

The Darkest Hour

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All of my life I've heard that the death of Christ was the central point in all history. Scripture bears that out, doesn't it? Paul says, "Far be it for me to glory in anything except the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14) and "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but for those who are being saved it is the very power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

We sing a lot of beautiful songs about the cross.

And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross

Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown

Another song says, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." That old rugged cross was erected on a hill called "Calvary," a place so well known for its stench of death that it had another name. They called it Golgotha, the place of the skull.

After a sham of a trial, before the Jewish high priest, Jesus was railroaded before a cowardly Roman governor by the name of Pontius Pilate. In fear and trembling he abdicated his responsibility and handed the man over to be crucified while ceremonially washing his hands of the whole matter. Beaten and scourged, Jesus trudged up that hill wearing a mocking purple robe and a crown of thorns. It was at 9:00 a.m. on a Friday that they nailed him to that cross. For three hours he heard the taunts and the jeers from the crowd below. "King of the Jews, Ha! He saved others, he can't save himself. If you're the son of God then come down off that cross."

At noon, something strange began to happen. An eerie darkness that quickly turned into a pitch blackness spread over the sky. It's as if somebody had shut the door and turned out the lights and said, "You're losing the light of the world." The darkness thickened for three hours and a frightening silence pervaded the entire hill. "At the sixth hour" (that's noon) "darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour" (that's 3:00 p.m.) "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'—which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:33)

I find it interesting that the words "cried out" in the Greek could be translated, "roar." It was the same word used for a lion's roar. He roared it from the cross, "Eloi, Eloi..." A lot of them didn't understand what he was saying. The next verse said, "Why he's calling for Elijah." No, he didn't say, Eli, Eli, he said, "Eloi, Eloi" (My God, My God) "lama sabachthani" (why have you forsaken me?)"

Of the seven statements Jesus made on the cross, this is the most crucial. Everything else He said you'd almost expect Him to say, wouldn't you? But if you knew the life of Jesus, you'd almost expect him to say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It doesn't shock you that he would look over to a crucified crook and say, "Today, because of your faith, you'll be with me in paradise." And it certainly doesn't surprise us he would look down at his mother and motion to John and say, "Behold your son, and son, behold your mother." All those things would naturally come from the lips of Jesus.

But this was different. Hanging there, looking down at his executors. Sure, it was magnanimous, sure it was compassionate. This was a cry, a desperate cry. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At the foot of the cross they didn't understand it, and a lot of people still don't today. What was he saying?

1. A cry of sadness. Do you know what that darkness that spread across the land for three hours represented? In scripture, darkness is always symbolic of evil. "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19) Satan's kingdom is called a kingdom of darkness. (Colossians 1:13) By contrast in dozens of scriptures, light is reflected with the presence and glory of God. The absence of light on that day signifies the absence of God. As God, the father, turned his back, it's as if he was calling the whole attention of the world to something he could not stand to look at himself.

You know we focus on the cry from Jesus, but I've often wondered what was going through the heart of the father as the darkness spread and the cry went up, and he heard the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It was a terrible cry of sadness.

2. A cry of separation. Let's get right down to the heart of it. What did Jesus mean? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That was recorded in Psalm 22:1. Some scholars have said, "Oh God was there, Jesus was just fulfilling prophecy by quoting scripture." No, it's much more than that.

It's interesting that the verb used there is exactly the same verb that Paul used in 2 Timothy 4:10 when he was writing about a former comrade named Demas. "Demas has forsaken me having loved this world too much." The word means "abandon." It means to leave, to run away from. Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Why have you run away from me? Why have you left me here? For the first time in all eternity, the most unimaginable thing that you could possibly comprehend has occurred. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the eternal one Godhead, was divided. The Godhead

is disjointed in that Jesus was separated from the Father. It never had happened before and never will happen again.

Why would God forsake Jesus anytime, much less right now at all times? What did Jesus do wrong? The answer is: Nothing. Nothing at all. You see it's not what he did that was wrong. It was what he was willing to do for our wrongs. One of the great verses to explain this cry in scripture "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." See where the first part of the verse says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." (1 Peter 2:24) You see it's if all the sins of humanity have been gathered into one huge, stinking, filthy, sewage pile dumped upon Jesus Christ while he hung on that cross. In a way that we can't even pretend to understand, all the sins of the world were put upon the cross of Jesus. "God made him who had no sin to be sin." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

"The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) The word "death" in the Greek doesn't mean termination, it just means separation. That's why we use it in a number of different contexts. When one die physically they don't just terminate or cease to exist as their spirit is separated from their earthly tent. That's all death is, it's just a separation. The death that's talked about in Romans 6:23 as compensation for our sins, it's not a physical death and it's not a physical death, the separation of the soul from the body; it is a separation from God. That's frightening, that's eternal.

Remember the parable of the prodigal son? When that prodigal son was in the depth of his sin, where was he? He was separated from the father, wasn't he? He was away in a foreign land, dwelling in his sin. When the boy came back home, the father turned to the other son and said, "This your brother was dead, but he's alive again." What does he mean he was dead? He wasn't dead. Yes, he was. He was separated from the love of the father, and that father must have wondered at times if he would ever come home. The Son of God that we call Jesus was separated from his Father not by his own sin, for he had none, but because he bore all ours.

The best commentary and the best picture of the cross, and particularly this cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Leviticus 16. Since the Old Testament is a tutor to help us understand the new, Leviticus 16 should help us understand this cry from the cross. There were three sacrifices that were made by the Israelites involving two goats and a bull. First, the bull was offered for the sins of Aaron so that he could intercede for the people. Then a goat was offered sacrificed for the sins of the people. A second goat, the third animal, was brought before the people. "When Aaron was finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert." (Leviticus 16:20-22)

Now do you get the picture? A goat would be brought, and Aaron would take his hands and put them on the head of that goat. He would say, "All our sins we put on this goat's head." All the lust, all the adulteries, all the lies, all the thefts, all the gossip, all the hatred and all of any other sin was symbolically put on the goat. That goat would be led by a man until it was so far out in the desert that it could never find its way back to camp again. That man would take his shoe or sandal and kick that goat and say, "Get out of here, be gone, be vanished." Do you realize we get our English word, "scapegoat" from that very passage? Placing all the blame, all the sins on a third party? That's surely seems like a silly tradition. Why do they do that?" For 1,500 years, the Israelites obeyed that command. They sent that scapegoat out into the desert signifying the vanishing of sin.

For six long hours Jesus hung on a cross, and it must have seemed like six millennia. Like the goat when left alone in the desert, he was left alone. He cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

3. A cry of substitution. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24). "By his wounds you have been healed." "God made him who had no sin to be sin for our sakes so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) See the substitution?

It's incredible. Somehow God took the ones who were sinless, holy, spotless and pure and made him as filthy as sewage and somehow when I come humbly, obediently and in faith to Christ God transfers to me the beauty, the purity, and the grace of Jesus Christ. That is the most powerful, most unbelievable and most incomprehensible thought that a human can bear, Jesus' righteousness being transferred to sinful man. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" Could be considered a cry of substitution.

If Jesus had not interceded, if everything had just got along in the natural course of things, that's the cry that you and I would be offering on our death and at the events of the Judgment. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But Jesus said those words so that I don't have to, so that you don't have to.

You probably have heard the story before or maybe even saw the man on the *Today Show* about eight years ago. But it was probably to me the best illustrations of this idea of the cry of substitution. Early one morning I happened to see a man by the name of Francesca Geraszchnevik interviewed early in the morning on the *Today Show*. They interviewed him because he was a survivor of Auschwitz, the terrible concentration camp that was right in the middle of the Holocaust. But Geraszchnevik had a particularly interesting story because he told about the time in 1941 when there was an escape in July at Auschwitz. And whenever that occurred, the commandant of that concentration camp always did the same thing.

To discourage future escapes, he would gather all of the inmates and all of the prisoners out into the courtyard, and they would randomly draw 10 names. And those 10 would be put into an open pit and it would be covered up. And they would be left there until they would starve to death or dehydrate. And everybody would watch them dying every day. They began to call the ten names, and the tenth name called was the name Francesca Geraszchnevik. Geraszchnevik said, "I fell to my knees and I began to weep uncontrollably. I begged." I said, "I've got a wife, I've got children, please, please, don't do this to me." And all of a sudden out of nowhere stepped forward a man by the name of Maximilian Cole. Cole was not even Jewish. He was in that concentration camp as a sympathizer. Cole had come in February of '41, this was in July, and already he had earned the nickname, "The Angel of Auschwitz," because he shared his food, and he took care of the sick, and he tried to encourage the downtrodden. He spoke up and said, "Commandant, may I say a word?" It was remarkable that he wasn't shot on the spot. But for reasons we will never know, the commandant turned to Cole and said, "Yes, you can." He said, "May I take his place? I'm older - you won't get as much work out of me." Well, the Nazi mind picked up on that and allowed it. And Maximilian Cole was thrown into that pit with the other nine. Six weeks later on August the 14th, he was the only one left living. Rather than allowing him to die of starvation, they injected him with phenol and he died.

I don't know if Geraszchnevik is still living, but he was as of eight years ago. And when they interviewed him, his comment was, "I didn't get a chance to say a word to him, but I looked into his eyes as they led him away. And he knew how grateful I am. Every August 14th, Geraszchnevik goes back to Auschwitz as a memorial. And in his backyard is a metal plaque that he fashioned with his own hands, and everyday he expresses his gratitude to a man by the name of Maximilian Cole.

We have very little in common with Francesca Geraszchnevik. We don't speak the same language, we don't know the same people. We don't even claim the same homeland. But we've got a couple of things very much in common with him. Somebody died to save our lives and we both lived the rest of our lives in absolute gratitude. That's what everybody who's a Christian has in common with Geraszchnevik, Although Geraszchnevik's is physical and ours is spiritual.

They gave a lot of jeers at Jesus and a lot of taunts. There was one of them that was true. Yes, there was one that was true. They said, "He saved others, but he can't save himself." That was true. Oh, he could have saved himself, Matthew 26:53. Several hours he told Peter, "Don't you know I could call down 12 legions of angels?" He could have saved himself, but he could not have made that whole statement true. He saved others, but he couldn't save himself. If he was going to save others, he could not save himself. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was the cry of substitution. Amazing Grace Lesson #1254 Steve Flatt March 17, 1996