

- e. Jesus' assurance to the penitent robber was just one of the crucifixion statements attributed to Him by the four gospel writers. Once again, the four evangelists provided different accounts with Matthew and Mark paralleling each other by including one and the same statement. Luke and John, on the other hand, each recorded three different statements to fill out the so-called "seven sayings."

All four evangelists mentioned women observing Jesus' crucifixion, but Matthew and Mark located them at a distance while John recorded that four – Jesus' mother, His aunt, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene – stood very near the cross (19:25; cf. Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:27). This set the stage for Jesus' first words from the cross in John's account which He spoke to His mother and "the disciple whom He loved." Again, John himself was likely this disciple and Jesus instructed him to thereafter care for Mary as his own mother and Mary to embrace John as her son (19:26-27). Though some have used this to argue for Mary's perpetual virginity (a Roman Catholic dogma), it seems Jesus was highlighting the new family relationship He was inaugurating in Himself – a relationship of the Spirit having its most powerful imagery in John's apocalypse (cf. Mark 3:31ff; Revelation 12). Jesus addressing Mary as *woman* (cf. 2:1-4) rather than *mother* further suggests this idea.

This is not, however, to deny Jesus' sincere concern for Mary's well-being after His departure. His love for the world led Him to embrace Calvary and that love didn't cease on the cross; whether pleading with His Father to forgive His executioners (Luke 23:33-34) or looking to His mother's care, Jesus' sole concern – even in the throes of His agony – was the good of others. Indeed, the world's good was the very goal of His agony. Such self-giving love which seeks the true good of all others originates in heaven and is foreign to this world, most manifestly the hierarchical ancient world which exalted power and domination.

John also recorded Jesus' words, "*I am thirsty*" (19:28), likely to reinforce the connection he (and his counterparts) drew between the Messiah's ordeal and David's prophetic words in Psalm 22 (ref. Psalm 22:15; cf. also v. 18 with John 19:24 and v. 17 with John 19:36). The abased and abused king of Israel who'd entrusted himself to Yahweh's faithfulness, confident of the glories and universal blessing it would achieve, was now finding his fulfillment in his greater Son. John had come to recognize that Jesus' ignominious death was the pinnacle act of the Father's faithfulness by which He'd establish His kingdom and gather all the earth's families to Himself in renewal, worship and service (Psalm 22:27-31).

Matthew and Mark also emphasized the prophetic connection with Psalm 22 by including Jesus' so-called "cry of dereliction" in their account of His crucifixion (cf. Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 with Psalm 22:1). This plea has immense theological import and so deserves some careful consideration. First of all, was Jesus' cry spontaneous or was He knowingly and intentionally connecting Himself and His suffering with Psalm 22? Did He speak these words to "fulfill the Scriptures" or did they express His genuine perplexity?

Matthew and Mark's inclusion of just this one utterance indicates that they viewed it as important, but neither connects it with Psalm 22. For His part, Jesus understood His relationship with the Scriptures (5:39; Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:25-27, 44) and so almost certainly recognized that His words echoed this psalm. But that doesn't mean they didn't express His own personal anguish and perplexity; nothing in the text suggests that Jesus' cry was either staged or insincere.

Jesus *felt* that His Father had forsaken Him, but was that merely His perception (cf. Luke 23:46)? And if the Father did forsake His Son, how was that the case? Was the Godhead now divided? Matthew and Mark provide insight by connecting Jesus' cry with the darkness that descended on the land. Many have explained this phenomenon in terms of a solar eclipse (cf. Luke 23:44-45), but such eclipses are impossible during a full moon (as at Passover). Others, noting the "obscuring" of the sun, contend that the darkness was caused by either a sandstorm or the dense clouds of a thunderstorm. Whatever the actual explanation, the point isn't the mechanism of the darkness but its *meaning*, which the Scripture itself provides.

Very often darkness is a symbol of divine judgment, *particularly God's judgment of His covenant people*. Such judgment is provoked by the nation's covenant violation and has its ultimate goal in purging and restoration. The great expression of this judgment in the Scriptures is the prophetic "Day of the Lord": The "sons" who'd given themselves to spiritual darkness would experience Yahweh's retributive darkness, but unto the goal of renewed light and illumination (cf. Psalm 74:1-23, 82:1-8, 107:1-14; Joel 2:1-32, 3:1-21; Amos 5:18-20; Zephaniah 1:14-18). Most importantly, Yahweh would accomplish this mighty work in connection with His Messiah (cf. Isaiah 7:1-9:7, 42:1-16, 49:1-13, 59:1-60:5).

Whatever phenomenon caused the distressing midday darkness, God wanted those witnessing this celestial sign to connect it with what was taking place on Golgotha. For the Romans, this meant perceiving cosmic, even divine implications in the death of this peculiar Nazarene (Matthew 27:54). For the Israelites, it meant associating Jesus' crucifixion with the prophesied "day of darkness"; in some mysterious and unforeseen way, Yahweh seemed to be acting in this death to fulfill His pledge to arise and judge Israel and the nations.

The interpretive key, then, is the oft-missed truth that Jesus, the son of Abraham, embodied Israel in Himself in order to take Israel's judgment and so secure Israel's forgiveness and restoration to her God. Bearing in Himself Israel's unfaithfulness and sin, Jesus was experiencing Yahweh's righteous response to it: Yahweh was forsaking His *incarnate Son* in precisely the way He'd forsaken His *covenant son* centuries earlier. Israel's exile was the proof of her forsakenness; Yahweh had departed from her even as He sent her away and the empty temple was the painful reminder that her alienation and abandonment continued. And this woeful plight wouldn't end until the sin – the covenant violation – that provoked Yahweh's departure and Israel's exile was atoned. That was what the cross was accomplishing and the darkness directed Israel to that understanding.

The Father was treating His Son according to the truth that He'd embodied Israel – the Abrahamic household – in Himself. He was the covenant “son of God” (Exodus 4:22-23; Isaiah 49:1-5) as the covenant “seed of Abraham” (Galatians 3:16) and that meant that He embodied Israel's covenant unfaithfulness and sin as well as its covenant identity and status. He was taking Israel's forsakenness that Israel should be forsaken no longer; He was enduring Israel's judgment that the promise of forgiveness and restoration attached to it should be fulfilled. And though it wasn't yet clear, Israel's restoration was to occur *in Him*: Even as Jesus was Israel under judgment, so He was to be the beginning of a new Israel built upon Himself as the cornerstone (Galatians 3:16-29; cf. Romans 2:28-29). And this restored Israel would at last fulfill its covenant calling to the nations in and through Him (cf. Psalm 22:27-28 with Isaiah 11:1-12, 49:1-13, 53:1-55:13). Forgiveness, cleansing, life and ingathering would flow from Him to Abraham's natural branches and then, through them, to the Gentile wild branches (cf. Genesis 12:3 with Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:1-39; Romans 3-4, 9-11; Galatians 3:1-9).

Jesus understood His messianic identity and mission and so the reason and justness of His Father “forsaking” Him. At the same time, He was the perfectly devoted Son “in the bosom of the Father” (1:18), so that He carried out His role with an anguish that no other human being can even begin to imagine.

One final consideration is the onlookers' response to Jesus' plea. Why did His words cause certain persons to believe that He was calling for Elijah (Matthew 27:47-49; Mark 15:35-36)? Why would anyone think this and why did Matthew and Mark include this in their accounts? It seems that the idea of Elijah came from Jesus' repeated word, *Eli* (“my God”) and commentators generally conclude that these observers either misunderstood Him or intentionally twisted His words to further mock Him. That they responded by giving Jesus sour wine to wet His lips and so help Him to speak indicates that they did believe He was calling for Elijah and they wanted to see what would happen (Mark 15:36). The rabbis taught the people to expect Elijah at the time of Messiah's appearing (cf. Matthew 11:1-14, 17:1-13 with Malachi 4:5-6) and so, if Jesus really was the Messiah, Elijah *should* appear and deliver Him so that He could then deliver the nation.

Whatever the bystanders' intention, Elijah didn't appear. Instead Jesus uttered His final words and died there before their eyes. Matthew and Mark noted only that Jesus cried out loudly, while Luke recorded that He spoke to His Father, committing His spirit to Him. John, on the other hand, had Jesus proclaiming, “*It is finished.*” This declaration profoundly summarized the purpose and outcome, not just of Jesus' cross, but His entire life from the point of His conception. He'd come into the world, not to “pay for sins” so that people can get into heaven, but to banish the curse and deliver and renew the whole creation. His Father had sent Him as the embodiment of His love and faithfulness (3:16-17); Jesus was Yahweh returned to Zion (1:19-23) to accomplish the great Passover and Exodus promised by the prophets and the entire Israelite history (5:39-40). That was His mission and He knew, as He expired, that He'd succeeded (Revelation 5:1-14, 21:1-6).