

Two Cries and One Confession

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[0 : 00] I'm glad to see you and welcome to St. John's again. I wonder if you would pick up your Bibles and turn to Matthew 27 please.

Those verses Maddie read for us, 45 to 56, on page 834. And as you do, you know scientists have been telling us for quite a while now about the reality of black holes in space.

You know black holes which are massive stars that have exploded and collapsed in on themselves so tightly they come to tiny little points that are so dense and so massive nothing can escape, no light can escape.

Although those of you smug scientists, clever scientists will know that there are certain particles, the Hawkins particles that do escape. And the only reason we know they're there is because they have a massive gravitational effect on all those things around them.

So scientists are pretty sure that they're real and I can't say but I hope they are because they make a great illustration for Matthew 27. One of the things that's very strange about Christianity, different from every other religion, is the focus, this great focus we have on the death of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 20] No other religion has that. The death of Buddha is not relevant for Buddhism nor the death of Muhammad really for Islam. This is Matthew's Gospel, 28 chapters and something like 40% of it is given over to the death of Jesus Christ.

Because for Christians, the death of Jesus has this massive gravitational pull and power and everything that happens before is drawn into it and everything that happens after comes out of it. Even stranger about Christianity is the fact that we have four independent witnesses of the death of Jesus and none of them are all that interested in the physical suffering and agony.

So just look out of our passage in verse 35. Matthew deals with the actual crucifixion in verse 35. He starts that verse and says, That's it.

Six words in English, three words in Greek. And don't you think if you are writing this, this is the moment to go to town on people's emotions. Yeah?

[2 : 29] I mean you could really harrow people by saying they slammed them down on this piece of wood and then they nailed the spikes through their hands and their feet. And then you could talk about how they lifted them up and let them drop into the hole like this.

I mean, that would work, wouldn't it? If you wanted to make a really manipulative movie. Maybe it's already been done. I don't know.

Now the focus is never on the gruesomeness of the death. Lots of people have died gruesome deaths. The focus is always on the significance and the meaning. That is especially true for Matthew.

And we're going to look at the second half of Jesus on the cross today from verses 46 onwards. Jesus was crucified around 9 a.m. And on the first half of the cross, for those first three hours, in the first half, which you can read later on today, it's mostly ridicule and vicious taunting by the crowds, by the chief clergy, by the thieves on either side.

And then our passage, verse 45 and 56, the focus turns to Jesus himself and we get a new stage on the cross from noon till 3.

[3 : 46] And there's such a gravitational pull around this that everything that has ever existed that is evil or that is wonderful, the entire history of the world is drawn into this and spins out of this entirely changed.

And what makes the gravitational pull so overwhelmingly attractive is that it contains the unique and radical love of God. It's a holy love where Jesus is willing to die to save us.

Today is Palm Sunday and it's the start of the week that leads to the crucifixion. And in this passage, Matthew draws out the meaning of the crucifixion two very simple ways.

First, he says the lights go off. Then he says the lights come on again. So you look at verse 46, verse 45, I'm sorry, the lights go out.

What happens when lights go out? You have to listen. That's right. And what we hear is two loud cries on the cross. And then verse 51, the lights come back on.

[4 : 55] And what we see are a series of supernatural physical phenomena where creation is tearing itself apart at the power of Jesus' death. Let's look at these two things.

Two points. When the lights go out, when the lights come on. Okay? So if the lights go out for you, we're still in the first point. When the lights come on, we're in the second point. That was a weak attempt at humor.

Just want to see who's with me. So firstly, when the lights go out, verses 45 to 50. If you look down at verse 45, darkness descends on Israel, the whole land, from noon till 3 p.m.

It's completely unnatural. Cannot be explained as some physical phenomenon like an eclipse. You could say the sun is so shocked by the crime that's taking place before its face, it has to look away. But it's not just unnatural. It is supernatural. This, in the Old Testament, God promised to do this, to bring darkness on the day when he judged evil and sin.

[5 : 54] Listen to these words from the prophet Amos 700 years before. He says, On that day, declares the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will make it like the grieving for an only sun and the end of it like a bitter day. In other words, this supernatural phenomenon shows us that what's taking place on the cross has the power to tear the fabric of the cosmos completely apart.

But the point for us as readers is that when the lights go out, we listen carefully. And verses 46 to 50 are focused entirely on listening to Jesus because Jesus makes these two very loud cries.

Literally two megaphones, loud voice calls. And the first one's very, we know this, it's familiar to us. Verse 46, if you look at it, he says, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This is wonderful. Matthew tells us the word in the original Aramaic. And he tells us those words and then he translates them to bring us right into the presence of Jesus on the cross.

[7 : 12] We get to hear his words that he actually spoke are from the cross. And they are the only words that he speaks on the cross in Matthew's gospel. And although they're very familiar to all Christians, they're still shocking to hear Jesus cry out in agony.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me, left me behind and forsaken me? He doesn't call God father. He calls him God. Shockingly different from the prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane last week where he spoke to God as his father.

And there was a sense of intimacy and trust. This is a cry of desperation and agony. What he feared in the Garden is now taking place. And it's so shocking.

There are many commentators say he wasn't really forsaken by God. And the way they do it is they point out that these words are a quote from Psalm 22 verse 1.

But if you read to the end of Psalm 22 verse 1, God rescues the psalmist. So Jesus is quoting the first verse because he knows he's going to be rescued. My question is, why didn't he quote the last verse?

[8 : 21] I think we have to face the words as they are. I think better than saying Jesus was mistaken or play acting is we have to accept the fact that Jesus was actually forsaken by God the Father.

And if you've been reading Matthew's Gospel, you'll know we've been set up for this. In the very last chapter, at the last supper, he took the cup. When he'd given thanks, he gave it to them saying, drink this all of you.

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. In chapter 20, as he turns to come to Jerusalem, he says, The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Well, right back in the infancy narrative, when the angel appears to Mary and says, You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. So when Jesus cries out, My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

This is Jesus saving his people from their sins. He is taking all our guilt and all our shame into himself. And he is being punished in my place and your place.

[9 : 36] He is being separated from the Father so that we might be reconciled to the Father. He is giving his life as a ransom for many. He is pouring out his blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Now, we're taken inside the mind of Jesus just a little here. And I recognize we're standing on holy ground. And there is much about this we don't understand.

We do know from the rest of scriptures that somehow Jesus is made sin for us. That on the cross, he is under the curse of God.

And that the greatest horror and torture for Jesus is not the physical suffering, but enduring the anger and the righteous punishment of God for our sins. And I don't think we can begin to imagine what that's like.

For the eternal Son of God, who always enjoyed the glory and communion with the Father, now having the Heavenly Father opposed to him and judging him for our sins. And I think we get a small glimpse of the agony that our sins cause in God.

[10 : 45] And the dread seriousness of evil. You know, if there was any other way for us to be forgiven, don't you think God would have found it apart from giving up his only Son? The fact that he had to give his only Son shows the infinite seriousness with which he takes our decisions.

I mean, I treat sin so lightly. And we call sin by different names. We say it's weakness. Or we say mistakes were made.

Or we call it our personal brokenness. Or we want a God more like us. He doesn't care so much about sin so that he doesn't have so much to save us from. But I think it is right here, at the center of the gravitational force on the cross, that we recognize that every sin separates us from God, tears his heart apart.

And we have to ask ourselves, what kind of God is this? What kind of God is this who would give his only Son? Who cares so much about punishing evil that he finds a way to punish evil and yet not punish us.

Who gives his only Son over the horror of wrath and hell for us so that we don't have to face that righteous judgment. And I think it is the most radical form of love.

[12 : 07] It is pure. It is holy. It is righteous. Utterly dedicated to us. Willing to sacrifice himself to the complete depths. Self-sacrifice.

It's not the pale love of leniency or excuses. This is commitment and sacrifice. To endure what we deserve. To give us what we don't deserve.

And I think, and my experience as a Christian is, the more we look at that love, the more alluring and enthralling it is, the more we're drawn into the love of Jesus Christ.

And then at the end of the three hours, he cries out again, the second cry in verse 50, with a loud voice. And right at the end of verse 50, we read these words.

He cried out with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. Now, why are we told that? In the original, it's not passive. It's active.

[13 : 06] That is, Jesus is not having his life stripped away from him. He is voluntarily giving his life. He is choosing and relinquishing his life. He is still in full possession of his faculties.

He is giving himself for you. He's giving himself for me. So now, secondly, what happens when the lights come on? Verses 51 to 56.

The sun comes out again at the end of three hours. And the beginning of verse 51, as Jesus dies, the darkness disappears.

He's dead now. And it's replaced with a series of supernatural events, which show this great gravitational power of love. The curtain tears in two from top to bottom.

The earth quakes. Rocks split. Tombs are open. There's even a small resurrection, which we are going to look at. There is another preacher on staff at St. John's who's preaching tonight.

[14 : 09] And I asked him, what are you going to make of the resurrection? And he said, I'm not going to touch it. And I said, you're a chicken. I think the picture here is the whole creation itself.

It can't hold itself back from rejoicing in what Jesus has done. Now, the scientists tell us, well, they believe that black holes create new galaxies where matter is created.

And this little second section here, when the lights come on, show us something of the new creation that comes about through the death of Jesus. And Matthew begins verse 51 with his own command to us.

He says, look and see. Behold. It's an old word. But basically, it says, look, use your eyes. And as we look, the first thing that happens is the curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom, obviously,

by God.

It's the immediate effect of God's death because his sacrifice opens the way for us into the presence of God. He's taken away our sins. There's nothing that stands between us and the Heavenly Father now.

[15:19] And that curtain had designs on it. Beautifully embroidered. And it had designs from the creation story. Because the Holy of Holies were gotten.

Let me tell you, behind here, it's just a bit of a mess, really. There's a bit of a... There's nothing much. There's... I shouldn't keep going on this line. Behind the curtain in the temple was the Holy of Holies.

And the Jewish people thought of it as the Garden of Eden. That's where God himself dwells. So these creation symbols in the Garden of Eden. And it's only accessible.

You can never look in. But it's only accessible by sacrifice and atonement. You could never see it. And Jesus' death, God tears it open. And he tears open the door of heaven for us.

And what that means is we don't need any temples anymore. We don't need any priests anymore. We don't need no more altars. It's done. It's all something of the past. In Jesus Christ, we have access directly to the Father.

[16:17] And every blessing that comes from that. Communion with God. The tree of life. All the things in Genesis 1 and 2. The next thing that happens is the earth shakes.

And the rocks split. I'm giving sound effects. Not helpful. And some tombs are thrown open. And it's just to show this is bigger than one man dying.

Bigger than even the replacement of the temple. This is cosmic. And it's going to involve all of creation. And creation itself has to bear testimony for this awesome love and salvation that's happening in front of it.

That it's witnessing. The earth quakes because whenever in the Old Testament God drew near, the earth would shake because of the heaviness and weight of glory in God.

And then the rocks split open. I love this. It's like you see the beginning of the new creation. They have to react to this love. They break themselves open in worship to God, their creator.

[17:17] They were made by the Son of God. They were made for the Son of God. And here they see the Son of God dying in love for the new creation. And despite the ridicule and rejection of all those around the cross, the rocks themselves, they sing out.

They break open in praise. And then we have this very strange and amazing scene, this little resurrection. And I think this translation of the Bible, ESV, really helps us.

It separates the tomb opening from the actual resurrection. So if we look down there at verse 52, the tombs also were open, full stop. I think that happened with the earthquake.

Then we have, I heard a woman this week talk about the fact that she'd even been invited into a group of schools to speak about the physics concept of inertia.

And she gave a talk on inertia. And at the end of the hour, a young girl put up a hand and said, is that a wig you're wearing? Now, I have lots of questions of this passage.

[18:26] You know, who were these people? Why were some taken and not others? Why haven't we heard about it from somewhere else? And what happened to them after? And the problem is they're all wig questions. I tried out the Ziploc theory on the trustees this week and they didn't buy it, but I'll give it to you anyway.

You know how when you're closing something in a Ziploc, you never really, you never really get that final thing sealed. You stick it in the freezer and it leaks out. I think that's what happens here. You know, when Jesus bursts out from the grave, he just brings some people with him.

Okay. Okay. You don't like it any more than they did. That's okay. That was Wednesday. Now it's Sunday. Let me tell you, I think the big reason that Jesus includes this is that it's a preview.

It's a taster of what's to come. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, the first fruits of the resurrection. But he didn't die for himself. And he doesn't rise for himself either.

He dies for us. He rises for us. And when he's raised from the dead, he brings just a little company of brothers and sisters with him into the presence of God. Because he's not dying in his own private capacity and he's not rising in his own private capacity.

[19:40] But for us, of course, and the vast majority of Christians throughout the ages, our true life is still hid with God in Christ and we wait for the resurrection.

We've been caught up in the love of God in Jesus Christ, but our bodily resurrection is future. But on the day of that first resurrection, God took some from the grave as a foretaste and to demonstrate that salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins and a spiritual feeling. It's about new bodies in a new creation made holy by sacrifice, enjoying the fellowship of God and with each other. Now, okay.

So far, so good. How? We're not automatically caught up in this gravitational pull, though. There is a way that we enter into these things.

And I think that's why Matthew finishes this little section the way he does. Matthew shows us that we need to do two things to enter into this gravitational pull. Two examples he gives us, very humble, very down to earth.

[20 : 48] The first, in verse 54, is from the team of men whose job it was to execute Jesus, to make sure he was dead. And what they do is they confess him as the Son of God at the end of 54.

They had done their work. They'd heard the mockery. They'd seen the darkness. They'd heard Jesus cry. They'd seen the earthquake and the rocks splitting, and they were utterly overwhelmed. And without even thinking, they say, truly, this was the Son of God. And in that confession, they reverse all the mockery.

And they're not at all sure what they mean by this, just as we're not at all sure, I think we understand a great deal. But what they do is they see the real God at work in this death of Jesus Christ, and they confess that somehow this one on the cross is the Son, even though he's died. He's the Son of God for me. He's the Lord for me. And significantly in Matthew's Gospel, they are the first ones outside the group of disciples to indicate that he is.

[21 : 54] And that means that this death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not just for Jewish people. It's for every people. It's not just for old people or just for young people or just for one nation.

It's for every nation, for every person under heaven. It's what the world needs. And when anyone confesses Jesus to be the Son of God, we may not understand all that that means.

But we say, yes, I see God at work in this. I see this holy love willing to give himself for us. And the first thing I have to say is, Christ Jesus, you are God's Son, you are my Lord.

And the second response comes in the last two verses of our passage, 55 and 56. And the response here is to follow. Confess and follow.

And Matthew mentions the women, verse 55, standing at a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee. The word follow is the word we get disciple from.

[22 : 58] We know some of these women were wealthy and had resources. Some didn't. At this stage, all the men had lost their courage and run away. But these women continue to follow.

They had followed him all the way from Galilee. All the way through Palm Sunday and through the cross. And because they were loyal to the end, they become the first witnesses of the resurrection. Matthew mentions three of them by name. Mary Magdalene. Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, which is likely Jesus' mum. And the mother of James and John. Matthew calls them disciples because they haven't just confessed Jesus to be the Son of God, but they follow him.

They follow him. And this is a picture of the new life as it is now, generated by this great power of Jesus' love. As they see the supernatural love of Christ, it empowers them to follow Jesus in every circumstance, even when things seem like they're lost.

They now make decisions based on what's comfortable for them. And this is what it means to confess Christ and to follow him.

[24 : 11] And since Jesus has demonstrated absolutely radical love for us, it means that he can make the most radical demands. Maybe we've thought about that.

Someone told me between the services there's a group that's approached the Pope this week and asked him if he could make Christianity more popular by lowering the moral demands on people. Really. Do you see, if God's love is shallow and superficial, if God's love is just about self-actualization, he would never have given his son.

And he could never, there'd be a limit to what he could ask of us. Jesus would have a splinter, but he wouldn't go to the cross. But he's given us all that he is substituting for us, taking our guilt and our sin away from us.

And our debt to him is infinite. And that's such a happy thing because it's our debt to him, to the one who gave himself for us. And he demands this morning we confess him and follow him where he

goes.

[25 : 13] And as we'll see next week at Easter, what that means is we meet the living and risen Jesus face to face as friends and followers. Let's kneel and pray.