

JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS

No psychology can explain what happened in the depths of Jesus' mind, when He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" His struggle seems to match the one in Gethsemane, when He asked the Father, if possible, to remove the cup from Him. In spite of His feeling of abandonment as God treated Him as the sin-bearer, He remained obedient in our place, and still called the Father "His God."

Those who were standing close by said, "Listen, He is calling Elijah." The Hebrew for "My God", "Eli" sounds like the first two syllables of the Hebrew name "Elijah." Very likely, they did not misunderstand Jesus' words. It was very likely deliberate mockery. It was commonly believed that Elijah would come in times of critical need to protect the innocent and rescue the righteous. This year the Jews are celebrating the Passover at the same time of the month as we celebrate our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. At every Jewish Passover still today Jews who have rejected Jesus as the Messiah and still wait for their Messiah place an empty chair for the prophet Elijah if he should come. Just about every Jew would have known that Malachi had prophesied that God would send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. He would be the Messiah's forerunner, and prepare the people for the Messiah. In fact, John the Baptist had been the promised Elijah, as Jesus clearly told His disciples earlier. The mockers meant: "If He wants to be the Messiah, He has let his run a little late. His Elijah has not even come yet, and He is about to die on His cross!"

The account of Jesus' crucifixion is full of Jesus' lowliness, His mockery, pain, and disgrace. The Gospels do not go into the details of crucifixion. They were very well known. They hint at his nakedness by reporting the division of His clothing. They hint at the practice of the Romans of crucifying victims with legs bent, so that they would live longer on the cross by reporting the breaking of the legs of the criminal on each side of Jesus. Normally crucified people died slowly. They suffered long periods of agony, sometimes for several days. They became exhausted and lapsed into unconsciousness before they died.

However, we need to add several important things about Jesus' crucifixion. It was not the severe pain of His ordeal that was the crucial thing. Other people lived longer on crosses than Jesus did. The question is: Who suffered like this? He was fully human, but He was very God. His human death was the very own death of God the Son. That gives the shedding of His blood and His death its validity. It was great enough to cover the sins of all other human beings.

Another is to be careful not to say that the nailing to the cross took His life. Jesus said earlier (John 10) that He would lay down His life for the sheep. No one took it from Him, but He laid it down of Himself. He freely gave up His life. If He had used the almighty power that He had at His disposal, His enemies could not have laid hands on Him, much less have Him nailed to a cross.

Another is the description of Jesus' death. The Gospel writers say, "He gave up His spirit." Remember that Pilate expressed surprise that Jesus had died so quickly. We might say that the ill treatment during His trial, particularly the scourging, had caused His death earlier than usual. However, the Gospel writers say that Jesus gave a loud cry just before He died. His life did not, as was usual for crucified people, end with a whimper or prior lapse into unconsciousness. John reports that Jesus received the sour wine, and cried, "It is finished." That meant much more than, "I am dying now." He had accomplished everything that He came to earth to do. He had fulfilled the many prophecies about Himself, and completed the atonement in His blood for the salvation and eternal life of sinners. The Father's raising Him from the dead was the Father's Amen to Jesus' statement: "It is finished."

Part of the meaning of Jesus' death is explained by the report that when He died "the curtain in the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. The earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had died were raised. They came out of the tombs, after Jesus had risen, and went into the Holy City, and appeared to many people." The tearing of the curtain signified that Christ had made it possible for believers to go directly into God's presence. The Old Testament Law had been fulfilled. Sacrifice for sin was no longer necessary. Sprinkling of blood in the Holy of Holies was no longer necessary. A new order had at last arrived. Through His blood believers have direct access to God. The Jewish Talmud has a story about a certain Rabbi, Johanan ben Zakkai. It reports that forty years before the fall of Jerusalem, in other words, right at this time, the doors of the temple opened of their own accord.

The splitting of the rocks by an earthquake takes on particular significance if the claims by Ron Wyatt are correct. He claimed that Jesus' blood, which came out when a soldier pierced His side, fell through a crack that opened up at the foot of the cross, down about ten metres, directly onto the Mercy Seat, the golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant had not been heard since shortly before Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem. That was some six hundred years before. The claim was that it had been hidden in a cave directly below the place of the crucifixion.

Matthew reported the reaction of the Roman centurion who was in command of the four soldiers at Jesus' crucifixion. He said, "Certainly this was the Son of God!" As a pagan he may have been acknowledging that, since the gods had intervened to support this victim of injustice, Jesus must have been one whom the gods especially favoured. However, it seems probably that Matthew understood his words, as the one officially in charge, to state a profound truth. He had heard Jesus' enemies telling Jesus to come down from the cross because He claimed to be the Son of God. The startling events confirmed for him something very important about Jesus. For believers, His statement confirmed the words of the Father, "This is My Son" at Jesus' baptism and at His transfiguration, and Jesus' own confession before Caiaphas that He was the Christ, the Son of God.

Matthew concludes his account of the crucifixion by referring to the faithfulness of a group of women who had followed Jesus from Galilee. They were women who had followed Jesus from Galilee. They had been supporting Jesus and His

disciples from their own means. Jesus had rescued Mary Magdalene and some of the others from evil spirits and diseases. Many of them were at Golgotha, watching from a distance. Mary, Jesus' mother, was also there until John took her away. The other women stayed with Jesus until the end. Their devotion contrasted strongly with the way in which Jesus' disciples failed, and also contrasts with the hatred of the other groups at Golgotha. This was the group of women who also bought spices to anoint Jesus' body after the burial. Such quiet and faithful devotion must have been well pleasing to the Lord. May God bless our Good Friday as we spend time reflecting, looking up at His cross, as the source of our eternal salvation!