



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1271
Matthew 27:45-54
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April 4, 2004

The Passion Revisited

“Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?’ that is, ‘MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?’ And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, ‘This man is calling for Elijah.’ Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. But the rest of them said, ‘Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.’ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’” (Matt. 27:45-54).

Like many of you it's been several weeks since I saw *The Passion of the Christ*. It's hard to say I enjoyed that movie, or even liked it, but I did think it was well done. I was especially glad that Jesus wasn't portrayed as a helpless victim, but rather as one who chose to offer up his life for us in obedience to his Father's will. I felt the movie portrayed the suffering of Christ in a realistic way. It certainly made me more appreciative of him and what he did for me.

But one of the things that's bothered me since I saw the movie is that when I read the gospel accounts of the death of Christ I don't see them emphasizing the gruesome details of his physical suffering. They don't ignore it, but they don't dwell on it either. There is a kind of discretion in their description of his suffering. For instance, when he was actually nailed to the

cross, they simply say, **“...and they crucified him.”** No wincing pain; no spatter of blood. Two of the gospel writers don't even single him out in this; they tell us that there were two other guys who they crucified with him. Perhaps they hadn't been beaten and scourged like Jesus, but then again maybe they had; we don't know.

I thought about that. Perhaps the gospel writers don't dwell on his physical suffering because that's not really the point. Isn't it true that lots of people have suffered in the flesh? Thursday night I watched a Frontline report of what happened in Rwanda ten years ago. 800,000 people were slaughtered, most of them with crude machetes, simply because they were Tutsus. Talk about gruesome. Lots of people suffer; lots of people suffer unjustly. I think the gospel writers knew that. You see, the really unique thing about the passion of Christ was not HOW he died but WHY he died and WHAT his death accomplished.

I thought about what it would be like if someone like me could actually go back and watch Jesus in the most intense part of suffering; in those three hours before he finally died. What would I see? What would have impressed me the most? As I look at this scene, particularly from the standpoint of Matthew's gospel, the things I would have noticed the most; the things that would have appeared to me the most startling, would not have been his suffering, but the other things; the miracles happening around him that bore witness to the meaning of his suffering, miracles that most everyone could see.

I. The miracle of darkness

The first thing I would have noticed was the darkness. I would have noticed that at noon, for three hours right through the brightest part of the day, a deep, thick blanket of black covered everything. There was no natural explanation for it. Solar eclipses don't last for three hours. Not only that, it was Passover, which was always celebrated during the time of the full moon, when an eclipse of the sun would be impossible. No,

this was a miracle; a miracle of darkness.

Some miracle! When I think of miracles, I think of joy. I think of light. I think of how Jesus turned the water into wine, transforming a boring reception into a festive party. I think of a man lame from birth, jumping in the air like a kid with a new pair of Air Jordans. I think of the look on the poor widow's face when Jesus raised her dead son and gave him back to her. Those are miracles.

This was a different kind of miracle. The kind that wakes you up in the middle of the night with pouring sweat and a racing heart. The kind of miracle you dread. In the time of Moses the Egyptians saw those kinds of miracles. They didn't call them miracles. They called them plagues. First the Nile was turned to blood, then the frogs and the gnats and the boils. Finally before the the angel of death came to visit their firstborn sons, there was the miracle of darkness. Moses said it was a thick darkness which could be felt. This darkness covering Mt. Calvary was a darkness so thick it felt like it strangled you. It was a miracle all right, but not the kind you hope for. In every culture known to man darkness has been a symbol of evil, of judgment, of separation from the light of God. Jesus once spoke of a dreaded place called "the outer darkness" where there would be **"weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (Mt. 22:13).

For three hours Jesus was swallowed up in that darkness, hidden from human eyes. The light of the world was snuffed out. It was like in an act of divine modesty God pulled the drapes around his son. We couldn't see him, but he couldn't see us either. He was alone. What made it worse was the silence. When it's dark, the human voice reaches out. "Here I am! Are you there?" But for three hours there was nothing but darkness...silence.

It wasn't until 3 p.m. that the silence was broken: **"Eli, Eli, lama, sabachthani?" "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"** At that moment, I finally would have understood. Jesus was indeed forsaken; he was experiencing the darkness of separation from God for the first time in eternity. This was more than just a human cry of loneliness; this was an expression of what was really happening. God the Father was forsaking God the Son. Why? Because God the Son was taking upon himself the sin of the whole world. Your sin and my sin became his sin.

And God, being holy, unleashed his righteous wrath upon his only Son. I would have remembered the words of Paul: **"He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf."** Then I would have known: the darkness that surrounded us mirrored the spiritual darkness into which he was plunged.

II. The miracle of the rending of the veil

But that's not all that would have stood out to me. It wasn't long after 3 p.m. that Jesus **"cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit."** Not far away, in the heart of the Holy City of Jerusalem, stood the Temple, where the Jews had worshipped since the days of Solomon. If I had been in that Temple at that moment I would have seen another miracle. I would have seen the veil of the Temple torn in two from top to bottom. I wouldn't have been the only one to see it. At the very moment Jesus died the Temple would have been bustling with priests. 3 p.m. was the time of the evening sacrifice. I would have loved seeing the look on their faces when that veil ripped in two and exposed the very place they were forbidden to see or enter. Maybe that's why we're told in the book of Acts that in the days and weeks that followed many priests became believers (6:7).

The Temple was divided up into three parts: the outer court, the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place (the Holy of Holies). Every Jew in Israel could assemble in the outer court. But only the priests could enter the the Holy Place, where they performed their various duties. And the only one allowed to enter the Most Holy Place was the high priest. Once a year, on the day of atonement, he would press beyond the veil to enter God's holy presence and offer the sacrifice as a payment for sin.

Each part of the tabernacle had a curtain or a veil which blocked off and concealed what lay behind it from those who were not allowed to enter. It was like some kind of holy "No Trespassing" sign. The veil which stood before the Holy of Holies was incredible! Upon a base of finely twisted linen were displayed the colors of blue and crimson with beautiful purple cherubim woven in. The veil was 60 feet long and 30 feet wide. It was as thick as the palm of my hand. Stories were told of needing 300 priests just to move it!

It was this wall of fabric that was ripped in two by some unseen hand at the moment of Christ's death. It was not an earthquake that caused the veil to rip apart. Any earthquake strong enough to rend the veil would have destroyed the Temple

as well. The fact that it was torn from top to bottom demonstrates that it was the hand of God.

But what did it mean? Why would the death of Jesus cause this barrier to come apart? The answer? Because it was no longer necessary. The very thing that kept us out of the Holy of Holies, our own sin, was judged on the cross. In one sense, his flesh was torn in two and the way was cleared for us to enter. The death of Christ was a death blow to the whole Temple system of worship. No need for thick curtains. No need for restricted areas for priests alone. Our great high priest, Jesus, has entered the Holy Place in heaven and offered up the perfect sacrifice, once for all. Now as the writer of Hebrews says, **“Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...”** (Heb. 10:22).

Then I would have understood something else. I would have understood one of his final cries from the cross: “It is finished!” he said. No more yearly sacrifices. The work of salvation - finished! The price of salvation - paid in full! That would have stood out to me.

III. The miracle of the tombs opening and the saints being raised up

But still that's not all that would have impressed me. The last miracles go together in cause and effect. In parallel lines, Matthew says the earth shook, the rocks were split, the tombs were opened and the saints were raised.

In California we're used to earthquakes. It's part of the deal. We get the sunshine and the beach, but we also get the earthquakes. Most of the time we just stand there and wait it out. We talk about it a bit the next day at the water cooler: “Hey, did you feel that earthquake yesterday?” No big deal. In 1989 I was excited to be at the first game of the World Series. The Giants were playing the A's in the “Bridge to Bridge” series. My friend Jeff Farrar and I were hunkered down to watch the pregame warm-ups, munching on our hot dogs, when a slow roar seemed to erupt from the bowels of the earth. At first I thought it was Jeff's stomach, but then I realized it was an earthquake! You've heard of “the wave,” right. Well, the stadium, not the fans, was doing it. It was frightening. When it stopped, there was a pregnant hush. And then news began to trickle via transistor radio—the Bay Bridge collapsed! California is sinking! The end is near!

Throughout Scripture, earthquakes are the manifestation

of God's majesty and power and judgment. When God gave his law to Moses, Mt. Sinai shook as a sign of God's holiness. Earthquakes remind us that the only fixed ground is God himself. They also remind us that the time is coming when God will shake down all the kingdoms of the earth. The writer of Hebrews reminded us, **“When God spoke from Mt. Sinai, his voice shook the earth, but now he makes another promise: ‘Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also.’ This means that the things on earth will be shaken, so that only eternal things will be left.”** (Heb. 12:26-27 NLT).

If I were there I might have wondered if this earthquake was some kind of portent of the end. You see, it wasn't just the earthquake; it's what happened as a result. The rocks were split, the tombs were opened and many dead saints were raised up. This isn't a Science Fiction novel; this isn't the “Night of the Living Dead;” this is the Bible. The amazing thing about this is that if it didn't happen, people could have easily refuted it. But it was there for everyone to see, believer and unbeliever.

If I were there I would have noticed a few things about this miracle. I would have noticed that not every dead person was raised up, but only the saints. These were probably OT believers, men and women who had put their faith in the Messiah before he even showed up in flesh and blood. I would have also noticed that though many saints were raised up, not every saint was raised up. It seems that only those in that vicinity were raised up. It also seems that though their tombs were opened for three days, these saints didn't actually come forth and enter the Holy City of Jerusalem until after the resurrection of Jesus.

Can you imagine being at the Jerusalem Cafe that day? You're sitting at the counter and some old guy and his wife comes in and sits next to you. They each order a bagel. You start to talk with him and finally you ask him his name. He introduces himself as Abraham. His wife is Sarah. You laugh and say, “Hey, that's pretty good! Abraham and Sarah. Let me guess: you have a son named Isaac.” Next thing you know you're talking with Moses and Deborah and Daniel.

If I were there I would have wondered, is this the end? Is this the resurrection at the end of the age? It turns out it wasn't, but it was a sneak preview of the end. The day

will come at the end of the age when ALL the saints will be raised up. Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 15:20, **“But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”** The miracle of the tombs opening and the saints being raised up is a sign that Jesus’ death has broken the bonds of death and inaugurated a new age that will culminate in the resurrection of his saints to eternal life. Because he died, I don’t have to fear death. When I saw those saints I would have remembered what Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”

From these miracles I would have seen that what really mattered was not HOW he died but WHY he died. He died to enter into the darkness of God’s wrath so that I wouldn’t have to. He died to open up the way for me to be able to enter his holy presence without fear of condemnation. He died to conquer death so that you and I can have hope beyond the grave.

V. The miracle of the centurion's faith

But there is one more miracle. I almost missed it. On the surface it doesn’t really look like a miracle, but it is. It’s the miracle of the centurion. If I were there he would have caught my eye. The centurion was the captain of 100 men. He would have been the veteran of many crucifixions. No amount of physical suffering would have surprised him. He’d seen it all. But this day was different. If I were there,

I would have seen him look at all these things and say, **“Truly, this was the Son of God.”** He didn’t really even know what that meant. He wasn’t a theologian. But he would have known enough to say, “Whatever this man claimed to be, I believe it. If he claimed to be God’s Son, I can believe that. Because I’ve seen a lot of deaths, but I’ve never seen anything like this.”

You see, the greatest miracle of all is when hardened, sinful people look at the cross and see not just HOW he suffered but WHY he suffered and WHO he was. He wasn’t just a good man who suffered nobly in a gruesome death he didn’t deserve. He was the Son of God. He died so my darkness could be turned to light. He died so my rejection from the Father’s holy presence could be turned to open armed acceptance. He died so my death could be turned into eternal life.

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