THE DEATH OF JESUS

Matthew 27:32–66

Key Verse: 27:46

“About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Death is almost never pleasant. For some it happens suddenly in their sleep, quietly, and no one even notices they’re gone. For others, it happens slowly, with a lot of attention, and their death seems to be a great loss. In old age death seems natural, but when it’s a younger person it seems unnatural. Often, a person’s death can seem so meaningless or useless, but in some cases it can be very meaningful. Some die for a cause, or to save someone else, and it seems so noble. But in most cases we don’t want to die, and we don’t want our loved ones to die, either. In today’s passage people witness the death of Jesus, the most significant death that ever happened. He was about 33 years old. During the past three years so many people had come to hear him and be healed by him, so he was a public figure, which made his death very visible. It also happened in the midst of a major national holiday, when so many people had gathered where it happened.

On top of that, today’s passage shows us that the death of Jesus had a number of highly unusual elements. Though he’d lived as a very religious man, Jesus was executed as a criminal. That’s weird. When most people are dying usually people have sympathy for them, but in Jesus’ case there was so much cruelty. Then there were some very strange things: total darkness for three hours, right in the middle of the day; the temple curtain torn in two; an earthquake; and the resurrection of many holy people. We see its impact on two unlikely persons: the Roman centurion, and, Joseph of Arimathea. Matthew tells us how the religious leaders were so afraid of Jesus’ death and tried to control its outcome. What does it all mean? The only words quoted from Jesus during his death were his cry in verse 46. So we want to think especially about his words. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

In verses 32–37 the main actors are the Roman soldiers. The Roman government used crucifixion as a major form of execution, especially against people rebellious against Roman rule. So these soldiers had probably crucified people many times. Jews didn’t allow crucifixion inside the holy city of Jerusalem, so it had to be done outside the city walls. The place was called Golgotha—the place of the skull. It was probably a cave area that looked like a skull, and also, a place where many human skulls of executed people lie exposed. It was a horrible place, but there was a road there where people would pass by to watch crucifixions. Usually people being crucified would have to carry their own cross through the streets of Jerusalem, but in this case, after he’d been flogged, Jesus was too weak, so the soldiers forced someone named Simon of Cyrene to do it. It was really unpleasant, but it’s likely that through this experience this man later became a Christian. Just before nailing him to the cross, the soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with gall. Maybe it was supposed to help with the pain, or more likely, the gall made it so bitter it was undrinkable, so it was like a cruel joke. Jesus tasted but then refused it. They stripped him naked, and after crucifying him they gambled for his clothing. It was a small perk of their job, to make a little money from selling the clothes of executed people. They sat down and stayed there to keep watch, making sure nobody could rescue him. And finally, they put a sign above him, to indicate his crime. It read: “THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” Supposedly this was his crime—he was claiming to be king instead of Caesar. It was the only crime they could come up with for Jesus. It was also their way of making fun of Jesus and the Jews. But it was the truth. Jesus really is the King of the Jews. In fact, the Bible says he’s the King of kings and Lord of lords. But he’s not a political king. He’s the spiritual King of all people who believe in him. He alone is worthy to be our King because he was slain to save us from our sins (1:21; Rev5:12).

What the soldiers were doing was so heartless and cruel, but even in these things the prophecies of Scripture were being fulfilled. Psalm 69:21 reads, “They put gall in my food, and gave me vinegar for my thirst.” And Psalm 22:18 reads, “They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” In both verses the psalmist is writing about the heartless cruelty of what’s being done to him, even though he’s righteous. But all these sufferings find fulfillment in Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate Righteous Sufferer. People were being so mean to him, and he was completely innocent. He wasn’t suffering for his own wrongdoings; he was suffering for our sins. He was suffering in exact fulfillment of God’s plan. So his sufferings were meaningful. The Bible tells us not to suffer because we’ve been doing wrong, but to participate in the sufferings of Christ (1Pe3:13–4:19). Even though Jesus suffered once and for all, as we follow him we get to share in his sufferings. We are rejected, humiliated, ignored and mistreated on account of our faith in him. But these sufferings are not miserable or meaningless; they are very meaningful. They are God’s plan for our lives, to mold us into the image of Jesus. They’re actually joyful sufferings. It’s hard to be mistreated, but we need to always remember that it’s a great privilege to suffer like Jesus.

In verse 37 we see that they crucify Jesus in between two rebels, in order to make him look guilty. And while he’s hanging there, passersby begin to insult him: “You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” (39,40) The religious leaders had spread this smear campaign against Jesus that he was threatening to destroy their cherished temple. Now, people were taunting Jesus to save himself and come down from the cross. They said, “…if you are the Son of God.” It was exactly what the devil had said to Jesus while tempting him in the wilderness (4:3a,6a). On the cross it really didn’t look like Jesus was the Son of God. It looked like he was nothing but a fraud, a criminal, a loser. But Jesus really was the Son of God. Even all this apparent disgrace didn’t change his identity. The same is true for us. No matter how much we may be suffering or how people may be looking at us because we follow Jesus, we need to hold onto our identity as God’s precious children because of his grace to us in Jesus.

The religious leaders then join in the mockery: “He saved others, but he can’t save himself!” (41,42a) It was so true. Jesus had saved so many others, but he refused to save himself. It was no joke; it was his life principle, and it should be ours as well. As followers of Jesus we should be known as people who save others but who do not save ourselves. It’s not just words; it’s a lifestyle. If our practical lives are all about saving ourselves, preserving our own lives, we’re not really following Jesus. But if our practical lives are all about saving others, it gives a good testimony that we’re genuine followers of Jesus. It’s a paradoxical truth of God’s work in every time and place: when we do not save ourselves, but sacrifice ourselves, God works to save many others. But if we put saving ourselves ahead of saving others, no matter what good things we may be trying to say or do, God can’t use us. We have to choose.

In verses 42b–43 the religious leaders also make fun of the fact that Jesus is now not performing any miracle. They would believe only if they saw miracles. But even their words of mockery fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 22:8. The rebels crucified with him just jumped on the bandwagon of insulting Jesus (44). In the midst of such injustice and evil, God was still working to carry out his plan.

Then God starts to show his own miracle. Look at verse 45. It was the middle of the day, from noon to 3:00PM, when the sun is at its brightest. But when Jesus was crucified, it became the darkest time. It was a preview of God’s judgment. God turned off the lights. With all our abilities and cleverness we think we can do all kinds of things, but God can bring an immediate end to it all. This mid-day darkness was similar to the plague of darkness on Egypt. During these three hours of Jesus’ crucifixion all the mocking and joking came to a stop. People got real serious. In fact they got real scared. No doubt some began wondering what they’d done. The darkness had a profound effect. When the Son of God was crucified, it was the darkest moment in human history.

At this darkest hour Jesus said something. Read verse 46. It tells us why things were so dark. It was at this time that God had placed on his Son the sins of the world. When Jesus was bearing the sin of the world in his own body, God the Father, who is holy, was turning his face from him. God was pouring out his wrath on his own precious Son on the cross. In many ways it’s so hard to understand. But it was God’s way of saving us. God was making his Son the atoning sacrifice for our sins. God was punishing his Son in our places. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” When he was forsaken by God on the cross, Jesus was taking our sins away, all our punishment and all our guilt. Because Jesus was forsaken by God on the cross, even though we’re terrible sinners, we can accept his grace and draw near to God, and God will never leave us or forsake us.

Read verse 46 again. Jesus cried out these words in a loud voice. Why? Partly it was to fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 22:1. But it was also the cry of his soul. Until now Jesus had been silent. He didn’t cry out when Judas betrayed him, or when all his disciples deserted him and fled, or when Peter denied him, or when he was flogged, or stripped naked and crucified, or insulted and mocked. He could man up and take all kinds of suffering. But when he felt God’s presence withdraw from him while bearing our sins on the cross, he felt a pain he could no longer bear. At this moment he could understand all the agonies we experience when we’re cut off from God.

Many people think living without God is so fun and so free. But living apart from God is our worst nightmare. It brings about such meaninglessness, such loneliness, such darkness in our souls. To feel so alone can make life itself too hard to bear. No amount of success or wealth or comfort or human friendships can alleviate this inner emptiness. Only when we’re reconnected to our Creator God can our souls find rest. And this can happen only when we accept what Jesus did for us on the cross. When we realize that Jesus bore the punishment of all my sins in his own body, we taste God’s forgiveness and his great love, and we realize that he’s so close, so intimate, so real. This relationship with God through his grace becomes our greatest treasure, and the meaning of our lives. When we hold onto his grace, we can be close to God anytime, anywhere.

In verses 47–49 ignorant people made fun of Jesus again. And then he died (50). What happened? Read verses 51–53. The torn temple curtain means that now sinful people can come to the Holy God directly through accepting Jesus’ grace on the cross. The earthquake and the resurrection of holy people show the power of the cross and point to Jesus’ upcoming resurrection which would break the power of death and points to the day of God’s judgment on the righteous and the wicked.

Read verse 54. This centurion had actually been crucifying Jesus. But all that he saw over those six hours completely changed his mind. People had been mocking and insulting, but he became convinced, especially through the darkness and the earthquake, that Jesus is the Son of God. There were so many spiritually blind and ignorant people at the cross. But this centurion reminds us of Jesus’ words, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (5:8).

Matthew tells us about the faithful women who were there watching (55,56). Then he tells us of another kind of miracle. Read verses 57,58. This rich man was actually a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. But he didn’t go along with their condemnation of Jesus. And now he steps forward to side with Jesus, at the risk of his whole career. Witnessing the death of Jesus made holding onto this world seem so meaningless. He gained the courage to identify himself as a follower of Jesus, even to Pilate. Read verses 59,60. When Jesus was most vulnerable, when none of his followers could do anything, this man stepped forward to do something so selfless for Jesus. It fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:12: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.” Joseph gave Jesus a burial with dignity fit for a king. He served his mangled body with his own hands. When we accept what Jesus did for us on the cross, we too can do beautiful things for him.

At the end of the passage Matthew uniquely tells us how the religious leaders tried to prevent any story of Jesus’ resurrection from spreading (62–66). But ultimately their clever plot would backfire. Even what they tried to do became further proof that Jesus really would rise from the dead.

Read verse 46 again. May God help us experience his grace personally through the death of Jesus for our sins. May God open our eyes and help us to do beautiful things for Jesus with our lives.