it, like some commentaries suggest, God hiding His son’s nakedness and shame? No, simply this: darkness is always a symbol of divine judgment. And God only judges one thing – SIN. God’s fury is being unleashed on Jesus Christ because He is bearing sin, the sin of the whole world. This is God’s judgment on your sin and my sin. Remember what Peter said in 1 Peter 2:24: “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the [cross]…”

John Stott has a great quote about this: “Before we can begin to see the cross as something done for us, we have to see it as something done by us.” So **verse 45, this darkness is the wrath of God against sin, our sins**.

READ Matthew 27:46-49

The second event we see is the departure of God. Jesus is crying out, He’s screaming in a loud voice the words of Psalm 22, which is a prophecy: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The Father is turning His back on His Son! One of the great theological questions is how is it possible for the Father and Son, who are by nature one, now separated? It’s a mystery. We don’t know.

Of course the crowd’s response is to mock Jesus. They say a bunch of silly things simply to poke fun at Jesus. What we need to focus on here is not their stupidity but the gut-wrenching words of our Lord – why have You forsaken Me? By the way I mentioned that these are words from Psalm 22. Well, later in that psalm we read these words: “Yet Thou art holy.” That’s why God had to turn away. Because He is holy and a holy God cannot look upon sin. Habakkuk 1:13 tells us, “Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor.”

The fact that God turns away and Jesus feels the weight of being abandoned is proof that Jesus did indeed become sin. Jesus died on the cross in our place, our substitute. That should have been me on the cross paying the price for my own sin. Jesus took my place. What an overwhelming thought! So, here, **verse 46, we see the holiness of God in turning away from sin, our sins, being born in the body of Jesus**.

READ Matthew 27:50

Remember I said earlier that death by crucifixion was a slow process that could be drawn out over several days? But Jesus yields up His own spirit after just 6 hours. Why? Because His mission was complete. In John 19:30 He cries out, “It is finished!” In Luke 23:46 Jesus is heard speaking His final words to His heavenly Father: “‘Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit.’ And having said this He breathed His last.”

By the way the Greek word for “yielded” in v 50 is *aphiemi* (af-EE'-ay-mee), which means, “to send away.” Jesus literally sends His own spirit away. Jesus’ own words in Matthew 20:28, speaking of Himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Jesus in a great act of love, mercy and grace gave His life as a ransom for you and for me. In John Chapter 10 Jesus talks about how He is the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. He says, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” (John 10:17-18) Jesus was not the victim of the Jewish leaders who wanted Him dead. **So in v 50 Jesus willingly lays down His life. Why? Because He loves us.**

READ Matthew 27:51a

Right in the middle of the sacrificing of all those Passover lambs and goats, in the temple courtyard, shortly after 3 PM the veil of the temple, the large curtain that separated the people from the holy of holies is ripped in two from top to bottom. It’s from the top down. God does it. The holy of holies, which represents for the Jewish nation the presence of God Himself is exposed.

This is what the Ryrie Study Bible says about the veil of the temple: “Josephus reported that the veil was 4 inches thick, was renewed every year, and that horses tied to each side could not pull it apart. It barred all but the High Priest from the presence of God, but when it was torn in two at the death of Jesus of Nazareth, access to God was made available to all who come through Him.”

Jesus’ death on the cross opens the way to God. No more sacrifices needed. No more priests required. No more veil. Hebrews 10 says, “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus… let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.” (v 19 and 22) So, **verse 51, the curtain of the temple torn in two provides you and me with access to God**.

READ Matthew 27:51b

The earth shakes and rocks are split. Here we have God’s preview of the coming judgment. Isaiah provides us with a vivid description of the coming day of the Lord, coming judgment: “Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.” (Isaiah 13:13). A few chapters later Isaiah says, “The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken.” What is it that God will judge the world for at the end, just before Christ returns to rule and reign? For rejecting His Son and what He did. Jesus has just completed His redemptive work on the cross. Satan’s head has just been crushed. I believe what we see here in **verse 51 is a preview, a warning to all, of what is to come, of God’s judgment on a world who rejects His son**.

READ Matthew 27:52-53

Notice this takes place, v53, “after His resurrection” (Jesus). This is significant because Paul says “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep [have died].” (1 Cor 15:20). So Jesus was raised first and then there is this preview of a literal resurrection of the dead. Here we see many what I believe to be Old Testament saints coming out of their tombs and walking around at least for a short time in their resurrected bodies. They’re not a bunch of scary zombie-like figures in grave clothes. It says here they went into Jerusalem and appeared to many. Matthew is the only one of the gospel writers who mentions this event. So we don’t know any more than what we read here. This is a miraculous raising up of the dead, just like Jesus’ resurrection. And I believe that this offers us a preview of our own bodily resurrection some day – a literal, physical bodily resurrection. Death will be defeated and as Paul says in 1 Cor 15: “The dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” (v 52-53)

**So here in verses 52-53 we see a hope of the resurrection, of our own resurrection one day.**

READ Matthew 27:54

This Gentile, pagan unbeliever having witnessed all of these events makes a declaration, recorded by Matthew for the ages: “Truly this was the Son of God!” Even the Roman centurion recognizes who is hanging on the cross. And as believers we too recognize that the very Son of God is the One who died on the cross for our sins at Calvary. I want us to close by singing that great hymn, “AT CALVARY”

[the word “Calvary” is not mentioned in the Bible. It comes from the Latin term *Calvariæ Locus* , literally “place of the skull,” speaking of Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified.