

Saviour:
Saviour in His Death
Matthew 27:45-54

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April 9, 2017

Text Introduction: For the last several weeks, we have walked our way through God’s plan of redemption. We have stopped at major points to emphasize that salvation did not begin at the cross. Salvation began at creation. Through periods of rebellion throughout the era of the Old Testament, we continue to see God’s intention to redeem people to Himself.

His passionate pursuit of us that calls us to relationship started at creation, and we continue to see it in the fall. We see this continued rebellion throughout the Old Testament as the story of Israel as a nation unfolds. The prophets of the Old Testament begin to point toward the Messiah coming—a Saviour. Most people heard this prophecy of a Saviour as a political savior rather than a spiritual Saviour. They missed that His purpose in coming was to be the One who would come to take away our greatest problem of all—our sin.

In the last two weeks, we have examined the subject of *Saviour* through the birth of Jesus and the life of Jesus. Today, on this Sunday before Easter, we have come to this culminating and obvious point that He ultimately is Saviour in His death.

Text: ⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over the whole land. ⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “*Elí, Elí, Iemá sabachtháni?*” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

⁴⁷ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling for Elijah!”

⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, fixed it on a reed, and offered Him a drink. ⁴⁹ But the rest said, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to save Him!”

⁵⁰ Jesus shouted again with a loud voice and gave up His spirit. ⁵¹ Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was split in two from top to bottom; the earth quaked and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³ And they came out of the tombs after His resurrection, entered the holy city, and appeared to many.

⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they were terrified and said, “This man really was God’s Son!”

Introduction: I rarely get excited about movies. In fact, I can’t even tell you the last movie I saw. But, I am excited about the movie that depicts the story of Lee and Leslie Strobel. Lee was an award winning journalist in the early 1980’s. Everything was going great in his job at the *Chicago Tribune*. He had been recently promoted to Chief Legal Editor. But, Lee had no reason for celebration because his marriage was a mess. His wife Leslie’s new found faith in Jesus was too much for the atheist Lee to take. So, he set out to use his investigative reporting skills to debunk every claim of Christianity. As he would later write in *The Case for Christ* his investigation did not lead him to debunk the claims of Christianity at all, but

instead, led him to place his own faith in Christ. He has written to a whole generation now regarding *The Case for Christ*.

I am convinced that any person who sets out to honestly and thoroughly study the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will always arrive at that same point. Sometimes the conclusions hits the person smack in the face as in the case of the Roman centurion who carried out the crucifixion of Jesus. We see that in our text today. In fact, what else do we see in this text today? Let me point out 4 remarkable features of the death of Jesus.

The Solitude Assumed at His Death

In essence, what I am attempting to describe first in this scene revolves around the question:

What is the significance of "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"

Several things should be noted about Jesus' cry from the cross. First of all, we could conclude that Jesus was simply quoting Scripture. He was quoting Psalm 22. In Jesus, we have a wonderful example of the power and importance of Scripture in the most demanding moments of life. The most familiar example of this is in the beginning of Jesus' ministry as He is tempted in the wilderness. Three times Jesus quoted the Old Testament Scripture as he faced the temptation of Satan. Though Psalm 22 starts off as a prayer of suffering, the conclusion of the Psalm is that this is a Psalm of praise. Might Jesus be doing the same here?

In addition, I think the spiritual agony that Jesus faced is most clear. Remember the commentary from 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

I believe this is the cry of the cross because this is how Jesus felt. That's how sin makes us feel isn't it?

The Significance Attached to His Death

What is the significance of He "gave up His Spirit?"

You may remember that several years ago when Mel Gibson's *Passion of Christ* was such a big hit that there was quite a controversy over the film being anti-Semitic. People were afraid that many would conclude that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus and thus there would be a backlash of anti-Semitism. However, Matthew's note that He "gave up His Spirit," reminds us that the Jews did not kill Christ. Neither did the Romans kill Jesus. Neither did Pilate. Neither did Judas who betrayed Him.

In fact, though Jesus had already been handed over by Judas, Annas and Caiaphas (Jewish authorities), and Pilate, "it wasn't over until Jesus said it was over." Yogi Berra might have said, "It ain't over 'til it's over," but Jesus said, "It isn't over until I say it's over." Remember the text indicates that "He gave up His Spirit."

John 10:18 "No one has taken it (my life) away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."

What a remarkable feature of the cross. Jesus is in full control. When He was arrested, Jesus told His disciples (Peter mainly, who had nearly taken the head off of the one who seized Him), "Put your sword back in your place...Or do you think that I cannot call on My Father, and He will provide Me at once with more than 12 legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53)

The Signs Accompanying His Death

What is the significance of the 4 miracles that occurred at His Death?

- **Darkness in Daytime**

Speculation abounds as to the exact reason for the darkness. Some see it as God's judgment on sin or God's judgment on those carrying out the crucifixion. I would rather not speculate at this point, but rather see the daytime darkness in a package with the other miracles of this passage. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we see a intermingling of the miracles of Jesus with the message of Jesus.

God uses these miracles to make an announcement. We see this in other places that could be referred to as a Divine moment. In Exodus 10, the Bible describes that the ninth plague was total darkness for three days. Right before the plague of death, which is the tenth plague, is the plague of darkness. God is announcing through darkness, "I'm up to something.

More important than this is what we read in Amos 8:9-10,

"9 " And it shall come to pass in that day," says the Lord GOD,
" That I will make the sun go down at noon,
And I will darken the earth in broad daylight;
10 I will turn your feasts into mourning,
And all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on every waist,
And baldness on every head;
I will make it like mourning for an only son,
And its end like a bitter day.

So, this is Old Testament prophecy fulfillment.

The darkness symbolizes that this is a defining moment in human history. All throughout Scripture, evil and sin are referred to in terms of darkness. Good and righteousness are referred to in terms of light. The darkness of verse 45 is linked to the declaration of verse 46. Christ took upon Himself the sin of the whole world—at that moment all sin past, present, and future. No wonder the sky grew dark!

- **Curtain**

The veil in the temple was a barrier. The first veil kept non-Jews from entering the inner courts. The second veil kept all, except the most High Priest, and this only once a year, into the Holiest of Holy Places. Sin is our barrier, but at the tearing of Christ's flesh on the cross, the Temple Veil miraculously tore apart as well, thus symbolizing the removal of the barrier.

Another thing I see in this tearing of the veil is the reminder that salvation is God's idea, not our idea. Some have remarked that the Gospel writers were sure to remark that the veil was torn from top to bottom. Perhaps, this imagery is symbolic of God from Heaven ripping down the curtain. God initiates our salvation.

The temple being torn dramatically announces that access to God is open to all.

Through the veil, I am reminded that Jesus is the only way to salvation. The simultaneous tearing of the veil with His death announces that we gain access to God only through the cross.

- Earthquake

I believe that this "splitting of the rocks" points back to a statement Jesus made to the Pharisees as He was welcomed into Jerusalem on the Sunday before that Friday.

Luke provides the details of the entry into Jerusalem. *36And as he went, they spread their clothes in the way. 37And when he was come nigh, even now at the descent of the mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen; 38Saying, Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest. 39And some of the Pharisees from among the multitude said unto him, Master, rebuke thy disciples. 40And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.*

When we collaborate the accounts from Matthew and Luke, we find an interesting detail. "If these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out." At the cross, we find the disciples at their worst. I remind you that it is not just Judas that betrayed Jesus. Likewise, it is not just Peter that denied Jesus. In one way or the other, is it not true that all of the disciples deserted Jesus? Is it not true that the "these" of Luke 19:40 did in fact become silent? So, what was the response? Matthew tells us that the stones cried out!

I give you as a hypothesis that the earthquake and the splitting of the rocks were the prophetic fulfillment of Jesus' words recorded in Luke 19. If this hypothesis is correct, then we have some certain conclusions from the earthquake. First, the earthquake establishes that Jesus is worthy to be praised. The precise reason that He is worthy to be praised was established at the cross.

Second, the earthquake establishes that Jesus will be praised. The fulfillment of this prophecy makes clear that Jesus will always be praised. The whole world may fall silent, but His name will be praised forever.

- Resurrected Bodies

The resurrection of these saints reinforces the unlimited power of God and the ultimate purpose of God. Don't forget the background. The text tells us that many accusations were being made against Jesus. Those who passed by were mocking Him. Some shouted, "Save yourself." Others called for him to come down from the cross if He really was the Son of God. Through all of this harassment, Jesus remained silent, but His answer was coming.

All of these signs point to an even greater miracle!

The Salvation Accepted at His Death

The first thing that we notice in verse 54 are the characters. As the title suggests, a centurion was commander over one hundred soldiers. He was the leader. "Those with him" suggests regular soldiers. The important thing to understand is that these soldiers were just doing a job. They had presided over countless other crucifixions. In that respect, the crucifixion of Jesus was no different than any other crucifixion. The idea is that they had no emotional attachment whatsoever to what was going on that day. That's the thing that makes this confession so amazing. They are not looking to follow Jesus. They haven't investigated Jesus' works or His words. But, when confronted with what they saw that day, they had no other choice but to exclaim, "Truly this was the son of God."

In the context of Matthew's Gospel, we should consider this confession a statement of faith. Why?

- Matthew 14:33 33 Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

Two things are noteworthy in this text. First, this is the confession of the disciples who had just witnessed Jesus walking on the water. The other very important aspect of this text is the link between the confession and worship.

- Matthew 16:16 16 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

This is an important confession because Peter recognized him as the Christ in comparison to what others were saying about Jesus.

But, then, there is more as it relates to the centurion. Luke records it this way in his Gospel.

- Luke 23:47 47 So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!"

There is that connection again between the confession and praise.

Conclusions

Most of all, we need to see some conclusions from this confession.

1. God desires that all would be saved.
 - There is no past so problematic that God will not pursue.
 - There is no heart so hard that God cannot soften.
 - There is no sin so sinful that God cannot forgive.

2. God demands a decision.

One thing we learn from the response of the soldier is that the cross of Christ demands a response. You must decide.

In Bach's oratorio, *St. Matthew's Passion*, he designed the finale to make a very specific point. The finale reflects this confession from the centurion. Here's what Bach did. He felt that it wasn't enough to reflect this confession only as the confession of the centurion. He knew that every person must be willing to make this their confession. So, instead of the line being a solo, the entire choir sings this part. In addition, in the musical score accompanying this phrase, Bach musically wrote in his name for the bass line. This was Bach's way of saying, "I believe that Jesus is the son of God." Can you put your name on this line? You must! For, God desires that all would be saved. God demands your decision today.