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Sermons on Matthew

Forsaken by God

Matthew 27:45-50

With Study Questions

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Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. ⁻⁴⁶⁻ And about the ninth hour __Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “_Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, __“_My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”_”-

⁴⁷⁻ Some of those who stood there, when they heard *that*, said, “_This Man is calling for Elijah!”_” ⁻⁴⁸⁻ Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, __filled *it* with sour wine and put *it* on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink.

⁻⁴⁹⁻ The rest said, “_Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him.”_” ⁻⁵⁰⁻ And Jesus __cried out again with a loud voice, and __yielded up His spirit (Matthew 27:45-50).

Introduction

In the mission where we serve and teach, there is a small poster on the wall where the word “BIBLE” is in the form of an acronym: “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.” It is clever and certainly accurate. Another acronym which has gotten legs during the past twenty years in the form of bracelets and bumper-stickers is “WWJD”: “What Would Jesus Do?” Clearly there is a sense in which we should do as Jesus did. Did not Jesus teach after washing His disciples’ feet, “**For __I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you?**” (John 13:15)

Occasionally we do Sunday evening classes on biblical topics. I may teach about end times or Calvinism or apologetics. But, by far, the most well attended Sunday evening class I have ever taught was the one on marriage. A class on substitutionary atonement or even on the Lord’s Supper would not be attended as well as a class on parenting or overcoming bad habits.

There is a natural desire we have (Christian or not) to improve our lives. We want to be told how to do things better. And people will view the Christian faith as valuable with this utilitarian mindset—to pursue its

functional usefulness. But in so doing, we often neglect its true beauty and essence.

I remember as a young Christian being told to read the Bible. I was hungry for instructions on life. I was advised to begin reading the New Testament—so I did. **“Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar...”** (Matthew 1.2, 3a) and so on. It wasn’t until I got to chapter five (the Sermon on the Mount) that there was any real instruction on how to behave. The Bible seemed to be all about Jesus—His birth, His life, His power, His death, His resurrection, His ascension and so on.

The emphasis was not so much “What Would Jesus Do?” (although it certainly did include that) as it was “What Did Jesus Do?” It wasn’t so much basic instructions on how I ought to live, but instructions on how Jesus lived for me and died for me and rose again for me. The instruction permeating the Scriptures was not so much¹ on how to be a better husband, but on how Jesus is the groom of His bride, the church.

It seemed as if the Bible was all about Jesus. I later found that observation to be accurate when Jesus taught, **“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me”** (John 5:39).

If I have learned anything in my many years of ministry, it is how accurate the Bible is when it speaks of the sinfulness of man. As much as we should pursue holiness and seek to be law-keepers—as true as it is that there are great blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience in this life, the bottom line of truth in life is that apart from what Christ has done for us, there is simply no hope either in this life or in eternity.

To teach the law of Christ without teaching the work of Christ would be like teaching your children how to exercise without feeding them. The most accurate instruction would still end in death. The gospel is the good news of what Jesus has done for us. And here we are, at the peak of Matthew, staring as it were, at the heart of the gospel—the cross of Christ.

Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land (Matthew 27:45).

¹ I say “not so much” because “how to be a better husband” *etc.* is certainly included.

Darkness

Matthew had recorded Jesus coming into this world with a supernatural light guiding the wise men to Him. Here we see, in His crucifixion, a supernatural darkness. The sixth hour until the ninth hour was 12 noon until 3 PM. There was darkness over all the land. Darkness was a sign of God's judgment, **"And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord God, that I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight"** (Amos 8:9).

There is a fearful reflection, especially when we consider the current disdain our culture is developing for biblical Christianity, that the judgment of God includes God's removal of His counsel. Amos continues,

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord God, "that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. ¹² They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but shall not find it (Amos 8:11, 12).

It's little wonder that people are starving for instruction.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46)-

Fear of Death, Fear of God

I once spoke with a man who, in his atheism, expressed that he wasn't afraid to die. I told him I thought his courage was unwise. He had convinced himself that death was mere termination of existence—annihilation. But death is much worse than that! True death means to be eternally forsaken by God. And if it was a horror to Christ to be forsaken by the Father, should it not be a horror to us?

Forsaken, in this context, should not be thought of as merely ignored. To be forsaken of God means to be left at the mercy of all that is evil. God is omnipresent. So to speak of separation from God is, technically speaking, not possible. Separation from God, as a consequence of sin, means to be separated from His love and grace and to be met by His wrath and condemnation.

A Biblical Prayer

I was leaving a baccalaureate service for a local high school when a teenage Christian girl approached me with a criticism. She wanted to know why people from my denomination write out their prayers or organize their prayers prior to public worship.

Modern Christendom, with its emphasis and praise for spontaneous prayers, can take a lesson from the Savior here. Certainly Christ could have uttered a matchless prayer derived from no other source than His own flawless heart. But in this dire hour His prayerful expression has the Holy Scriptures (Psalm 22) as its source. Let us not think it weak for Christians to borrow, even in their prayers, from sources more eloquent and profound than their own minds. Who does not enjoy the ability of others to express our thoughts better than we? And there are no thoughts more profound or eloquent than the ones found in the holy text.

Estranged From God

What are we to make of this prayer? Was there a genuine ignorance here on the part of Jesus? Did He really not know why He was forsaken by God? Could there have been a willful, human sided, lack of knowledge similar to His lack of knowledge regarding the time of the apocalypse (Mark 13:32)?

It is certainly quite difficult for us to get our hands around the notion of Christ being fully God and fully man. It can be equally difficult to understand what level of humanity (or what constitutes Jesus being fully human) He must have achieved in order to accomplish His appointed task of being our High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15), not the least of those weaknesses being a some sense of estrangement from our God. Calvin explains that

...the Divine nature gave way to the weakness of the flesh, so far as was necessary for our salvation, that Christ might accomplish all that was required of the Redeemer.

Let us also be keenly aware that the human sentiment of Christ to feel estranged from His God did not interfere with His true knowledge of faith. This is obvious by what precedes the complaint where He twice utters “**My God.**”

...thus by the shield of faith he courageously expels that appearance of *forsaking* which presented itself on the other side.

Perhaps by this we can learn that our present feeling of distance from God in our sentiments ought not dictate the true knowledge we have of His grace toward us by virtue of His promise. Sometimes I *feel* as if my prayers bounce off the ceiling, but I *know* that my God gives them His ear.

An Eternally Glorious Sacrifice

The passion which lead to the cry of Jesus is the heart, not only of Christendom and its gospel, but it is eternally glorious. When we glimpse heaven through Scripture we see:

And __they sang a new song, saying: __“_You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and __have redeemed us to God __by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Revelation 5: 9).

Just what is it that is deserving of such glory? What would it take to extract this impassioned cry from the Lord of glory? Was it the nails, thorns, scourging, spit or insults? His cry was not “Why the nails, whip, spit and mockery of men?” Though the cross, and its attending humiliation, was no doubt a horrific form of execution, it is a mistake to assume that great drops of sweat fell from the brow of Christ because of these things. There were no doubt many who faced the cross with a stout heart and a courageous mind. Are we to think Christ less brave than others?

This eternally glorious sacrifice of Christ which extracted this legitimate complaint was that on this cross, in a manner which plumbs deeper than human comprehension, Jesus **“bore our sins in His own body”** (1 Peter 2:24); the **“just”** Christ suffered for **“unjust”** men **“that He might bring us to God”** (1 Peter 3:18); **“He who knew no sin”** was made **“to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”** (2 Corinthians 5:21); the Father set His Son as a **“propitiation (to appease the wrath) by His blood...that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”** (Romans 3:25a, 26b).

A Unique Truth

It is here we see a principle unique to the Christian faith. Atheists, of course, can provide no objective explanation for good, evil or justice. And religions that find no place for the cross of Christ (Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus et al) can offer no explanation for how a good God can forgive sinners and remain just. We certainly would hold any courtroom in contempt that openly and readily ignored the crimes of those brought within their halls. A religion that offers no sacrifice or payment for sin must count on their god lacking either goodness or justice; but this sounds more like hell than heaven.

Jesus was forsaken by the Father that those who trust in Him need never fear being forsaken themselves. A good God has retained both His goodness and justice while exercising mercy on sinners.

Some of those who stood there, when they heard *that*, said, “_This Man is calling for Elijah!”⁻⁴⁸⁻ Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, __filled *it* with sour wine and put *it* on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink.⁻⁴⁹⁻ The rest said, “_Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him_” (Matthew 27:47-49)

Calling for Elijah

They mistakenly (whether this is mockery or not, I don't know) think Jesus is calling upon Elijah (since the word for God and Elijah are similar sounding). Jesus, like along with those who trust in Him, need not bring a prayer to God through a saint. Perhaps the sponge of sour wine was designed that they might understand Him more clearly. But again, they made sport of Jesus, looking for a sign.

And Jesus __cried out again with a loud voice, and __yielded up His spirit (Matthew 27:50).

Yielding up His Spirit

Jesus ends with a loud cry and yields up His Spirit, thus demonstrating who is orchestrating these events.

No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I __have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.

“This command I have received from My Father” (John 10:18).

It truly is Jesus who holds the keys to life and heaven (Revelation 3:7) and death and Hades (Revelation 1:18). It was because Jesus yielded up His Spirit, that Stephen, having been stoned to the brink of death, could with confidence cry, **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59)**. It was because Jesus was forsaken that He can promise that we will never be forsaken (Hebrews 13:5).

There are few things that give me more joy as a pastor than to look into the eyes of those at the retirement home, and express with confidence that their last breath on earth will be followed by their first breath in heaven—that they will close their eyes surrounded by tears and weakness, only to open them in the presence of Christ where there will be no more tears, ever. As a great reformer explained:

Let us now remember that it was not in reference to himself alone that Christ committed his soul to the Father, but that he included, as it were, in one bundle all the souls of those who believe in him, that they may be preserved along with his own.

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²Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the difference between focusing on what Jesus would do versus what Jesus did do (pages 2, 3)?
2. What, or who, is the Bible primarily about (pages 2, 3)?
3. Why was the cross attended by darkness (pages 3, 4)?
4. When is it unwise to have no fear of death (page 4)?
5. Is it always better for prayers to be spontaneous (page 5)?
6. Discuss the different aspects of what it means to be forsaken by God (pages 5, 6).
7. What made the sacrifice of Christ eternally glorious (pages 6, 7)?
8. Discuss one thing that is unique to the Christian faith (page 7).
9. How does Jesus yielding up His spirit benefit us (page 8)?