

Mark 15:1-47 (Good Friday)

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[0 : 0 0] 800 years before Jesus, the Hebrew prophet Amos spoke of a coming day of darkness and gloom, a day when God would remove his merciful presence from his stubbornly rebellious people.

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 turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation. I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day. What has been your darkest hour, your most bitter day? Have you ever looked out upon a world from which every sign of God's merciful presence? Every glimmer of hope, every promise of justice, every expression of love seems to have vanished. Maybe your faith in God has been shaken since coming to college. The simple trust in a good and powerful God that you once had as a child has been chipped away, eroded by persistent, unanswered questions that you can't figure out how to resolve and can't seem to get out of your head.

Where God once seemed vivid and personal, now he seems abstract and distant. Where once the Bible was your food for daily living, now its stories seem fanciful and foreign to your daily experience.

Other things seem far more real and compelling, like the conclusions of modern science or your prospects for summer internships or perhaps simply the parties going on this weekend.

[2 : 1 4] Maybe your faith has been shaken. Or maybe your hope in God has been weakened by prayers that seem to have gone unanswered. Maybe you've prayed earnestly for a broken marriage to be restored, or for a dying relative to be healed, or for a job prospect to finally come through, or for relief from unrelenting stress, or for a companion in loneliness. But what you prayed for has not come to pass.

Maybe your love for other people has been poisoned by the pain of betrayal, or rejection, or abandonment.

And you feel like an empty shell, hollowed out, with nothing left to give. Maybe you've looked upon the tragic horrors of this world and wondered, where is God? The Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, in his book *Night*, described the evening when he lost his faith. When alongside two grown men, a young Jewish boy was publicly hanged on the gallows of the concentration camp. And every prisoner was compelled to march past the gallows and to look. And he wrote of his experience that night.

He said, a voice behind me said, where is merciful God? Where is he? For God's sake, where is God? And from within me, I heard a voice answer, where is he? This is where, hanging here from this gallows.

How do we respond when almost every sign of God's merciful presence, every bit of justice and beauty and love seems to have vanished? When we feel not only hurt by other people, but forsaken by God himself.

[4 : 1 9] I think our natural response in situations like this is to become increasingly focused on ourselves. Perhaps we become angry and vengeful because we feel entitled to something that we're not getting.

We deserve respect. We haven't harmed others, or we deserve to be recognized for our efforts to help them. We deserve to be better paid for our hard work. We deserve a chance to prove ourselves instead of simply being rejected.

Perhaps our anger manifests itself in complaining or gossiping or occasional bursts of rage. Or maybe we just withdraw. We become resigned and cynical.

Part of our soul becomes hardened. Part of our soul becomes hardened. Our vision for the world becomes shrunk. We keep our distance from God.

Maybe we don't pray very much anymore because it seems that our prayers haven't been answered. Or maybe we distance ourselves. We separate ourselves from people who are needy and difficult to deal with.

[5 : 34] From situations that call us to sacrifice and pour ourselves out because we don't want to make ourselves vulnerable and get hurt again. Perhaps we take comfort in self-pity.

Well, the passage we've read tonight in Mark 15 describes a dark and bitter day. It began early in the morning with Jesus put on trial before the political authorities, falsely accused by the religious leaders, and sentenced to death without a just cause.

It continued with him being physically beaten and tortured by the soldiers, mocked by the crowd, stripped of his clothing, and hung on a shameful cross. The night before, he had been betrayed, abandoned, and denied by his closest friends.

And at noontime, darkness fell over all the land, as if the God who had spoken light into the darkness at the beginning of creation, who had brought order into the chaos, had withdrawn his presence in an act of divine judgment, as the prophet Amos had threatened.

And Jesus cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? You see, everything had been stripped away from Jesus.

[7 : 00] Every physical provision, every social support, every emotional comfort, and finally every tangible sign of God the Father's merciful presence.

The presence and fellowship that he had known from all eternity as the Son of God was removed. Jesus cried out, and there was no response.

There was no encouraging word, no confirming sign, no divine intervention. He was bruised and crushed, bearing the weight of human rebellion against God.

And of God's righteous indignation against our rebellion. But in his deepest darkness, in his most bitter agony, Jesus did what none of us would or could have done.

He did not turn inward in self-pity. He did not collapse in despair. He did not burst out in vengeful anger.

[8 : 12] He persevered in complete trust and obedience to God. And he extended unfailing love even toward his enemies.

He cried out in the words of Psalm 22, My God, My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me? On the surface, it might sound like an accusation against God.

And certainly it was an honest cry of one from whom all conscious awareness of God's love and favor was removed as he bore the awful punishment for human rebellion.

But his cry was also an expression of trust in God. He says, My God, My God. He claims the God of Psalm 22 as his God.

Psalm 22 is written 900 years before Jesus by King David. It's a song about a righteous sufferer, one who endures excruciating torment, but who continues to rely on God through it.

[9 : 34] I encourage you to read Psalm 22. If you want to turn there, it's page 457. Because it's striking how a psalm, a poem, a prayer written hundreds of years before Jesus describes Jesus' specific sufferings so well.

Let me read just a few verses. Psalm 22, verse 7. All who see me mock me. They make mouths at me.

They wag their heads. He trusts in the Lord. Let him deliver him. Let him rescue him, for he delights in him. Verse 14. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.

My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my mouth, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You lay me in the dust of death. A company of evildoers encircles me.

They have pierced my hands and feet. I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

[10 : 50] What an exact description of Jesus' sufferings. But in the midst of his torment, the psalm also expresses trust and complete reliance on God.

Verse 3, or verse 2, says, Oh my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest, yet you are holy.

enthroned upon the praises of Israel. In you, our fathers trusted, they trusted, and you delivered them. Further down, verse 9, you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

Verse 19, Oh Lord, do not be far off. Oh you, my help, come quickly to my aid. Jesus cried out to God in the words of this psalm, in utter agony, and in complete trust.

You see, unlike the rest of us, when we endure such bitter agony, Jesus was not consumed by himself. He was not focused on how terrible his circumstances were.

[12 : 06] Even while he hung on the cross, he extended himself to others in love. from the gospel of Luke, we learn that Jesus looked upon those who crucified him and said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

And from the gospel of John, we learn that Jesus looked upon his mother, about to be bereaved, standing nearby, along with John, the only one of his male disciples who remained.

And he spoke to her and provided a home for her, saying, Woman, behold your son, son, behold your mother. Jesus looked out upon a world from which every trace of God's merciful presence seemed to have vanished.

And he persevered to the end in perfect obedience to God and in unfailing love for us. In this book, The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis wrote that the kingdom of darkness and evil is never in greater danger than when a human being, no longer feeling any desire, but still utterly committed to do God's will, looks out on a world from which every trace of him has vanished, asks why he has been forsaken, but still obeys.

He said, this obedience, trustful obedience, is the supreme canceling of Adam's fall, the movement by which we retrace our long journey away from paradise.

[14 : 00] It is the untying of the old hard knot of distrust and disobedience and divine judgment in which the human race is bound up.

The point is this, Jesus' faithful obedience to God and his unfailing love for us on the darkest day of human history won for us salvation, deliverance, hope, life.

Jesus began by quoting the first verse of Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But the psalm doesn't end there.

The psalm begins with a cry of abandonment, but it ends with a cry of victory. Verse 24 of the psalm is a turning point.

It says, God has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted. He has not hidden his face from him, but has heard when he cried to him.

[15 : 13] All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord. Verse 30 and 31, the concluding verses say, they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.

Jesus began by quoting the first verse of the psalm. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But he concluded by alluding to the final verse.

He has done it. It is finished. Mark doesn't record these words, but the Gospel of John does.

Jesus' last words, his last cry, it is finished. In other words, the righteous sufferer has remained faithful all the way to the end.

Without wavering, without turning away, he has delivered the perfect sacrifice of pure trusting obedience to God the Father.

[16 : 19] He has accomplished the work that he came to do to offer himself on behalf of us who have turned away. And his work is complete.

He has done it. It is finished. It's a triumphant cry, a cry of victory. As I said, Mark doesn't record the words, but he does record the tone.

Verse 37 of Mark 15 says, Jesus uttered a loud cry cry and breathes his last. Now that would have been extremely unusual for a crucified man to die with a shout.

And the Roman centurion, who is the military officer, the policeman responsible for supervising the execution, he noticed it.

Verse 39 says, the centurion saw that in this way he breathed his last. And he said, truly this was the son of God.

[17 : 37] You see, the Roman centurion knew how a crucified man would usually die by suffocating. because he couldn't hold himself up long enough to breathe, being nailed to the cross.

He would often drift in and out of consciousness for even one or two days, barely able to utter an intelligible syllable until he would gradually suffocate.

But Jesus was different. The way that he died was utterly different from anyone else that centurion had ever seen. Jesus looked out upon a world from which every trace of God's merciful presence had vanished.

He bore on his shoulders the weight of our rebellion against God and the judgment we deserved. And he persevered in trusting obedience to God and in unflinching love for us until in his last breath he could say, it is done.

It is finished. Truly, this man was the son of God. Let us pray.

[18 : 57] God I invite you to pray with me in response to three words of scripture.

First, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Lord Jesus, as we look upon the cross where you died, may we believe in you the son of God and receive this life that you have promised.

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Lord Jesus, may we rest in the completeness of your sacrifice for us.

May we see in your death the most convincing proof of your love for us. Let us run with endurance the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[21 : 02] Consider him so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. Grant us, O Lord, in Christ the endurance that we do not have within ourselves, that even in our darkest hour and our most bitter days, that we may look to you and not grow weary or lose heart.

May we know that you have gone before us through a greater darkness, through a far more bitter day.

And may we look forward to the joy that you have won for us, that you have promised us. We pray all these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. word ? What? What?