

Matthew 27:45-54

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to that passage that we read in Matthew chapter 27, as Matthew continues to recount for us the circumstances that surrounded the crucifixion and death of Jesus. And we pick up the account, as our reading did, from, to use the time reference that Matthew employs, from the sixth hour. Now, Jesus was crucified at the third hour, which in our timekeeping would be at nine in the morning. And the events related by Matthew in the passage that we've read and that we'll be giving thought to cover the events from the sixth hour, that would be midday through to the ninth hour, or three in the afternoon, when Jesus died. And it's that period of time that Matthew covers in these very brief verses, and that's what we'll be giving thought to this evening.

And what we're going to do is very simple. We're going to go through the account verse by verse in the order that Matthew recounts the events, and they follow a chronological order through these hours leading up to the death of Jesus. And we'll identify a number of events that are described as part of the big event, and try and draw out from them truths concerning who Jesus is, what Jesus is doing as he dies, and also how are we to respond to him. Now, these three hours that we've read on are, without doubt, the most pivotal hours in the course of human history, indeed of all history.

The cross dwarfs any other event, however transcendent it might be in the course of time. And acknowledging that to be so leads us to be conscious that it is a daunting task to even try and explore this event, the cross of Christ. An event that is at one at the same time, disturbing and magnificent, harrowing and humbling, shocking and splendid. These are all adjectives that we can use, even though they seem to be ones that would with difficulty describe the same event, but they do.

In these verses, there are seven elements of the account that I want to identify, and we'll run through them in a swift way. So, even though each of them would merit much greater consideration, the way we're going to do that this evening is not to do that, but swiftly move through the account, and identify seven elements of it, and consider each in turn. Now, as it happens, as a helix, to memory, each of them begins with the letter D. One or two of them are somewhat stretched to make it work, but most of them don't involve too much stretching. Well, let's just go through them. I won't say what they are. We'll just go through one by one, and you can identify them as we go along.

The first one will be very clear there in verse 45. From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, darkness came over all the land. So, within this period, this is the first thing that Matthew tells us about, that these three hours were marked by this darkness that came over the land. It would seem that the reference to all the land is a reference to Israel, so it wasn't a localized darkness in that sense just at Golgotha, but extended beyond. We don't know how far, but that language of all the land does seem to suggest certainly all of Israel. The question is, well, what is this darkness? How are we to explain it? First of all, the phenomenon itself, and then its significance. I think it's very clear that this is not a natural phenomenon. Even if it was a natural phenomenon, it would still be miraculous in terms of the timing of it, that it would coincide just with the death of Jesus. But on this occasion, though in theory it could have been a natural phenomenon, I don't believe that it is, or it would seem not to have been. This is not a solar eclipse. It doesn't have the characteristics of one. And the timing of it also, I think, precludes that possibility. The Passover festival, which as we know is when Jesus died, occurred during a full moon. And a solar eclipse can only occur during a new moon. That fact alone kind of precludes that possibility. What we have here, this darkness, and I don't think it surprises us to come to this conclusion, is supernatural in character. When we think of this darkness that came over the whole land, we sometimes hear that that darkness, it speaks of how the cosmos itself, creation itself, acknowledging the horror of its creator hanging on a cross. And there's an attraction to that explanation. But of course, the reality is that it's not the cosmos that is acting.

[5 : 42] It is God the Father who decrees the darkness. He who created the universe, who holds it in His hand. He is the one who decrees that at this time, to accompany these three hours that lead to the death of Jesus, darkness should come over the whole land. This is God's doing. But why? Why has God determined? Why did God act in this way? Sending darkness over the land? At one level, we might see the darkness as simply fitting, given that the horror of what is taking place, that the altogether righteous one, the one without any sin, is dying on a cross. The eternal Son of God dying at Calvary. Darkness seems a fitting accompaniment to such an occasion. And there may be something in that, that the darkness speaks of the horror of what is taking place. But I think more significantly, the darkness serves as a symbol of judgment, as it often does in the Bible. Darkness being a means of God demonstrating His judgment over His people or over those who rebel against Him. In this case, the judgment of God is resting upon sin in the person of Jesus. And so, this darkness speaks of God's judgment upon sin.

The darkness over the land. That's the first thing that we're told about by Matthew. And that perhaps is a way in which we can understand why this took place. Then there's another event in the following verse. And it is the cry of dereliction, the cry of dejection, of despair, a cry of dereliction there in verse 46, about the ninth hour. So, the darkness has been over the land for these three hours. And we're coming then to this culmination to the very death of Jesus. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice this cry of dereliction, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

It's been said, and with good reason, that these words are the most profoundly mysterious words in the entire Bible. The eternal Son of God, the one who had enjoyed eternal and uninterrupted communion with His Father, now declares, indeed He declares to God Himself that He has been abandoned by His loving Father. And the manner in which He declares it is in the form of a question. It is an experience that is altogether perplexing for Jesus. Why? My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why have you forsaken me? And there is silence from heaven. There is no reply to His question.

And these words provoke a response in the sense of, well, what is going on? How are we to understand what Jesus says? Are we to conclude that Jesus really was abandoned by His Father?

For some, that seems a conclusion that they're not willing to contemplate. And the suggestion is made that what we have here is Jesus' perception of what was happening in the darkness of His soul as He bore the sins of the world. His sense was that He had been abandoned. We can maybe relate to that. We can maybe think of experiences where we imagine that we've been abandoned by somebody, by somebody we love, and they're not there in our time of crisis. And we imagine, our sense is that we've been abandoned.

[9 : 58] But then maybe subsequently we discover that that wasn't the case. That's what we felt. If we expressed that conviction, it was honest, it was sincere, but it was mistaken. And some wonder, is this what we have here? Jesus had a sense of abandonment, but that wasn't actually what had happened. There's one who holds that view, and he expresses it very elegantly. And I'll just read the way it's expressed, not because I agree with it, but because it's expressed so well.

Now, there never was an utterance, this cry of dereliction. There never was an utterance that reveals more amazingly the distance between feeling and fact. You can see where that writer is coming from. He's saying, yes, that's what Jesus felt, but that's not the reality. How could it be that the Father would abandon His own Son when He is being so meticulously obedient in fulfilling the Father's will? It can't be. Well, is it right to say that what we have here isn't the reality of abandonment, but the sense of abandonment? Well, I don't think that is the case. Jesus really was abandoned by His Father. What He expresses, the question that He poses is an entirely legitimate question, because this is what had happened. He had been forsaken by His Father. And in posing and trying to answer the question why, we get to the very heart of what is happening on the cross. On the cross,

Jesus was bearing the sins of the world and satisfying God's righteous anger. And the scriptures often and unequivocally testify to this fact. We think of what the prophet Isaiah says in chapter 53 of that prophecy, we all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Jesus, the sin bearer. We think of how Paul expresses that same truth in different ways. In his letter to the Corinthians, in his second letter in chapter 5 and verse 21, we read, God made Him, that is Jesus, who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. God made Him who had no sin to be sin. And then Paul also, as he writes to the Galatians, he tells us that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. And in the light of this somber reality of Jesus, the sin bearer, the one upon whom the Father lays the iniquity of us all, in the light of this somber reality, the words of the prophet Habakkuk become strikingly relevant to the attitude of the Father towards his sin-bearing Son. What does Habakkuk say in the first chapter of his prophecy, in verse 13 of that chapter concerning God? Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. And see, this is what's going on. The Father cannot look on evil in the person of his Son, bearing the sin of the world. The words of the hymn that we sometimes sing capture what it is that leads to the cry of dereliction. The Father turns his face away as wounds which mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory.

The Father turns his face away. And it's because the Father turned his face away that Jesus cries out, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani. And yet, even in the midst of genuine forsakenness, Jesus clings on to his trust in God. He may not be able to cry out to God as his Father, but he can and does address God as my God. And that possessive pronoun is important. My God. I don't understand why it is. I pose the question why, but I pose the question to my God. So there is this grievous incomprehension illustrated in the question why, but side by side with this stubborn, resilient trust, my God.

The cry of dereliction. But let's move on to a third thing that we find in Matthew's account here, and that is what immediately follows, and it's the decision of those who hear that cry. Verses 48 and 49, let's see what happens next. We read there, or from verse 47, when some of those standing there heard this, that is the words that Jesus cried out, they said he's calling Elijah. And what we have here is simply a misunderstanding resulting from the fact that the words Eloi, Eloi are so similar to the words or the name Elijah. And for whatever reason, those who were witnessing came to that conclusion that this is what Jesus was doing. Without going into the reasons why they might have come to that conclusion, that's the conclusion they come to. But then what happens? What do they do? Well, in verse 48 we read immediately, one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, now leave them alone.

[15 : 57] Let's see if Elijah comes to save him. Those who hear this cry of dereliction, they have a decision to make. How will they respond to the one who cries out in this way? And also notice that their response has got to be understood in the context of the fact that these men have witnessed this supernatural darkness. So that in itself, you would imagine, would lead them to conclude that something remarkable is happening, given that this darkness has been over the land for these three hours and they've experienced it. That, you would have thought, would have helped them to see that they must take seriously what is going on. Surely it would impact on how they respond to Jesus. But what do they do?

Well, what we find in these verses is there's quite a contrast between one of them and the rest. Just to use the very language of the passage in verse 48, one of them did something, but the rest did something else. One of them, one nameless individual who was there, one of them, in some measure, we can't presume to imagine in what measure, but in some measure, one of them is moved by the suffering of Jesus and proffers this simple act of kindness. Some suggest that this is part of the mockery, but I don't see anything in the passage that would allow us to come to that conclusion.

I think it's more charitable and more reasonable to see that this one man, one of them, responds to the cry of Jesus and seeks to help in some small way by offering him this wine vinegar that he puts on a stick in order to reach the mouth, the lips of Jesus. One of them.

But the rest, they just mock. The rest cry out, leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him.

As we think of this group having a decision to make, how do we respond to this Jesus? The way they respond doesn't in some way illustrate how men and women continue to respond to Jesus.

[18 : 23] So many seek security in numbers and are content to be one of the rest. We foolishly imagine that it's good to be part of the crowd, to be part of the rest. We think there's security in being part of the rest, even if we're foolishly and tragically mistaken. But, thank God, throughout history and on this occasion, there is one, one of them, willing to stand out from the crowd, willing to be mocked himself, to be reprimanded, leave him alone. One of them willing to do that. Of course, the parallel of what happened there with today isn't an exact one. Jesus does not need our compassion, but he does call for our loyalty, even if that involves, as it will do, taking a solitary stand. And is that something that we're willing to do? Is it something that you're willing to do, to be that one and not be one of the rest, to take that stand of loyalty, even when it marks you out from the crowd with whatever consequences that might bring? The decision of those who hear. But then we move on to the next verse, and we have the death of Jesus, the death of the crucified one. In verse 50, we read, and when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. These, or this verse, relates the immediate moments before and the very moment of death. And in these moments, we're struck by what Jesus displays. And I think what he displays is three things. Certainly,

I can find three things here. He displays assurance, authority, and trust. There is, in this cry of Jesus, the assurance of mission accomplished. Now, I say that on the basis of an assumption. I'm assuming that the cry that Matthew is referring to here, when in verse 50 he says that Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, is the cry that John records for us in his account of the crucifixion, where Jesus cried out, it is finished. It seems reasonable that that is the cry that Matthew is referring to, even though he chooses not to actually quote the words. Just this morning, I was reading a comment about these words of Jesus, this final cry, it is finished. It's one word in Greek. The comment that I read, it was just this morning, was this comment, a drop of language with an ocean of meaning. And it struck me as being a vivid way of speaking about this word that Jesus cries out in a loud voice, it is finished.

And of course, there are words that do declare the assurance of Jesus that his mission has been accomplished. The mission that he had been given by the Father, he has accomplished. And so this cry of assurance, this cry of victory, you might call it, he is able to declare in a loud voice, it is finished.

So there's assurance, but there's also authority that we find in this verse. And in the very words that Matthew uses here to describe what happens, when Jesus had cried out in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit, especially that second part of the verse. He gave up his spirit. Nobody snatched it from him.

Jesus is in control. Even here on the cross, anybody looking on would have said, here is a man who has no control over his destiny. Here is a man who is crucified to a cross. He has lost all control. He is under the control of others. And yet, what we find is the reverse to be true. It is Jesus who gives up his spirit.

[22 : 35] It's not snatched from him. Indeed, throughout the passion narrative, indeed throughout his life, but very especially throughout the passion narrative, we see Jesus quietly in control. Well, here he is loudly in control. As he cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. So in this verse, we see the assurance that Jesus has of the mission that he has fulfilled, but the authority that he continues to exercise, even at the point of death. But there is also trust. He gave up his spirit. To whom did he give up his spirit? Well, he gave up his spirit to his father. Again, we are helped by the parallel accounts. We remember how Luke records for us these words of Jesus, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. He gives up his spirit, but he doesn't give it up into a vacuum. He gives up his spirit. He gives up his life into the Father's hands. And so we see that at this point, Jesus is characterized by this trust in his Father to the death of the crucified one. But let's move on to, is it the fifth event in the account? And that's the drama at the temple. The next verse, verse 51. At that moment, the moment of his death, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Drama at the temple there in

Jerusalem. And this drama declares the victory of Jesus over sin. The curtain referred to is, as I'm sure you know, the curtain that separated the holy place from the holy of holies, the most holy place.

It's an elaborately woven fabric that measured 60 feet in height and 30 feet in width. And the high priest, once a year on the day of atonement, would venture beyond that curtain into the holy of holies to intercede for the people as their mediator. And the curtain spoke of the necessary separation between a holy God and sinful men. And the priest could only go in on the basis of blood shed as a sacrifice for sin. This barrier between God and men that the curtain represented.

But as Jesus dies, our great high priest paid the ultimate and sufficient sacrifice and satisfied forever the just demands of God. So the curtain is rent in two. The very gates of heaven are flung open for sinners who are clinging to Jesus. The drama at the temple. But then Matthew continues, and we hear him describe about the dead being raised to life in the next two verses. The tombs broke open.

From the second half of verse 51, the earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs. And after Jesus' resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. It's only Matthew who relates for us this part of the story. And it is in some ways the most intriguing, the most mysterious aspect of the account. As the drama at the temple speaks of the victory of Jesus over sin and death, so the earthquake and the open tombs speak of the victory of Jesus securing new life. Whoever the holy people were, we'd love to know who they were. Maybe they were Old Testament saints that we're familiar with. We don't know. But whoever these holy people were, they certainly represented the saints of the Old Testament. And if nothing else, what this tells us, and I'm sure it tells us more, but if nothing else, it tells us or serves to confirm that the saving and life-giving efficacy of the death of Jesus

[26 : 52] Jesus extends backwards on behalf of the saints before Jesus died as it extends forwards and is efficacious for us looking back on the events. And when we read of what Matthew tells us, and he tells us so little, it's almost tantalizing. We're curious as to even the sequence of events. The earthquake strikes, the tombs break open at the moment of Jesus' death, so it would seem from what Matthew tells us. And yet the saints went into the holy city only after the resurrection, Matthew also tells us. What happened during that time between the tombs being opened and Jesus himself being raised from the grave? Or is it the case that their resurrection of these holy people coincided with Jesus his resurrection? So the tombs were open, but those inside the tombs weren't raised to life yet until

Jesus was raised to life? We don't know. Or did they wait respectfully for Jesus to be raised from the grave before they made their way into Jerusalem? We simply don't know the answers to these questions.

And what about these holy people who were raised to life? Did they die again? Did they possess resurrection bodies not subject to death? Did they ascend with Jesus into heaven? We don't know.

We don't know the answers to these questions. What we do know is that their resurrection speaks of the life-giving power of Jesus' atoning death, so that even as he dies, there is this announcement of the resurrection power intrinsic to his death. And then finally, the last aspect of the account in the passage we've read is the declaration of the centurion. Verse 54 we read, When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, surely he was the son of God. The centurion has witnessed, he's heard and seen everything. It was his job to see and hear everything. He's experienced the darkness, he's heard the words of Jesus, all of the words, not just those Matthew records, but all of them, he's heard them all. He's felt the earth tremble as Jesus dies. All of this he has been a witness to.

And as he ponders on and as he contemplates in a moment all that he has witnessed, he utters this confession that reveals the identity of Jesus. Surely he was the son of God. Surely he was the son of God. His confession, and it would seem that he was not alone, we're told of others with him, but the confession of the centurion echoes the confession of the disciples directed to Jesus when they witnessed him walking on water and calming the storm. He did in the same gospel in chapter 14.

[30 : 15] Truly you are the son of God. The same language is used by the centurion. And the confession of the centurion is couched in terms of great certainty. Truly, surely he was the son of God.

And so the centurion helps us to confirm, to reveal the identity of the one who has died there on the cross. Again, we're left perhaps curious what became of the centurion. Did he come to know and follow the one he was enabled to identify by the very spirit of God? We don't know. But we do know that we are called to make that same confession, but to make it in the present tense. Truly he is the son of God. So a number of events that Matthew records for us that revolve around or that take place in these, in this case, these final three hours, and indeed most of them in a much shorter period, right around the very death of Jesus. And each of them in their own way, helping us to know something about the one who dies and the task that he is performing, the mission he is accomplishing by his death. And in the light of all that we've been able to see, to discover, and conscious that there's so much that we haven't seen or discovered that is there to discover, as we consider in the measure that we have the death of Jesus, we're struck by the reality that his death declares his greatness. And so we appreciate, as we saw in the morning, how appropriate it was for Jesus to talk of his death as the hour when he would be glorified. Remember that to be glorified is to declare greatness concerning. And so we discover here, as we hinted at in the morning, that in his death, he is indeed glorified. His greatness is revealed in a way that had never been revealed before in ways that we've been able to see and in other ways that we've left unconsidered. Jesus on the cross, dying for sinners, dying for sinners such as you and me. All of this motivated by loyalty to his Father and love for us. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for his life, and we thank you for his death. We thank you for his atoning death in the place of sinners.

We thank you for all that he endured. We thank you that he handed over his life to death. We thank you for the forsakenness that he suffered in our place. And we thank you that when the time came, having accomplished all that he had been given to accomplish, he was able to cry out with a tone of victory, it is finished. And we thank you that that is so. The saving work that we are all so in need of, accomplished, finished, completed, and for us. So we pray that we would understand that, that we would acknowledge that, and that we would know what it is to put our trust in Jesus and in his finished work on our behalf. And we pray in his name. Amen.