

His Death Was Life to Me

Matthew 27:45-56

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Lent is the traditional time of preparation for Easter. As we move through these weeks of Lent, I want to focus on the cross of Jesus: what he did for us and what it means for us. Reading the New Testament, we see the various authors presenting a variety of ways to see and understand the cross. All of these together offer us a full and rich theology of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ's death. We start with Matthew.

When Jesus died, the curtain, or veil, of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. That curtain hung in front of the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the temple. It was a huge curtain: sixty feet long, thirty feet wide and about three inches thick. It had hung there for years. It looked like it might hang there forever. This massive curtain, embroidered in blue and purple and scarlet, represented all that keeps us from God. That veil hid God's holiness. The mystery of God was in that darkness where we can't see. The veil represents all our efforts to keep God in his place, to shut God in and shield ourselves from God's presence.

The temple was arranged so that the light diminished progressively from the outside to the darkness behind the curtain. Farther in toward the Holiest Place fewer people could enter. Only the high priest could go behind the curtain into the Holiest Place, and he could do that only once a year.

But when Jesus died, the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. The curtain's tearing is closely connected to Jesus' death. It symbolizes a lot of what Jesus' death means. The torn curtain opens up the Holiest Place so God is revealed. It shows that the way to God is open. It shows that God is not contained, but is loose in the world. Jesus' death opens access to God for us.

To see more clearly how Jesus has opened the way to God, we need to consider more carefully what the Bible says about Jesus' death. This includes what Jesus himself had to say about his own death. In Matthew's

Gospel, Jesus refers to his death at least twelve times. Let's look at two of those sayings.

The first is, "...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28). This saying comes at the end of a story about the disciples James and John and their mother asking Jesus to give them the places of honor at his right and left in his kingdom. He tells them, "You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup [of suffering] I am going to drink?"

"We can," they said.

"Indeed you will. But it's up to my Father to grant the places of honor."

The other disciples get upset about all this, so Jesus tells them that greatness comes in being a servant, just as he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom.

Jesus is identifying himself as God's suffering servant described in Isaiah 53. He speaks of giving his life as a *ransom*. A ransom is a price paid so someone will be released. In that time it meant the price paid to set a slave free. So one aspect of the meaning of Jesus' death is that *he sets us free*. Jesus gave his life in our place to set us free from bondage to sin, fear and death.

Think about what traps you and hold you in bondage. Now hear the good news that by his death Jesus sets you free from that bondage.

In 1838, after a strong emancipation movement, slavery was abolished in Jamaica, to take effect on August 1. On the evening of the last day in July, a large group of former slaves gathered on the beach for a solemn, yet joyous, occasion. A large mahogany coffin had been built and placed on the sand next to a large hole in the beach. All evening the soon-to-be-freed slaves placed symbols of their slavery in the coffin. There were chains, leg-irons, whips, padlocks, and other symbols. A few minutes before midnight, the box was lowered into the hole in the beach. Pushing sand into the hole, everyone joined their voices to sing: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below, praise him above ye heavenly host, praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." They were free from their slavery (*Illustrations Unlimited* 225-26).

Jesus, in his death, sets us free from sin that held us captive. All of sin's power to enslave us can be buried because of what Jesus did for us.

I love the scene in *Pilgrim's Progress* where Christian carries a heavy burden up a hill to the cross. Just as he gets to the cross, his burden falls from his shoulders and rolls down the hill into a tomb where it's seen no more (CBN Univ Press ed. 29-30).

So, Jesus' death on the cross means freedom for us.

Another saying of Jesus we want to look at is in the upper room the night before Jesus gave his life. During a Passover meal, which involved sacrificing a lamb, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples and said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Jesus would offer himself as a sacrifice on the cross.

Then he took a cup, gave thanks, offered it to them and said, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:26-28). The blood of the covenant represents a sacrifice for forgiveness.

This aspect of what Jesus did for us is the *forgiveness of sins*. Jesus died for us so we could be forgiven. Forgiveness means that God no longer holds our sins against us. God removes them and casts them away. The phrase "the blood of Jesus" speaks of Jesus' death. He provides forgiveness for each of us through his death.

Whatever your sins are, Jesus has already died for them. Forgiveness restores our relationship with God. Through Jesus, we can enter in and get close to God. The veil of separation has been torn open. We can walk into the forgiving embrace of God and find new life.

A man came back to work in a place where he had been fired some months before. Now his work was outstanding. A fellow worker remembered how inconsistent he had been in the past and asked, "What happened to make such a difference in you?" The man said that when he was in college he was part of a fraternity initiation committee. They placed the new members in the middle of a long stretch of country road. This man was to drive his car as fast as possible straight at them. The challenge was for them to stand firm until a signal was given to jump out of the way. It was a dark night. The driver was going one hundred miles an hour and saw

the looks of terror in his headlights. The signal was given and everyone jumped clear—except one boy. The man who was driving left college after that. He later married and had two children. But the look on that boy's face as he ran over him at a hundred miles an hour haunted him all the time. He became inconsistent and moody and eventually he became a problem drinker. His wife had to work to bring in their only income. One morning he was drinking alone when someone rang the doorbell. He opened the door to find himself facing a woman who seemed strangely familiar. She sat down in the living room and told him she was the mother of the boy he had killed years before. She said she had hated him and spent agonizing nights rehearsing ways to get revenge. Then she told him about the love and forgiveness that had come when she gave her heart to Christ. She said, "I have come to let you know that I forgive you and I want you to forgive me." Telling the story, he said, "I saw deep in her eyes the permission to be the kind of man I might have been had I never killed that boy. That forgiveness changed my whole life" (*Illustrations Unlimited* 221-22).

Jesus' death on the cross means forgiveness for us.

Now, let's return to the cross itself. Hanging on the cross in the darkness, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus has already been forsaken, betrayed or denied by almost everyone who was close to him. Now he is forsaken, abandoned, by God the Father. How can this be? How can God forsake God?

Somehow, in his full humanity, Jesus was able to feel and experience what it means to be totally forsaken. As he bore our sins, as he died in the place of all sinners, Jesus felt the loneliness, the alienation, the sense of abandonment that sin causes.

Do you ever feel far from God? If God is anywhere, he is hidden behind a thick veil where we can't get to him. God certainly can't be close to us or care about us. If God does love us, where is he?

Jesus knew those feelings. He felt them with us and for us. He had prayed that he wouldn't have to do that if there were some other way. But he chose the Father's will, which included drinking to the dregs the cup of suffering, of bearing humanity's sin and God's judgment.

Now, you may remember that *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* is the first line of Psalm 22. What the psalmist went through was similar to what Jesus experienced hundreds of years later. Jesus fulfills the role of the righteous sufferer in the Psalms. But Psalm 22 ends with a note of hope: the poor would be blessed, all the ends of the earth would turn to the Lord and future generations would be told about the Lord.

Jesus was surely thinking about the whole psalm when he quoted the first line. He knew that this sense of abandonment was not the end. The few of his followers still around the cross would surely remember the rest of the psalm also. With his last gasping breaths, Jesus may have been trying to give them hope.

When do you feel most alone? What are your darkest moments? When do you sink deepest in despair? Jesus has gone deeper. He endured all his suffering and death so that we could come out of that darkness and despair into relationship with God, who never leaves us or forsakes us.

That brings us back to where we began—the tearing of the temple curtain when Jesus died. The curtain tore from top to bottom rather than from bottom to top. It was an act of God’s self-revelation, not of human curiosity and effort. God makes himself known in Jesus’ death. In the cross, God’s heart is revealed to be love. God opens the way to himself for us in Jesus’ death. *God invites each of us to come through Jesus and find freedom and forgiveness and friendship.*

There’s one more thing I want us to notice here. Look at the other dramatic events that Matthew describes surrounding Jesus’ death. There was a great earthquake, tombs opened and many righteous people who had died came to life. In the Old Testament and other Jewish writings, these were events that would happen at the End, the great and final day of the Lord. They are signs that usher in the end of the world and the final resurrection. Matthew is showing the significance of Jesus’ death. The old world is starting to die and the new world is coming on.

The tombs’ breaking open and righteous people coming to life also show that Jesus’ death breaks the power of death. The result of Jesus’ dying for us is that his death gives us life. And the life he gives overflows with freedom, forgiveness, and friendship with God.