

Good Friday 2023 – The Pain and The Promise – Matthew 27:45-54 – Sermon Notes

Introduction

Thank you to our readers and our musicians for leading us in our reflection on the cross and we're going to continue that reflection, but I first want to tell you about a jar of corks that sits on a windowsill in our home.

It's a rather unimpressive collection, and if you came round our house and saw them, you might ask "What is the meaning behind those corks?" because they don't look like they contribute to our lives in any significant way.

Behind every cork, there is a special memory attached. There is a cork from our engagement, there is one from our wedding, and there is one from the night we moved into our first house. So, if I gave you that answer, you would look at the corks in a new way. They are no longer unimportant junk, but symbols of meaningful moments.

There are lots of moments in our passage that leave us puzzled. What's with the 3-hour darkness, the curtain tearing, the earthquake, and people coming back to life? As the corks point to good times remembered, these symbols point us to the enormous weight of what is happening to Jesus on the cross and to what his death accomplishes. They stress the suffering Jesus took on himself for our sins, and the promise of our salvation that his death achieved. Those are my two points this morning: the pain, and the promise.

The Pain

Let's start with Jesus' pain. Matthew chapter 27 is difficult reading. Innocent Jesus is first brought to trial before Roman governor Pilate, who can clearly see he is innocent. But rather than act justly, Pilate cowardly allows the crowd to decide Jesus' unfair and deadly fate. Now sentenced, he is handed over to the governor's soldiers who beat him, spit on him, mock him, and place a crown of thorns on his head. He is then dragged to Golgotha, a hill just outside Jerusalem's walls, where he is nailed to a cross.

This is one long horrific picture of physical suffering, but it comes nowhere close to the spiritual agony Jesus experiences on the cross. We're told in Mark's Gospel that Jesus was crucified at nine in the morning, so Jesus has already been on the cross for three hours by the time the darkness arrives, which signals his pain is about to get even worse. This darkness remains until three in the afternoon when Jesus dies, which gives us a clue to what it might symbolise. This darkness is no rain cloud or solar eclipse, but a supernatural work of God to emphasise what Jesus undergoes in those final three hours. I don't think I can describe it any better than William Hendriksen,

"The darkness meant judgement, the judgement of God upon our sins, his wrath burning itself out in the very heart of Jesus, so that he, as our Substitute, suffered the most intense

agony, indescribable woe, terrible isolation, or forsakenness. Hell came to Calvary that day, and the Saviour bore its horrors in our stead."

We know this must be the case because Jesus cries *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* To be forsaken literally means to be left behind. The consequence of sin is to be left out of God's love and grace in this life and after life in eternity. But our sin also deserves justice. Ephesians 2:3 says, *"All of us... at one time [gratified] the cravings of our flesh and [followed] its desires and thoughts. We were by nature deserving of wrath"* and Romans 6:23 says, *"The wages of sin is death."*

Jesus would never have experienced forsakenness before this because he was sinless. But, in those three hours, he not only suffered the loneliness of sin but also the punishment of sin, and both in their fullest as he shoulders the sins of all people.

Amazingly, Jesus' cry in verse 46 is not a sudden change of mind and it doesn't indicate that God has permanently abandoned his Son. Instead, it speaks of their faithfulness to our salvation. Jesus still cries to *"My God."* They both know the price that must be paid to rescue the world from the fate of hell, and the sacrifice it will take to free us, and they endure it. But, in his anguish, Christ can only call out to his Father with the reality of his pain.

Even though he knew it would be unbearable, Jesus willingly let himself be captured, tortured, crucified, and separated from his Father. Why? **For our sake.** 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* By paying the necessary judgement of sin, Jesus wipes our slates clean, and if we put our ultimate trust in him, God credits the blamelessness of Jesus to us so that we can be made right with God. Despite being entirely innocent, Jesus chose to bear all sin, and to endure its retribution to save tiny little us.

At the last Holiday Bible Club, one of the children in my group said, "The crucifixion doesn't sound that bad. I could do that." So, I got the group to stand up and hold their arms out, and no one in the group could last more than a couple of minutes. Add to that the cuts and bruises, add to that the mocking, and, most importantly, add to that the spiritual torment. None of us could do what he did. None of us is worthy to give our lives as a ransom for many. All we can do is cry hallelujah that he faced our punishment for us.

The Promise

The death of the author C.S. Lewis would have likely been headline news had it not been completely overshadowed by the assassination of the US president John F. Kennedy just one hour later. In a similar vein, God was not going to allow Jesus' death to be just another Jewish execution by the Romans. So, immediately after Jesus gives up his spirit, three surprising, extra-ordinary and supernatural symbols take place to highlight that the death of Jesus is the promise of sins paid for and salvation won.

The temple curtain was not a window covering like those on your left, but a giant, sixty foot high, thirty foot wide, and four inches thick, curtain. It worked a bit like a 'staff only' door to the innermost room of the temple where God would appear to his people. But because God is so holy, only the high priest could enter and only once a year, and only after he had sacrificed an animal as an atonement for people's sins. It is this symbol that Jesus fulfilled in his death and why the curtain tearing is so significant. Hebrews chapter 10 verses 19 and 20 say, "*we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place **by the blood of Jesus**, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.*" Through Jesus' death, the way to God is open. There is no longer a barrier to a relationship with him. The curtain tearing is not a coincidence, it is a deliberate act of God to tell us we are welcome home.

Meanwhile, the earthquake is reminiscent of Exodus chapter 19. When God meets with his people at a mountain called Sinai, "*the whole mountain trembled violently.*" What is significant about this meeting is that God sets out his relationship with his people. Verse 5 says, "*If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.*" At Christ's death, we have another earthquake and God announcing again his relationship with his people. The earthquake at Sinai where God set out the demands of righteousness in the ten commandments is matched by the earthquake here where the demands of righteousness are met in Christ paying for our sin on the cross.

And if that wasn't significant enough, this earthquake also opens some tombs, and previously dead believers come back to life! We don't know much about this event, but we do know that holy people came back to life in connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus. So, this unique event cannot point to anything else but our resurrection life beyond the grave that death of Jesus enables.

What glorious truth these three symbols promise. Our sin is paid for, the way to God is open, the demands of righteousness are met, and eternal life is ours.

Conclusion

The death of Jesus is openly and universally relevant for all people throughout all time. We are all guilty of sin, so we are all in need of Jesus' sacrifice.

And it isn't good enough to ignore that. Matthew is very clear that a response is needed. Look at v54, "*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*" These magnificent works of God bring about the wonderful and correct response of awe in the soldiers. The title Son of God which had been used in mockery is restored to its proper place.

So, what are we going to do with the title Son of God today? Maybe you've never considered what Christ went through on the cross before so I encourage you to consider why a man would experience all this pain for you. Why did the death of Jesus coincide with three powerful events if not to symbolise its ultimate importance? Please consider discovering more about the Son of God who died for you.

For believers, the pain Christ suffered at our expense should bring us to our knees in daily gratitude and worship. It is because of his willingness to endure all this that we are saved from suffering that very punishment and can live our new lives in relationship with the Lord God. The cross should never be far from our lips or our minds. It is central to all we are and all we do. We should never lose our awe at the willingness of Christ to suffer for us to rescue us from sin.