

Matthew 27:51-54

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[0 : 00] So, I invite you to turn with me to Matthew chapter 27. The last thing we saw last week was Christ giving up his spirit, completing his work at the cross.

And now we are left to ask, what was accomplished there? What happened? How are we to view it? And this week in Matthew chapter 27, verses 51 through 54, God is going to tell us just how we ought to view it.

So, I'm going to pray. We're going to read his, actually, I'm going to read his word. Then we'll pray. And then we will unpack it. Matthew chapter 27, beginning in verse 51.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

[1 : 17] When the centurion and those who were with him kept watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake, and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, truly, this was the son of God.

This is God's word. Let's pray. Oh, God, our Father, as we look to your word to see what your son has done for us.

We ask that you would, by your spirit, draw us to him in love. Show us who he is. Show us your heart.

Would you be glorified in these things, we pray. Amen. When you look at the cross of Christ, what do you see? What do you think of?

Well, what you see, as in most things, depends on your perspective. If you're a modern, Western, secular person, you might see a tragedy much like the death of the philosopher Socrates.

[2 : 36] Socrates was a great teacher, but he was misunderstood. And so he was opposed and then unjustly condemned to death, death by hemlock poison. You might think the cross is a lot like that.

Here is Jesus, also a great teacher, also misunderstood and opposed and unjustly condemned to death, death on a cross. And in fact, none of that is wrong.

But it's mistaken because it is incomplete. Or how might a medieval monk look at the crucifixion? Perhaps he might see in the crucifixion an example. This is how you atone for sin. So, looking to Jesus as an example, he treats himself sternly.

Denying himself the pleasures of good food, a comfortable home, of marriage. Perhaps he thinks in his head, right, in treating himself this way, his penitence will be accepted in heaven.

[3 : 40] That, too, is a mistake. The cross isn't an example of how we can atone for our sins. It's the way God himself atoned for sin.

Now, what if you were among the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council who had convinced Pilate to crucify Jesus? How would you see the cross?

His enemies had quite a day, didn't they? They got just what they wanted.

The man who represented a threat to their prominence and position was publicly shamed and destroyed. And not only that, they got to gloat over their vanquished enemy, right?

If you look back to verse 41, the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him, saying, He saved others. He cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.

[4 : 45] And now they depart Golgotha with victory in hand. Of course, that is a mistake as well.

Because from heaven, how does the Lord see it? When God Almighty looks at the cross, what does he see?

In God's eyes, the cross, not just the empty tomb, but the cross itself is victory. Now, it might not look like victory to our eyes, right?

Our secular humanists, our monk, the Sanhedrin, they don't think of it as God's victory. So, to make sure that we know what heaven thinks, God raises flags of conquest on the battlements.

He gives what one theologian called signs of victory so that we don't miss it. The first one comes in verse 51.

[6 : 07] And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

There's a book I like to read with my kids. It's called *The Garden, The Curtain, and The Cross*. Maybe some of you have seen it. There will be, they are not yet there, but there will be a couple copies of this, if you don't already have one, on the table over there at the end of the service.

This little book is a brilliant work of biblical theology. When I say biblical theology, you might be thinking, well, shouldn't all theology be biblical? biblical, and yes, and amen, right?

All our thinking about God, that's what theology is, should be in accord with the Bible. But there are different ways of expressing theology. Normally, when you think of theology, the thing you're thinking about is systematic theology.

What does the Bible say about such and such a doctrine? So when you open a volume of systematics, flip to a topic, you're going to see a summary of everything that the Bible teaches on that side.

[7 : 15] Another theological discipline is historical theology. It traces how a particular doctrine has affected the church throughout history. How did Paul's letters affect both abolitionists and slaveholders in the United States?

That's an inquiry in historical theology. Or it traces the way that the church has expressed a doctrine over time. For instance, how did the early heretics force the church, so to speak, to write the ecumenical creeds that express orthodox belief about the person and the work of Jesus Christ?

And another theological discipline is biblical theology. Rather than summarizing everything the Bible teaches on the subject, like systematic theology, it traces the story of a theme throughout the Bible.

And so it's often written like a narrative, as a story. For instance, how does sacrifice happen throughout the Bible? How does it begin?

And as God acts throughout history, with his redemptive purposes, how does he change sacrifice?

Where is it pointing?

[8 : 32] What does sacrifice mean for Christians now in the new covenant? Will there be sacrifice in heaven? Those are the questions. It's a trajectory throughout the Bible. And that beginning-to-end way of studying doctrine really resonates with me.

So often, you'll probably hear me in a sermon, just briefly, you know, like paragraph size, like here's the doctrine we're talking about today. Here's where it began. Here's how it interacts today in today's passage.

And here's where it's going. And this little book, *The Garden, the Curtain, and the Cross*, is a spectacular example of biblical theology.

Not just as a children's book, just as a book. Both the writing and the art are fantastic. And I feel like I'm just a salesman here, so I'm going to stop that.

but here's what's going on that little book the garden the curtain and the cross traces the story of the temple curtain it first appears in the temple's precursor the tabernacle as israel wandered the wilderness on the way to the promised land but the theme it represents goes back further still to the very beginning all the way to the garden the garden of eden adam and eve fell the cherubim we're going to see genesis chapter 3 barred the way back to the presence of god he drove out the man this is genesis 324 he drove out the man and at the east of the garden of eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life that cherubim is going to return to us in a moment because from the beginning of the fall of man the cherubim signaled our separation from god the way the book puts it is because of your sin you can't come in to god's presence and then we see in exodus chapter 26 as god commands the construction of the tabernacle that he puts the holy of holies the place where his presence dwells where no one may go save one person high priest and only one day a year the day of atonement he cordons off the place of his presence like this exodus chapter 26 you shall make a veil that's the curtain of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen it shall be made with cherubim cherubim skillfully worked into it the book calls them warrior angels and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy you shall put the mercy seat on the ark of the

testimony in the most holy place and that is where god's presence dwelt among them cordoned off protected by warrior aim the cherubim were there the place of god's presence was still barred the veil still represented because of your sin you can't come in to god's presence but here in matthew chapter 27 verse 51 the death of jesus results in the curtain god tears it down john calvin said this was god opening heaven god's presence in the curtain to invite those who trust in his son to approach him with familiarity that is as family charles simeon put it like this god was doing this to open for all people a free and personal access to god so they might obtain all his blessings for themselves without sacrifices and an earthly priesthood so we read in hebrews chapter 10 therefore brothers since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of jesus by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain and since we have a great priest over the house of god let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith that's how heaven looks at the cross the second sign of victory is a resurrection not christ's we're still waiting for that in in the text

[13 : 32] here we're still waiting for that but the grave could not wait it could not wait three days the tombs were open and the graves get back they're dead to life now there are a lot of things we can look at this and say like matthew could you explain a little bit more for us right he writes many bodies of the saints well how many is many who were these saints were they prominent old testament believers like would we know their names from the text of scripture or were they you know everyday folk were they recently deceased so that they still had living relatives in jerusalem to go see what what did they say when they went into the city did they go on to leave like long lives or like were they taking it we don't know there's so much he doesn't tell us they're much like lazarus the scriptures don't tell us about their lives because their experience isn't the point rather the idea that christ's death undoes death that's the point that's the point of the time of the time of the time of the time of the time of the time god declared that his son entered into the prison of death to bring out all who are held captive and these two signs combined the curtain of separation torn down the graves open right we call genesis 3 we already said you know where adam and eve disobeyed god and lost access to his presence we call that the fall what were the consequences of the fall separation from god and death and friends every difficulty that we face every difficulty that we face in this life every problem that every human being has ever had is a result of the fall one of those two things right there is evil in this world strong men oppress their citizens husbands abuse their wives racism exists we lie and steal we are selfish and god is too holy for it to be in his presence not just because like that that would offend god but also because his holiness is a consuming fire an active force evil that stands in his presence he burns it up right he said to his own people in exodus 33 you are a stiff-necked people if for a single moment i should go up among you i would consume you the curtain didn't just bar our entry to god it protected us from his holiness and the world is falling apart that's the sin part right like the death part right this world is falling apart all the time cancer and hurricanes and coven and human miscommunication creation and chiefly death creation groans under the curse and the greatest symbol that this world is broken look to my right to your left the grave the grave is the exclamation point

on the declaration this world is broken so there are two great problems in the world from which every trouble and sorrow grow there is evil sin therefore the temple curtain and this world is broken most clearly shown in grave in the grave and at the cross of jesus god gives two signs of victory hoists two flags of conquest one he has dealt with evil so the curtain of separation can fall and two he is making all things new so even the grave gives back it's dead so the curtain of the grave is dead both aspects of the fall evil and suffering sin and brokenness are undone at the cross of christ this is god's comprehensive victory what to the world looks like failure jesus dying on a roman cross what looks like the sand to the sanhedrin like jesus downfall is actually his moment of conquest the complete dismantling the reversal the undoing of the fall the fall has fallen this is victory we haven't even gotten to the resurrection we're about to sing in response today come behold the wondrous mystery christ the lord upon the tree this is the moment of the cross not the moment of the resurrection christ the lord upon the tree in the stead of ruined sinners hangs the lamb in victory do you see it do you rejoice in it do you rejoice in him oh the depth of the wisdom of the lord and let us not forget who is doing this matthew gives us a ton of emphasis that this is something god and god alone is accomplishing right look at verse 51 the earth shook and the rocks were split the earthquake is a common old testament symbol for god's activity uh psalm 77 the crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind your lightnings lighted up the world the earth trembled and shook and

That's how heaven sees it. He hoists flags that we cannot miss to proclaim, I have conquered the fall. What if I asked you, how did Satan and his angels be there?

[25 : 12] Turn with me, if you will, to Colossians chapter 2. At first glance, we might assume that the enemy would fall in line with the ruling council, right?

And see it as his victory. But we would be terribly, terribly mistaken. Colossians chapter 2, leading in verse 13. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, that's Christ, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing, triumphing over them in him.

Let's walk through that fact. How did he, verse 15, triumph over the rulers and authorities, the spiritual forces of darkness? How did he do it?

He disarmed them. How? He didn't go to battle against the enemy. Verse 14, he disarmed them when he canceled our debt in the holy courtroom of the most high God.

[26 : 46] He nailed it to his cross and made an end of it. That is how he disarmed the devil. See, Satan isn't so much a name as it is a title.

It means accuser. And now he has nothing left to accuse you with. So, Romans 8, who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? His hands are empty now. The accuser can make no accusation.

He is an impotent enemy. A declawed lion. A toothless dragon. In that moment, when Christ died for his people, Satan saw a victory.

But it was not his own. When Jesus said, it is finished, Satan realized he was finished.

[27 : 56] He can still lash out like a wounded animal with temptation and deceit and pain. But the only weapon he had that could finally harm us is gone forever.

Shattered by the cross of Christ. As these are the signs of victory. The curtain torn. Sin is dealt with. The way to God is open. The graves are open. Death is dead. The Lord of life is gone. The earth he made is shaken.

Friends, God is at work here. It's not up to us. And the enemy knows that he has been beaten. What shall we do now?

Friends, let's celebrate his victory. First, that means taking hold of it if you've never had before. Right?

[28 : 58] This is a victory. And it is a victory that he offers to share with you for free. So take hold of it.

Turn from self and sin. That's what we call repentance. And to Jesus. That's what we call faith.

Trust in him. And the victory that he has won, not your ability to stand before the king or your ability to overcome the grave as if you could, he's already made the way.

So run to him and cry for mercy. And you will receive by his hand the victory that he has already won.

We celebrate his victory by taking hold of it. We celebrate his victory in worship. Right? Every child of God can look to the cross, see God's victory and rejoice just in the beauty of it.

But then rejoice that it's now ours because he's given it to us for free. We can rejoice for what he's done for us. We can rejoice in him that this is who he is.

[30 : 13] The one who would make this sacrifice. Oh, the love of Christ. The one who is this wise. Who could conceive of this plan?

Of this victory? Save God alone. The one who is this powerful. When I die, no graves will open. But when he did, death was ended.

So let us worship with all our might. We celebrate his victory by taking hold of it in worship and by being his heralds.

Right? This message is for the whole world. What do you do with something that you love? You share it with people. Hey, did you see the game? Right? That, right? Look at verse 54 on a verse of this passage.

Who reacts? The centurion. The centurion is the guy running the show at Golgotha.

[31 : 26] At the very least, he's the one supervising this facet of the crucifixion. These three hours. Most likely, he is also the one who supervised Jesus' scourging, who ordered the crown of thorns,

who marched him to the place of the skull.

Right? This crucifixion itself would be old hat for someone who had got risen to the position of centurion. But he had never seen anything like this. A prisoner forgiving him for nailing him to the cross.

The world plunged into darkness at high noon. His death marked by an earthquake. And so he confessed like Peter did in chapter 16 that the placard above Jesus' head.

This is Jesus, king of the Jews back in verse 37, was true. That he was God's son, king of the world. So, Jewish believers are raised and a Gentile oppressor confesses the truth.

this is for the whole world. It is for you and me and it is for every person you need.

[32 : 59] That might mean that the gospel takes hold of your heart and you go to the ends of the earth to proclaim it. Friends, we would love to send more missionaries. And it might mean that you tell someone the good news this week.

Won't you? We celebrate our king's victory by taking hold of it, by worshiping, by sharing it.

And last, as we are about to turn to the communion table, so to speak, in remembrance. So, let me pray for us and then we will turn our attention the Lord's table.

Father, we praise you. We praise you for this startling victory in your son. We cannot begin to understand the glory of his sacrifice for us, but Lord, thank you that we will partake of his victory forever.

God, you are so good. Will you excite our hearts to love now and always? We pray this in Christ's name, who opened the way back to you.

[34 : 29] amen. Amen. When we come to the Lord's Supper, we think about how Jesus taught us to look at.

In Luke chapter 22, we read, he said, do this in remembrance of me. What is it that we ought to remember at the communion table?

what Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, he said, as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Now, last week's passage, the darkness prompts us to remember as we proclaim his death, to proclaim the guilt that he bore for us.

And this week's passage tells us that when we remember the cross, when we proclaim his death, we are remembering and proclaiming something else.

[35 : 48] In addition, we are proclaiming before the resurrection even happens, we are proclaiming his victory.

So, friends, let us come to these simple elements with hearts of gladness and hearts that are celebrating a victory that's been won for us before we were ever born.

Hallelujah. Now, this is the celebration, this remembrance, this proclamation of the gospel is for everyone who has repented and believed in this victorious Christ.

if that's not you yet this morning, this celebration is not for you yet. Instead of receiving these elements, we ask that you would receive Christ and I would love to talk and pray with you after we are done here today about just what that means.

But for all of us who are gathered here today to celebrate his victory, let's remember him together. I'm going to pre-open mine here.

[37 : 06] Paul says, for I received from the Lord but I also delivered it to you that the Lord on the night when he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance remembrance of me and let us remember the victory he has won. In the same way, he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. Lord, today we remember we proclaim Christ's victory on our behalf all by grace for his people.

In his selfless love, Lord, we proclaim your glory. We thank you and we pray all these things in Christ's name.

Amen.