Chapter 114: "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Matthew 27:45–54

As we come to death of Jesus, we must approach this passage of Scripture with reverent wonder, holy fear, and joyful gratitude. Our Lord took upon himself a human nature precisely so that he might undergo the miseries of hell on the cross, and ultimately that he might die for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures. Here we discover the heart of the gospel's extraordinarily good news: *Jesus was forsaken by God so that we might be reconciled to God*.

Christ's Dereliction (Matt. 27:45–46)

Jesus' death causes the upheaval of creation, beginning with a plague of darkness: "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour" (v. 45). Although God may have used natural phenomena to bring about this darkness, we should recognize that this could not have been a solar eclipse. To begin, Matthew also reports that this darkness was "over all the land," whereas the effects of eclipses are more localized.[1] Passover was held on full moon, on the (Jewish lunar calendar's) fourteenth day of the month Abib (Ex. 12:6; 13:4). A full moon takes place when the moon is on the far side of the earth from the sun, while a solar eclipse can only take place during a new moon, when the moon is on the near side of the earth from the sun. Also, eclipses never last three hours, as Matthew describes here.[2]

Instead, Matthew clearly means for us to see that this darkness was supernatural in its character and significance. In addition to echoing the plague of darkness against Egypt (Ex. 10:22), this darkness seems to have a specific prophecy in view: "'And on that day,' declares the Lord GOD, 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight'" (Amos 8:9).[3] Thus, this darkness has judgment in view—partially the judgment that God poured out against Jesus for our sins, but also partially against the rulers of this age who so wickedly crucified the Lord of Glory. Furthermore, this sign of darkness, along with the tearing of the curtain, the quaking of the earth, the splitting of the rocks, and the rising of the dead (vv. 51–53), bore witness to the "the astonishing design of God in the death of Christ."[4]

After three hours of darkness, Jesus speaks: "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?'" (v. 46). It is rare for the Gospel writers to record Jesus' words in the original language in which he spoke them (here, Hebrew and Aramaic). Here, the effect is to make "us hear Christ himself

[1] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 720.

[2] Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 970.

[3] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 720.

[4] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:316.

repeating the very words which then proceeded from his mouth."[5] More astonishing, though, are the words that are recorded for us. Since these are the opening words of Psalm 22, some have surmised that Jesus is strengthening himself with the words of comfort that appear toward the end of the psalm (Ps. 22:22–31). In response to this idea, many have observed that Jesus could have simply cited *those* words if that were his purpose. No, we must deal with the words that Jesus actually speaks. What does Jesus mean when he claims that God has forsaken him?

At one level, Jesus is giving words to his agony: "his anguish he was so far from being soothed by the assistance or favor of his Father, that he felt himself to be in some measure estranged from him."[6] The emphasis seems to focus specifically on his relationship to his Father, which is reflected in the way that Jesus addresses his Father as "my God." Part of the reason for this arises from the language of Scripture, but, as France notes, Jesus always addresses his Father as "Father" and never as "my God."[7] Yet, some commentators go to far and skew the nature of Christ's forsakenness on the cross when they read this forsakenness back into the inner communion of the Father and the Son within the Trinity.[8] Others seem to avoid the problem of rupturing the bonds of the Trinity that they largely render Christ's words meaningless. We are treading on the holiest of ground, and we must be very careful in the way that we characterize Jesus' words.

Good theology and Christology help us immensely here. Theologically, the one suffering on the cross is the second person of the Trinity, God the Son. Within his divine nature as the Son, the Son cannot suffer (he is "impassible"), and the perichoretic (mutually indwelling) relationship within the Trinity between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot be ruptured or damaged. If the Son suffered, died, or became separated from his Father, then the Son would cease to be God—and, indeed, *God* would cease to be God.

Additionally, the theological term "person" does not quite mean what we usually mean by "person," since a "person" usually refers to an individual who possesses a distinct human nature to himself or herself. We reject the idea that the three persons of the Godhead each possess a distinct divine nature, as though we worshiped three gods. Yet, our *one* God exists as *three* persons, so that "person" expresses the idea of *agency*. An agent acts distinctly, although on behalf of someone else. In God's external works of creation and redemption, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit each work distinctly; however, each works on behalf of the others to such a degree that the church teaches that the external works of the Trinity are indivisible. That is, each person works distinctly, but each person's work is inseparable from the works of the other two persons, since the three persons act indivisibly as one God. The Father sent the Son to suffer and die; the Son personally endured suffering and death, according to the will of his Father; and the Son offered himself up to his Father through the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14). Since God is indivisible, we must never say that God the Son was separated from God the Father at the cross, or at any other time.

Then, our Christology teaches that the eternal Son took to himself a second nature of true

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[5] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:319.

[6] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:318.

[7] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1076.

[8] e.g., as Morris writes: "When we put such passages of Scripture together, it seems that in the working out of salvation for sinners the hitherto unbroken communion between the Father and the Son was mysteriously broken." (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 721–22.)

humanity, so that his divinity was united to his humanity "without conversion, composition, or confusion" (WCF 8.2) within the single person of God the Son. By united two natures in a single person, God the Son can act *personally* through either and/or both natures. It is important to remember that "natures do nothing in the abstract,"[9] so that we do not say (for example) that Christ's *human nature* suffered and died. Rather, we say the person of God the Son experienced suffering and death *through* his human nature, but *not* through his divine nature.

These preliminary statements help us to speak about Christ's forsakenness at the cross. Through his divine nature, God the Son enjoyed perfect, blessed unity with his Father and the Holy Spirit as the three persons worked indivisibly and inseparably to accomplish the plan of redemption set out before the foundation of the world was laid. What delight and joy the Triune God took in accomplishing his plans, for it *pleased* the Triune God to crush Christ (Isa. 53:10). At the same time, through his human nature, God the Son experienced the forsakenness of his Father's presence. The same person experienced *both* (in the form of God, through his divine nature) perfect, unruptured, blissful unity with the Father *and* (in the form of a servant, through his human nature) absolute, tormented, agonizing forsakenness by his Father.[10]

Christ's Death (Matt. 27:47–50)

The responses of the crowd are difficult to interpret, and it is likely that different people acted at different times for different reasons. First, we see some level of confusion: "And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, 'This man is calling Elijah'" (v. 47). Hearing Jesus say "Eli" ("my God"), they thought that Jesus was calling upon Elijah, especially in light of the prophecy that Elijah would return "before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Mal. 4:5).[11] It is also possible, however, that the people (or, perhaps, some of the people) knew full well what Jesus had said and instead played on his words to mock him.[12]

Next, we see some measure of concern for Jesus:[13] "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" (v. 48). On the other hand, it may be that the purpose of bringing him something to drink "may have been to prolong life and agony, while with false piety the onlookers say they will wait for Elijah to rescue him (v.49)."[14]

Regarding the question of whether Elijah would come, I think Nolland's suggestion of "idle

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[9] Mark Jones, *God Is: A Devotional Guide to the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 47.

[10] For this distinction, see Augustine's reflections on the language of Philippians 2:6–7: "They say that the S?on its less than the Father because it is written in the Lord's own words, *The Father is greater than I* (Jn 14:28); the truth, however, shows that as far as that goes the Son is less even than himself. How could it be otherwise with him who *emptied himself, taking the form of a servant* (Phil 2:7)? For he did not so take the form of a servant that he lost the form of God in which he was equal to the Father." (Augustine, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 76ff (§1.3).)

[11] Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 845.

[12] So Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 973.

[13] Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 845.

[14] Carson, "Matthew," 648.

curiosity" seems closest to the mark.[15] They likely did not give much credence to the idea that Elijah could come, but who knows? Jesus had seemed extraordinary, so maybe this could be the moment when something significant might happen: "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him" (v. 49). On the other hand, even this too may be mockery.[16]

In the midst of confusion, concern, and curiosity—mixed, undoubtedly, with loud voices of mockery—Jesus suddenly dies: "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit" (v. 50). Morris writes, "Most of the crucified were in a state of absolute exhaustion at the end, but Jesus' utterance of a loud shout does not comply with this and supports the view that to some extent his death was voluntary."[17] At the very least, Nolland writes that the purpose of this cry "is to make clear that Jesus does not die a broken man. He does not slip slowly and passively into death, resigned to the way things work out in this world; he remains an assertive presence right to the moment of death."[18] Then, after this cry, Jesus "yielded up his spirit" and died.

Christ's Disruption (Matt. 27:51–54)

If there were any doubt as to Matthew's meaning of what happened when Jesus "yielded up his spirit," the subsequent reactions confirm the catastrophic nature of our Savior's death. First, the temple was opened: "And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (v. 51a). The significance of tearing the curtain that had veiled the Holy of Holies was twofold. (1) This curtain was an essential part of the regulations of the Levitical priesthood, since only the high priest was permitted to enter, and then only once per year. To tear this curtain was to abolish the Levitical priesthood from further use, since a new priest had offered a once-for-all sacrifice. The Levitical priestly order had been abolished, foreshadowing the coming destruction of the temple itself within forty years.[19] (2) The tearing of the curtain symbolized, "in some respects, an opening of heaven, that God may now invite the members of his Son to approach him with familiarity."[20]

Second, the earth itself shook, splitting the rocks and opening the tombs (vv. 51b–52a). Creation seems to revolt at the death of her creator, so that the rocks and tombs (which were shut up behind stones) split open. If the tearing of the temple curtain opened the path to God himself, the tearing open of the rocks and the graves open the path to resurrected life. This splitting open of the tombs prepared for something that Matthew narrates here, but that does not happen until Sunday, when Jesus himself is raised from the dead: "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" (vv. 52b–53). The way Matthew writes that these saints "were raised" is the language of resurrection, suggesting that these saints were raised with glorified bodies like what we will enjoy at

[15] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1209.

[16] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1123.

[17] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 723.

[18] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1211.

[19] Carson, "Matthew," 649–50.

[20] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:323.

the final resurrection.[21] With Jesus' resurrection, these were also resurrected—ensuring the fact that we too will be resurrected on the last day.

Third, the heart of the (Gentile) centurion was opened: "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!'" The centurion had apparently been one of the group of soldiers who had sat down to keep watch over Jesus (Matt. 27:36). With this front row view, he becomes an eyewitness to all the strange events that accompany Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He—along with others who were with him—is awestruck and acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God. It is unclear what he understood at this moment about Jesus; however, within the Gospel of Matthew this is an important development, as France observes:

> God has twice declared that Jesus is his son (3:17; 17:5); demons have recognized him as such (4:3, 6; 8:29); Jesus has said so himself (11:25-27; cf. 24:36), has frequently referred to God as his "Father," and has even on two occasions hinted publicly [page 1085] that he is God's "Son" (21:37-39; 22:42-45); the disciples have hailed him as "God's son" in a moment of crisis (14:33, a declaration very similar to this one), and Peter has included this title in his considered estimate of Jesus (16:16). But right up to the time of Jesus' trial no human observer outside the disciple group has used such language of Jesus, and at the Sanhedrin hearing it has formed part of the basis for his condemnation (26:63), subsequently providing the ammunition for Jewish mockery of this preposterous claim (27:40, 43)….Like the other centurion we met earlier in the gospel, this officer and his men have displayed faith beyond that of "anyone in Israel" (8:10), and so they, too, represent the many who will come from east and west to join the Jewish patriarchs in the kingdom of heaven (8:11-12).[22]

With this centurion, we too must survey the scene and declare for ourselves: "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Discussion Questions

1. What does the darkness that descended upon all the land signify (v. 45)? Why can we not explain this away as a solar eclipse? From what passage does Jesus quote his words of dereliction on the cross (v. 46)? Does Jesus suggest by these words that the Trinity has experienced a rupture within the three divine persons? If not, then how do we understand the nature of Jesus' forsakenness at the cross? How does our theology and Christology help us make sense of this?

2. Why might bystanders have thought that Jesus was calling out to Elijah (v. 47)? Why might one of them have run at once to give Jesus a drink of sour wine (v. 48)? What made the bystanders

[21] So Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:324–26; Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1130; Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 976; Carson, "Matthew," 650–51.

[22] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1084–85.

curious as to whether Elijah might come (v. 49)? To what degree might these actions and statements have been genuine? How might they also be interpreted as mockery? What was the scene like when Jesus made his loud cry and yielded up his spirit in death (v. 50)?

3. What did the tearing of the curtain of the temple, from top to bottom, signify (v. 51a)? What does the earthquake and the splitting of the rocks suggest about the death of Jesus (v. 51b)? Why were the tombs opened (v. 52–53)? What do the centurion’s words teach us about his faith (v. 54)? What significance does this have for sinners who have been kept from access to God? How do these reactions underscore the cosmic significance of Jesus’ death?

4. How do you personally respond to the death of Jesus? What does this passage teach us about the significance of the death of Jesus? How do we see the patience and long-suffering endurance of Jesus for miserable sinners? How does this passage demonstrate that Jesus truly is the Son of God? What does the event of Jesus’ death demand of us today? What holds you back from wholehearted faith, devotion, and obedience to Christ and him crucified?