

Good Friday - "The King and the Cross"

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[0 : 00] If you are the Son of God, if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. It's interesting, the crowds and the religious leaders who mocked Jesus that day thought! that they had conclusive evidence that Jesus was not who He claimed to be.

After all, there He was on a cross. Surely He could not be the King, the Son of God. The chief priests say it again with even more scorn, He is the King of Israel. Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him.

Surely if Jesus is the King, the Son of God, He would come down. But Jesus doesn't come down. Jesus stays. He stays on the cross.

And what Matthew wants us to see is that it's not by coming down that Jesus proves Himself to be the King. No, it's by staying on the cross that Jesus proves Himself to be the real King, the Son of God.

Here is the King who stays. And I think Matthew shows us two things about this King who stays in this passage that Carolyn just read for us. First, Matthew shows us what it cost Jesus to stay. What did it cost Jesus to stay on the cross?

[1 : 52] Well, first there was the cost of tremendous physical pain. By the time Jesus reaches Golgotha, He's already been scourged and beaten, as we read. So, He's already so weak that the soldiers need to force a bystander named Simon to help carry the cross. And then there's the actual crucifixion itself, the nails driven through His wrists and His ankles, so that hanging in mid-air, the weight of His entire body is pulling down, making it nearly impossible to breathe unless He pulls Himself up by the nails that drove through His skin and through His bones. It's almost unimaginable pain, crucifixion. But Jesus, the King, stays.

But the physical pain was not the only cost. There was also the incredible cost of social shame. You see, crucifixion in the first century wasn't just meant to be physically torturous. It was designed to be utterly shameful. It was designed to completely humiliate the victim. There you hung, naked, body torn apart, pinned up like an insect in a case, so that everyone walking by could get the message, that this is what Rome does with its enemies. This is what Rome does with its garbage.

And everyone surrounding Jesus mocks Him, even His own people. The passersby deride Him, Matthew says. The chief priests with the scribes and elders mock Him. Even the criminals who are crucified along with Him reviled Him, reviled Him in the same way, Matthew says. Notice Matthew uses three different words for contempt just to underscore the deep social rejection and shame that Jesus underwent.

Here was the man who had touched lepers and prostitutes who had brought dignity to the lowest of the low, and in return, he's mocked and shamed. But still, he stayed.

Through burning physical pain, through the intense humiliation and shame, he stayed. But the cost was even greater than that. Yes, the physical and the social cost were greater than anything you or I could imagine. But there was a third cost that exceeded them both.

[4 : 47] As darkness falls at midday, Jesus calls out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This is a verse taken from the Psalms, an expression of utter God-forsakenness. This cry of dereliction, as it's called, shows us the ultimate cost Jesus endured by staying on the cross, the cosmic cost of being forsaken by God the Father.

Here is a cost that we truly cannot comprehend. What does it mean that God the Son, who existed from all eternity in a perfect unity of love with God the Father, in the blessed Trinity of the one God, what does it mean that there could be forsakenness there, a tearing in the very fabric of God's self?

You know, you consider our finite human relationships. Perhaps you know what it's like to be alienated by a friend. Or a little deeper, perhaps you've experienced what it's like to be rejected by a son or a daughter or a close family member. Or maybe you've even tasted the bitter pain of being forsaken by a spouse.

The longer, the deeper, the more intimate the relationship, the greater the tearing sense of loss when the relationship is broken. But here, before the cross, what do we see? We see the eternal relationship between Father and Son, eternal God, one of perfect unity and love, now turned dark.

[6 : 48] When the ancient creeds say that Jesus descended into hell, this is it.

Jesus underwent the utter horror of separation from God the Father, the utter darkness of wrath against sin. Jesus underwent the utter horror of sin. And from that ocean of darkness, Jesus does not run.

He did not come down even when those waves were crashing over Him. He stayed. He willingly endured even that cost too. The cosmic cost of God's forsakenness.

As we consider that great cost, I wonder, how do you begin to see Jesus tonight? In light of what it cost Him to stay, does your heart still look with Jesus? Cynicism may be asking, why doesn't He just come down?

Or do you sense a greater admiration growing in your soul for this King, this King who was brave enough, courageous enough, faithful enough to stay?

[8 : 16] You know, our human leaders, our human leaders will stay through hardship to a point, right? Or our friends, our relatives, our spouses, they'll endure hardship to a certain degree, even a great degree.

But too often, when the cost gets too great, they come down. They back away. They resign. They leave. They leave. But not this friend, not this lover, not this King. He stayed, though it cost Him literally everything.

Friend, doesn't your heart begin to warm when you see His great resolve, His unflinching courage? Here is a King who will stay. He will stay for you. He already has. And because He stayed through the darkest cost for you, then you can know from here on out that He will not leave you. Even though you travel through the darkest valley, He will not forsake you. But it's not just the cost of staying that Matthew wants us to see.

He wants us to know not just what it cost for Jesus to stay, but what it brought. What did Jesus' staying on the cross bring about?

Well, Matthew shows us in verses 51 through 54, the first thing he shows us is this, because the king stayed, the veil has been torn. Verse 51 says, And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

[10 : 05] This curtain separated the innermost room of the temple from everything else outside of it. And in that innermost room, the very presence of God symbolically dwelled. But humans, you see, were not allowed inside of that room, that holiest place in the temple that was divided by that thick curtain. Except once a year, only once a year, the high priest could go in on the Day of Atonement, and only if he had the blood of a sacrifice that he could spread on the ark.

That curtain, that veil, that veil, it hung there, has a great sign of humanity's separation from God because of sin.

You see, friends, God created us in His image. God made us humans to love Him and worship Him and obey Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

He made us to live in intimate communion with Himself and with His goodness and with His holiness. That's why we were made. But we chose instead to worship gods of our own making.

We chose to worship created things instead of our Creator. And we chose to run our lives according to our own desires, rather than according to His good word.

[11 : 35] And that, that turning away from God is what the Bible calls sin. And the result of our sin is complete alienation from God. God is infinitely holy and can have no fellowship with darkness.

And in God's extreme goodness, He judges sin justly. And that means that there is now a thick veil between humanity and God.

God is an impenetrable barrier between sinful humans and a holy God. You surely have felt this veil, haven't you?

I know I have. God feels so distant. God feels so unknowable. We wonder, is God even there? And if He is, why doesn't He make Himself more clear?

God feels so distant. Well, friend, here's the reason why we feel those things right here. Because of sin. We humans, we stand behind a veil.

[12 : 48] And we push, we push into that thick curtain with the best of our reasoning capacities, and we push, try to push through with the best of our good works. But it doesn't budge.

We just get lost in the infinite folds of that impenetrable curtain. We find ourselves more and more lost and more and more estranged.

You see, the answer to our alienation from God cannot come from our side. We can't cut through the veil that separates us from God.

The answer has to come from God's side. God has to make a way for the curtain to be opened. But here's the great dilemma.

It's our sin that created the problem. So the penalty is ours to pay. But our sin is so great that only God can pay it.

[13 : 53] So how can the curtain be removed? Friends, here's the good news. It can be removed because the King stayed.

The eternal Son of God took human nature, and on the cross, He did what no one else could do. Because He's fully human, He can act on behalf of us humans.

And because He's fully God, He can actually pay that infinite debt. And when Jesus stayed on the cross in His utter, unrepeatable uniqueness, He did just that.

Sin once and for all paid. And so the curtain is torn, did you notice, from the top to the bottom. The way once blocked by sin is now opened.

The flaming sword that guarded the gate of Eden when humanity sinned and was driven out. That flaming sword that said, there's no coming back.

[15 : 07] That sword fell in judgment on our King, so that now the people of the King can enter back in. And the truth is, as long as we keep Jesus at arm's length, the veil remains.

The thick curtain will stay between you and God. But if you embrace Him, if you take Him as your King, and put your faith in Him, then you'll step through.

His torn body tore the curtain open for all who trust in Him. He stayed so that you could enter into fellowship with God, with sins forgiven, with your conscience cleansed, with your heart renewed.

Because He stayed, you don't need to remain far from God. This night, this very moment, on this Good Friday, you can yield yourself to Him.

You can entrust your life to Him as your King, and know that God has opened the veil for you, and you never need to be apart from Him again.

[16 : 21] Friends, what we see here is the Father's heart of love, the Father and Son acting together, mother, beckoning you, calling you, commanding you even, believe and be saved.

Don't stay in the far country any longer. Don't let the mists of sin cloud your vision anymore. The king stayed for you.

Give your life to him. But there's one more thing Matthew wants us to see. Because the king stayed, the curtain was torn.

But in addition to that, because the king stayed, the grave has been defeated. In verse 52 and 53, Matthew says that when Jesus died, many bodies of the saints were raised.

And some of them even appeared in the city after Jesus' resurrection. Now, of course, this detail raises a lot of questions that Matthew does not answer. Where did they go? Did they die again?

[17 : 31] Did they ascend to heaven like Enoch in the Old Testament? And mysteriously, Matthew doesn't say. But the point is this. The death of Christ the king was the death of death for all who believe.

How many of us live in the anxiety that we have only so many years in this life? We have so few years even.

And then death will steal it all away. And so we obsess, don't we? We obsess about having the best experiences, the best job, the best vacation. And we worry that if we make the wrong choice about the job we take or the person we marry or the city we move to, we worry that we'll waste the only life that we have and the only opportunity for joy and for happiness.

So you see, we don't just fear death itself. But death casts a shadow of fear over everything else. All of our life now is lived in fear, fear that we might miss out or make a wrong turn.

And if we're careful, we'll miss our one shot at happiness. But if you are a Christian, if you've come to see and trust in Jesus as your king, then death has lost its sting.

[18 : 57] Why? Why? Because your king has gone down into death for you. He waged the great battle against sin and death.

And he stayed on the cross so that death would do its worst, so that death would exhaust itself to the fullest extent, exhaust its curse, its finality, its joy-stealing power.

In the darkness of the cross, death fully spent its strength, striking with all of its force. And our king took the full extent of the blow.

He stayed. He stayed and absorbed the worst that death could deal. And he did it on behalf of his people. But you see, when the king went down into death, it was not ultimately the king who was defeated.

Rather, it was death itself. Death had fired its last round. Death had run its course. But the king conquered.

[20 : 13] You see, the resurrection on Sunday morning vindicated this king, demonstrating that the sacrifice for sin was complete, and that his defeat of death was done.

And now, for all who are in Christ, death has lost its power. Yes, in this age, until the king returns to make all things new, we continue to die a physical death, yes.

But the sting of death has been removed. Because now death can no longer steal our greatest joys. Death can no longer steal our happiness.

Death can no longer steal our future. In all those senses that matter, death has died. And those who die in Christ in this age will be present with God until the day Christ returns.

And on that day, in the age to come, we will rise with Christ to life imperishable in the renewed creation. But you notice how the earth shook and the rocks split when he died, as if birth pangs eager for a new creation.

[21 : 31] And so, because he stayed, death can no longer steal your joy. And the fear of death need no longer cast its dark shadow over your days.

You are free now. Free to love. Free to give. Free to sacrifice. Free to be courageous.

Because he stayed. In fact, because your king stayed, and now you too can stay. You can stay when the trials come.

When the way gets hard. When the cost seems great. You can love. You can persevere. With his spirit in you, you can stay.

Because he stayed. Because he stayed for you. Because of his love for you. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, as again on this night, we meditate upon what you did on the cross.

[22 : 48] Oh, Jesus, we acknowledge that we just catch, as it were, the little glimpse of the deep mystery and the deep power of all that you accomplished there.

Help us by your spirit to gain a richer grasp of these things and to live in the confidence that you have opened the way to the Father and put death to death.

Lord, draw our hearts to you in faith. Assure your people. Lord, cause scales to fall from the eyes of those who are seeking you.

Grant them faith by your spirit, we pray. Amen. Amen.