

Matthew 27:45-54

Introduction

Mark tells us that it was the third hour when Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:25). The third hour would have been 9:00 in the morning, but since time was not kept precisely, it could have actually been 9:30 or 10:00 (cf. John 19:14). From the time that Jesus was crucified until the sixth hour (about 12:00 noon) Jesus was derided by those who passed by, mocked by the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, and reviled even by the robbers who were crucified with Him. Jesus hung there on the cross, suspended by nails, for three hours. And then came the sixth hour.

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

The sixth hour is high noon, the time when the sun is strongest and brightest. But it was at the sixth hour that darkness came over all the land. And the darkness lasted for three hours. We know that the darkness was not a solar eclipse because the moon was full and because the darkness lasted for so long. It also seems unlikely that this was an especially severe thunderstorm because Matthew mentions only the darkness. It was the darkness, in combination with the earthquake that caused the soldiers to be filled with awe. We don't know what means God used to cause the darkness, if He used any at all. Were they thick, black clouds that held no water? Was it the very "hand" of God covering the sun? What we do know for sure is that this darkness was an *unnatural* darkness. It was the dark of night in the middle of the day. And so we're reminded of Scriptures like these:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 28:29 — ***You shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness***, and you shall not prosper in your ways. And you shall be only oppressed and robbed continually, and there shall be no one to help you.
- ✓ Jeremiah 15:9 — She who bore seven has grown feeble; she has fainted away; ***her sun went down while it was yet day***; she has been shamed and disgraced. And the rest of them I will give to the sword before their enemies, declares the LORD.
- ✓ Amos 8:9-10 — On that day... ***I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight***. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.

Darkness was a sign of God's ***wrath and judgment***. It was a sign of His terrifying anger against wickedness and sin. So as Jesus hung there on the cross, and the noonday sun was blotted out, and for three hours darkness covered all the land, we know that God was angry and wrathful. It would only be natural and right for us to cower down in fear as we wait for the stroke of God's judgment. Will God pour out His wrath now on those who have crucified His Son? Will He punish them sevenfold for their sins? Will He give them what they deserve? Will He give the whole world full of rebel sinners what it deserves? But three hours passed and nothing seemed to be happening. The soldiers, and those passing by, and the chief priests, and scribes, and elders of

the people still lived. And Jesus was still hanging on the cross. For three more hours Jesus hung there, and for three long hours the darkness covered all the land.

There are some who say that God was “displaying his displeasure and judgment upon humanity for crucifying his Son” (ESV Study Bible). But darkness in the Scriptures is not a warning of future judgment – it is accompanied by judgment. So either this darkness is an empty and hollow threat, or it is the sign of wrath and anger and judgment poured out. We look in vain for a judgment poured out on sinful humanity. But when we raise our eyes to the cross, we see *Jesus* still hanging there – the *innocent sufferer*. Why has the noon day sun been turned into darkness? Where should we look to find God’s fury, and anger, and wrath?

II. Matthew 27:46 — And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In Psalm twenty-two, it was the innocent sufferer who cried out:

- ✓ Psalm 22:1–2 — My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.

We know from verses 32-44 that Jesus isn’t just one more innocent sufferer. He is the ultimate *fulfillment* of the innocent sufferer. He is the holy, and pure, and spotless, and blameless Son of God. He is the one who said:

- ✓ Matthew 11:27 — *No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.*

He is the one of whom the Father said both at His baptism and at His transfiguration, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17; 17:5). Even in the garden, when Jesus was in torment and agony, He could still begin His prayers each time with the words, “My Father” (26:39, 42, 44). But now, on the cross, with all the land covered in darkness, He cries out, “My God, My God... why have You forsaken Me?” These words are the window into a pit of blackness that cannot be fathomed or imagined by any human mind. Here is the wrath and fury of God poured out not on those who mock and crucify His Son – but on Jesus. Here is a mystery that we can never understand. How can God the Son be forsaken by God the Father? How can this *possibly* be? We don’t know how. We just know that He was. And so the question we should always be asking is the same one Jesus asked – not “how,” but “why?” **Why** did God forsake His beloved Son with whom He was well pleased? **Why** did God pour out His wrath on an innocent sufferer? Jesus said:

- ✓ Matthew 20:28 — The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom *for many*.

And at the Last Supper with His disciples, He said:

- ✓ Matthew 26:28 — This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out *for many for the forgiveness of sins*.

The death of Jesus was a **substitutionary** death. It was a death *for*, and *in the place* of others. This alone can explain *why* Jesus was forsaken by His Father. Listen to Paul:

- ✓ Galatians 3:13 — Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law *by becoming a curse for us*—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”

And then listen to Peter:

- ✓ 1 Peter 2:24 — He himself **bore our sins** in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

The darkness over all the land was the sign not of God’s wrath poured out upon sinful humanity, but of God’s wrath poured out upon His only Son. His death in our place was a suffering of the full wrath of God in our place (cf. Isaiah 53:4-6, 8, 10). His death in our place was a suffering of the full curse and *punishment* of God against our sin. This is *why* the noonday sun was turned to darkness. This is *why* Jesus’ cry of utter desolation, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

My brothers and sisters, God forbid that we should ever wink at sin. It is at the heart of our human deceitfulness and pride that we can somehow be blinded to the blackness and the wretchedness of our sin. But every single one of our sins (flowing as they do from a sinful nature) fully deserves the fury of God’s everlasting wrath. We should know this and be terrified, and shake, and tremble. It was for the sins that we treat so lightly that Jesus suffered the excruciating torments of the curse of God. Let us never, ever think that we are basically good, because if we do, and if we are, then the death of Christ can have nothing to do with us, and we can only perish in our sins. It is only as we come to see our total depravity in sin that we can come to truly understand the meaning of Christ’s **substitutionary** death (His death *in our place*). It is only as we come to see that Christ’s death was truly **substitutionary** (*in our place*) that we can come to truly understand our own sinful, and total depravity. And so our **only** hope is the cross. Our **only** hope in all the world is Christ crucified – *for us* and *in our place*. He is our only hope. He is our all in all. There is no other.

But the bystanders were still convinced that Jesus was suffering for His own sins.

- III. Matthew 27:47–49** — And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”

The bystanders go on mocking Jesus even as God proclaims the righteousness of the one He punishes. It was the innocent sufferer who cried out in Psalm sixty-nine:

- ✓ Psalm 69:20–21 — Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and *for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink*.

And so we see again the theme of substitution – the pure for the sinful, the blameless for the wicked, the righteous for the unrighteous.

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 5:21 — For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

IV. Matthew 27:50 — And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

“The Son of Man came,” Jesus said, “to *give* his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus was not ultimately the victim of a miscarriage of justice. And neither was He just an unwitting, or even an unwilling sacrifice for sin. He laid down His own life for us. He was the priest and He was the sacrifice. He *offered Himself* up to God in order to appease (propitiate) God’s holy wrath and make full satisfaction for our sins – for *my* sins. So listen to the writer of Hebrews:

- ✓ Hebrews 7:27 (9:14; 10:10, 12) — [Jesus] has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when *he offered up himself*.
- ✓ Ephesians 5:2 — Christ loved us and *gave himself up for us*, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

When His spiritual torment and forsakenness was complete—when Jesus had drunk to the dregs the full wrath of God against all His elect—then “Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit.”

But was it really enough? Was it really sufficient? Might there still be any twinge of doubt left to gnaw at our souls? Was the wrath of God against all of our sin fully, and absolutely, and completely, and finally satisfied in the death of the Innocent Sufferer? Was Christ’s atoning sacrifice *enough* for guilty, vile, wretches like us? Was Christ’s death on the cross fully *sufficient* for alienated and hostile sinners like us? Matthew goes on to tell us what happened next.

V. Matthew 27:51–53 — And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

In other words – **YES!** This was *full* atonement, all-sufficient, lacking in nothing, accomplishing perfectly, and completely, and totally, and for all time the eternal salvation of all God’s people. The curtain of the temple symbolized the separation between a holy God and his chosen, but still sinful people. The writer of Hebrews says:

- ✓ Hebrews 9:7 — Into the [most holy place] only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.

Not Moses, not Joshua, not David or Hezekiah, not Elijah, or Isaiah, or Jeremiah, nor any of the holiest saints of the Old Testament were ever allowed access to the presence of God behind the curtain. But when Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom! In other words, God Himself tore the curtain in two. No longer was the earthly temple, with all of its protective barriers, the place where God would meet with His people. Now Christ Himself is the meeting place where God and man meet together – **without** walls, **without** curtains, and **without** barriers of any kind. Through His death on the cross, Jesus accomplished for all of God's elect full reconciliation and peace with God. In Christ we have unhindered access to God in the most intimate communion and the sweetest fellowship.

- ✓ Romans 5:10–11 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-19) — For if while we were enemies we were **reconciled to God by the death of his Son**, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **through whom we have now received reconciliation**.

The tearing of the curtain means full atonement. The tearing of the temple curtain means that the penalty for our sins has been finally, and fully, and completely satisfied, once and for all, and forever! If the penalty for our sins was finally, and fully, and completely satisfied at the cross, then there can no longer be any barrier of any kind to hinder our most intimate communion with God.

- ✓ Hebrews 10:19–22 — Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near** with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

Let us be *faithful* to enjoy the privilege of sweet fellowship with God *through Jesus Christ*, and Him *crucified*. “The curtain of the temple was torn in two,” but then there’s more.

“The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.” What actually happened at the moment of Christ’s death? Well, we know for sure that the tombs were opened, which is obviously a symbol and a pointer to resurrection. But did the resurrection of these saints also happen immediately, or did it take place only after Christ’s resurrection? If the saints were resurrected immediately (which means that they apparently stayed in the tombs until Christ’s resurrection), then it seems most likely to me that they were *not* resurrected with glorified bodies because Paul says that Christ is the “*first fruits* of those who are asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). On the other hand, if their resurrection happened *after* Christ’s resurrection (which is also when they appeared to many in Jerusalem; cf. Geneva Bible) then it seems most likely to me that they would have been raised with glorified, incorruptible bodies. This fits with the fact that the time they were on earth seems to have been very temporary (Matthew says only that they *appeared* to many). This also

fits better with the apocalyptic events of the earth shaking and the rocks splitting. And finally, a resurrection with glorified bodies seems more appropriate and fitting in connection with the climactic events of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. In this case Matthew tells about the resurrection *here*, at the moment of Christ's death, because it was at this point that the tombs were opened (anticipating the resurrection of many of the saints), and because the resurrection of the saints is the triumphant result not only of Christ's resurrection, but also of His atoning *death*.

- ✓ Romans 6:23 — The wages of sin is death.
- ✓ Romans 5:12 — Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.

But if even a few of the saints have now been raised to resurrection life with glorified, incorruptible bodies, then the power of death must be finally broken and the penalty for the sins of *all* God's people finally, and fully, and completely satisfied, once and for all, and forever! If the penalty for our sins was finally, and fully, and completely satisfied at the cross, then the resurrection of *all* the saints to everlasting life has been absolutely, and totally, and irrevocably guaranteed. Knowing these things, may all fear of death be *lost* for us.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 15:55–58 — “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

VI. Matthew 27:54 — When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

For Matthew, the centurion speaks more truly than he could have possibly known. The claims of Jesus, the way that Jesus suffered, and the events that accompanied His death were enough to convince the centurion that Jesus was the Son of God. But if once we can see that Jesus is the Son of God, then another question immediately arises, and it demands an answer. It's literally clamoring for an answer. If Jesus truly was the Son of God, then *why* did He suffer and die?

Conclusion

The darkness covering all the land, the cry of desolation, the Innocent Sufferer, the spirit yielded up, the curtain torn in two, the tombs that were opened... all of these things are declaring and proclaiming that Christ's death was a substitutionary *death*. Jesus, the innocent sufferer and holy Son of God was bearing in His own person the *punishment* for our sins. And in doing so, He propitiated and satisfied God's wrath **in full**, He paid the ransom **in full**, He accomplished reconciliation and peace with God **in full**, He conquered and demolished death **in full**.

When Christ died on the cross, He was not simply dying to make our salvation *possible* – *if only* (by chance) we will believe. He died to infallibly seal and secure and *guarantee* our salvation – as those who have been *made willing* to believe by God's free and sovereign, and regenerating

and life-giving grace. If, at the cross, Christ paid the ransom in full, then **all** those *for whom* the ransom was paid **must** be saved in full. If, at the cross, Christ satisfied the wrath of God in full, then **all** those *for whom* Christ suffered the wrath of God **must** be saved from the wrath of God in full. Otherwise, we have emptied the atonement of all its true power and meaning.

We love to affirm that God has expressed in the cross His love for the whole world (cf. John 3:16). We are zealous to affirm that “*whoever*” believes in Jesus will not perish but have everlasting life. We must not deny that all are responsible and all are commanded to believe in Jesus. We delight to affirm that God extends to all sinners the earnest and sincere invitation to come to Christ.

But on the other hand, all of these truths **must not** lead us to deny the true power and meaning of the atonement as a substitutionary sacrifice which actually **accomplishes** the salvation of all the vast multitude of God’s elect who have been chosen by grace. Otherwise, we have no firm foundation for our own souls. Otherwise, we would be right to always be in doubt about our salvation – for it ultimately depends on us. Otherwise, the good news that we proclaim to sinners is no longer a message of free and sovereign grace. Otherwise, we should empty the cross of all its dazzling power and beauty. We must not set up our own thinking as the judge of God’s Word. Charles Spurgeon writes:

“[There are many] who hold that Christ, when he died, did not die with an intent to save any particular person; and they teach that Christ’s death does not in itself secure, beyond doubt, the salvation of any one man living [He only died to make salvation possible for everyone]... We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ’s death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved.”

Brothers and sisters, *this* is the power of the atonement. This is the power of the cross. Listen again as Spurgeon shows us how *we* ought to be glorying in this truth:

“God has punished Christ, why should he punish twice for one offence? Christ has died for all his people’s sins, and if thou art in the covenant [of Christ’s blood], thou art one of Christ’s people. Damned thou canst not be. Suffer for thy sins thou canst not. Until God can be unjust, and demand two payments for one debt, *he cannot destroy [a single] soul for whom Jesus died.*”

Brothers and sisters, *this* is the power of the atonement. This is the power of the cross. The darkness covering all the land, the cry of desolation, the Innocent Sufferer, the spirit yielded up, the curtain torn in two, the tombs that were opened... all of these things are declaring and proclaiming the power of the cross – not to make salvation only *possible* for all (*if only...*), but to make salvation infallibly *certain* and beyond all doubt for all those whom the Father has given to His Son (cf. John 17:9) and who have been chosen **in Christ** before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4; cf. Rev. 5:9-10). ***This is the saving POWER of the cross!!!***