

The Great Divide

Luke 23:44-56

I need to begin with a bit of housekeeping this morning as we delve into our passage for today. This past week I was contacted regarding the video clip that we showed last week with younger children in the audience. I want to assure you that it was not our intention to offend anyone by its content. If that is the case I want to offer a sincere apology. For future presentations we will be more sensitive to those in the audience.

With that said, though, we need to understand the very graphic nature of sin. I wholeheartedly agree with John MacArthur who said in a recent message that the church has stopped talking about sin. I'm going to step out on a limb and go a bit further and suggest that the church has stopped talking about the graphic nature of sin. Sin is ugly, and no, we are not evolving to a higher moral consciousness. If anything, sin is becoming more brazen.

Why else would someone feel the need to write about respectable sins as Jerry Bridges did in the book we are currently discussing in our Saturday men's study. Sin no longer has the sting it should. We need to understand that one sin, any sin deserves the wrath of God, but we have tolerated sin giving it a window dressing to cover up its putrid stench. A lot of sin isn't given a second thought. It doesn't bother the conscience much. But if we saw it as God sees it, then, well, we would see how truly ugly it is.

My hope was that you saw past the horrific and graphic nature of sin in the life of someone without Christ to see the hope that comes through power of God's Word to transform a life, any life, from the gutter of sin to become a child of God. If we don't understand the gravity of our depravity then we won't understand the grace by which we can become eternally free. We must see sin through the lens by which God sees it if we are to comprehend

what Christ did for us on the cross and why He did it. If sin isn't as ugly as it is then Christ wouldn't have needed to go to the cross. God could have set up some other kind of penalties and payments to atone for sin. But it is and it deserves to be punished so I'm eternally grateful for a verse like Micah 7:18 "Who is a God like you, that pardons sin, and forgives the transgression of His inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy."

That Christ went to the cross shows us the seriousness of sin that would require the sacrifice of His only Son.

I read this past week that the way back to God begins with a broken heart. We must have a broken heart about sin. If Nathan had never confronted David with his sin regarding the murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba we would not have Psalm 51. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (vs.1-4, 17)

In the margin of my study Bible I have a note which reads "Be serious about sin."

Let's remember that it was our sin that resulted in God turning from the Son when He cried out from the cross why God had forsaken Him.

Last week we left Jesus on the cross. His crucifixion began around 9a.m. It's now noon. Turn to Luke 23:44-56.

I. JESUS' DEATH – vs. 44-49

For three hours Jesus has been hanging on the cross enduring the physical trauma of crucifixion.

His breathing is labored.

Open lacerations covered His entire back from the scourging. Open wounds around His skull trickle with blood where the thorns had been driven into His head.

He has multiple bruises on His face and torso where He was beaten.

He is fatigued from lack of sleep and loss of blood. Then there was the emotional toll of verbal abuse hurled at Him from the crowd, the religious leaders and the Roman soldiers.

We read in our text that at about the sixth hour or noon, darkness came over the whole land.

A. Darkness – v. 44-45a

I prefer the KJV rendering in this verse which indicates that it was the whole earth. Some translations give the impression that this darkness was just a localized phenomenon. I believe the Greek word means that darkness was worldwide.

Some want to suggest that it was a dense fog that had rolled in. Others want to say it was an eclipse of the sun. Let me give you two very reasons we can rule out that it was just a solar eclipse.

1. Our text tells us that it lasted for three hours from noon until three.
2. Astronomers tell us that at the time of Passover there was a new moon based on its consistent cycle orbiting the earth.

We must conclude that it was a supernatural event and perhaps Greek scholar A.T. Robertson said it best that when it comes to attempting to understand the darkness that prevailed over the earth for three hours “Leave the darkness unexplained.”

This was total darkness, no visible light. During an eclipse, even though the sun is blocked, there is still

visibility. This darkness lasted three hours.

Scripture speaks of two other events with darkness covering the earth. The first is in Exodus 10 when God unleashed the ninth plague on Egypt. It is described as a darkness that could be felt. It’s an eerie, unsettling kind of darkness. This darkness was throughout the land of Egypt except where the Israelites lived.

The other plague of darkness is found in Revelation 8 when the fourth trumpet of judgment is sounded and a third part of the world will be engulfed.

How it happened we may never know, but I believe we can know why it happened. Let me suggest that darkness was necessary to cover up all the wrath God brought down to bear on His Son for our sin. God shrouded the world in darkness as Christ was made sin for us. Why did He do that?

II Corinthians 5:21 “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

A story is told about a Greek philosopher who was lecturing in Alexandria, Egypt when this darkness covered the world. It was said that during the middle of his lecture he paused and remarked “Either a god is dying or the universe is ending.”

John MacArthur states “The darkness was not caused by the absence of God, but rather by His presence in full judgment, vengeance, and fury. Infinite wrath moved by infinite righteousness released infinite punishment on the Son. Because He is infinite, in just 3 hours He was able to absorb all the punishment of eternal hell for all who will ever believe.”

Galatians 3:13 “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”

I Peter 2:24 “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been

healed.”

I Peter 3:18 “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

For the first three hours Jesus suffered at the hands of man.

For the second three hours Jesus suffered at the hands of God.

It was during this time that He suffered the bitter cup He had so earnestly asked the Father to remove.

There was darkness.

Then there was death.

B. Death – v. 45b-46

Both Matthew and Mark indicate that Jesus spoke and then the curtain was torn in two so we’ll look at the cry first.

1. The Cry – “‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ When He said this, He breathed His last.”

Jesus does not mean the Holy Spirit was committed back to God, but rather His own spirit. We take that to mean He voluntarily willed His death.

John 10:18 “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from My Father.”

He was committing His spirit to God until three days later when it would once again join Him at the resurrection.

John adds that He also cried out “It is finished” meaning that the price for sin had now been paid and that God was satisfied with the sacrifice. He had completed the work of redemption given to Him by the Father.

The cry was a declaration of victory.

“Hebrews 9:27-28 “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was

sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.”

With the sacrifice for sin paid and the work of redemption completed, fellowship was once again restored with the Father as Jesus committed His spirit into God’s hands and breathed His last. That was the cry. Now look with me at the curtain.

2. The Curtain

At that moment Matthew records that there was a great earthquake that opened up graves and then the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Exodus 26 describes the curtain that was to separate the holy place from the Holy of holies. When King Herod rebuilt the Temple in the early years of his reign he raised the roof to about 60 feet high. That’s the height of the curtain that separated the two rooms. The width of the curtain was about four inches thick. The dimensions of this curtain make the event in our text all the more remarkable and truly another supernatural event.

So what’s the big deal? Why is that significant? Here’s what one author had to say about the significance of the veil being torn in two: “Above all, the tearing of the veil at the moment of Jesus’ death dramatically symbolized that His sacrifice, the shedding of His own blood, was a sufficient atonement for sins. It signified that now the way into the Holy of holies was open for all people, for all time, both Jew and Gentile.”

Up until that time God’s presence was always behind the veil and only the High Priest could enter and he could only enter one time a year on the Day of Atonement and only with blood from the sacrifice. When Jesus died, and the veil was torn, God in essence moved out of that place never again

to dwell in a temple made with hands (Acts 17:24). As long as the temple stood it symbolized the continuation of the old covenant. With the tearing of the curtain and then the destruction of the temple about 40 years later, God was saying that He was through with the old religious system. A new covenant was being established through the shed blood of Christ.

The veil was a symbol of Christ as the only way to the Father (John 14:6). Christ became our High Priest who could enter the veil with His own blood. We are now able to go through Him to meet with God because it was torn in two. We can enter into God's presence because of Him.

Christ "was the veil to the Holy of holies, and through His death the faithful now have free access to God."

"The veil in the temple was a constant reminder that sin renders humanity unfit for the presence of God. The fact that the sin offering was offered annually and countless other sacrifices repeated daily showed graphically that sin could not truly be atoned for or erased by mere animal sacrifices. Jesus Christ, through His death, has removed the barriers between God and man, and now we may approach Him with confidence and boldness."

Hebrews 4:14-16

Hebrews 6:19

Hebrews 9:11-15

Hebrews 10:19-25

Because of open accessibility to God I want you to notice the threefold invitation found in Hebrews 10. Notice also that these invitations speak of faith, hope, and love.

The confidence we have to enter into God's presence is because of the blood of Christ. Without that we cannot enter and will not be accepted. Because of the blood of Christ, we can boldly go where no man was able to go before. Our boldness

to enter into God's presence hinges on the blood of Christ and nothing else. Hebrews 8:13 describes it as a new way while Hebrews 7:25 describes it as a living way, where Christ lives to intercede for us. When Christ died and the curtain was torn a new and living way was made for us.

a. "Let us draw near" – v. 22 Here is faith.

In order to draw near there are four conditions that must be met.

- 1) We draw near with a sincere heart. That means we have an undivided allegiance to God.
- 2) We draw near with full assurance. This is complete faith or trust in following Christ.
- 3) We draw near with hearts sprinkled from a guilty conscience. We are free from the guilt of sin because of what Christ did on the cross.
- 4) We draw near with bodies washed with pure water. This is not baptism. It is a figurative picture of the inner cleansing that takes place when we trust Christ as Savior through His one-time sacrifice.

All that means is that just as the priest had to go through special preparations before he could enter into God's presence so we must prepare ourselves. Our preparation is confession of sin knowing that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9).

The first invitation is to draw near.

The second invitation is found in v. 23.

b. "Let us hold fast" – v. 23 Here is hope.

These readers were being tempted to return to the old covenant, to follow the old religious system. They were being tempted by others to forsake Christ and return to the Old Testament system of worship. The writer of Hebrews wanted them to see that Christ is our only hope for eternal life. Here's how John MacArthur puts it: "A true believer will be around in the end. He may become

discouraged or frustrated, and occasionally fall into a sinful habit. But he will “hold fast the confession and hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

I Thessalonians 5:24 “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”

We can rely on God to do what He says, especially in regard to salvation.

There was once a young boy whose dad left him on a downtown corner one morning and told him to wait there until he returned in about half an hour. But the father’s car broke down and he could not get to a phone. Five hours went by before the father managed to get back, and he was worried that his son would be in a state of panic. But when the father got there, the boy was standing in front of the dime store, looking in the window and rocking back and forth on his heels. When the father saw him, he ran up to him and threw his arms around him and hugged and kissed him. The father apologized and asked if his son was at all worried that he wouldn’t be coming back. The boy looked up at his dad and replied, “No, Dad. I knew you were coming. You said you would.”

That is the faithfulness of God. It may seem like God is taking a long time, but He will keep His word. In the meantime we are to hold on to hope. Hebrews 12:3 reminds us to fix our eyes on Christ the author and perfecter of our faith...considering Him who endured opposition from sinful man, so that we don’t lose heart and give up. He is our hope.

The third invitation is in verse 24.

c. “Let us consider” – v. 24 Here is love.

What are we to consider?

- 1) Consider how to spur one another toward love.
- 2) Consider how to spur one another toward good deeds.

Why?

- 1) So we don’t give up meeting together.
- 2) So we encourage one another until Christ returns.

This verse is a call to fellowship with others with the emphasis not on what we can get, but what we can give when we meet with others for worship and fellowship.

If we come with the idea of only getting something when we come to worship and we go away disappointed, then I believe we have sorely missed the point. But I believe that when we give something as we gather, then we get something in return.

I think that something is a blessing.

I think that something is joy and satisfaction.

I think that something is an enriched relationship with God.

How important, how imperative it is to meet regularly with God’s people as Warren Wiersbe writes “Faithfulness in church attendance encourages others and provokes them to love others and to do good deeds.” It’s mutual accountability

Faith, hope, and love – three important virtues that develop in us when we draw near to God in faith, hold fast to Christ in hope, and consider one another in love.

So, was the tearing of the curtain important? You bet it was.

I have purposely spent a lot of time on the importance of the curtain tearing to show you that the way to God was opened up to us through Christ.

Let me quickly run through the rest of the passage.

There was darkness, death, and also a declaration.

C. Declaration – v. 47-48

First there was the centurion.

1. The Centurion – v. 47

Luke states he said Jesus was a righteous man. This was not a declaration of innocence. It was more than that. Matthew says he called Jesus the Son of God. He had stood watch over the crucifixion. He heard and was himself involved in the defamation of Jesus, the hurling of insults. He saw the difference between how Jesus conducted Himself on the cross and all the other criminals whom he had led to their death. He witnessed the prevailing darkness and felt the tremor of the earthquake at the moment Jesus cried out and then breathed his last. It was a unique death and this hardened soldier came to the conclusion that Jesus was who He claimed to be. I truly believe that he had a heart that was gloriously, wonderfully, and magnificently touched by God and he was saved.

Do you find it interesting that people can look at the same evidence and come to entirely different conclusions about Christ?

That leads us to the reaction of the crowd.

2. The Crowd – v. 48

They were witness to the same things the centurion was but their response was to beat their breast, a sign of anguish, and then just turn and walk away. They were unmoved by the act of redemption they witnessed that day. I wonder how many of them will be present 40 days later when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost in the Temple. I wonder how many of them will have their conscience pricked by the Holy Spirit and be moved to trust Him as Savior.

The way in which they left were as much a declaration of unbelief as was the declaration of the centurion who declared faith in Christ.

Then in verse 49 there was distance.

D. Distance – v. 49

At one point family and friends who had followed Jesus stood near the cross, near enough for Jesus to instruct John to care for His mother. Now they had moved some distance away. Maybe they were afraid the hostility of the crowd would spill over on them if they realized these were sympathizers of Jesus. Whatever it was they had moved away from the cross. In time some of these will stand boldly in the face of persecution as they proclaim the gospel.

Dear friends, let's also be bold in standing with Christ no matter the consequences.

That's what we find in this last section of vs.50-56.

II. JESUS' BURIAL – vs. 50-56

There is the petition and then the preparation.

A. The Petition – vs. 50- 52

One of the members of the Sanhedrin who had not consented to their plot to arrest and murder Jesus went to Pilate and pled for the body of Christ that He might receive a proper burial. Pilate didn't have to grant the request. Typically the bodies of criminals were just thrown on the garbage dump and burned. They had lost the right to a burial, but God saw to it that His Son would be would be buried with dignity and with love.

All four gospels give an account of the burial. It is a way of proving that in fact He was dead.

Joseph had been a secret follower of Jesus, but this request was a public declaration of his faith. I wonder if I would have made such a bold petition.

B. The Preparation – vs. 53-56

Joseph took the body down with the help of Nicodemus and prepared the body for burial. Knowing the account as we do, we want to shout back through history, "why are you going through

all the trouble of preparing the body for burial when He's just going to rise from the dead in three days?" Hadn't any of them listened to Him about His resurrection? Didn't they believe Him when He said that if they destroyed this temple speaking of His body He would rebuild it in three days? Didn't they grasp what He said that He had the authority both to lay down His life and take it up again?

I am so quick to jump on their lack of understanding when I wrestle with my own about such things. They were only doing what was natural. A dead body needed to be prepared for burial and they only had a couple hours to bury Him before Sabbath began.

When they were done, the body was placed in a new tomb owned by Joseph. The women who were followers of Jesus watched the preparations and where He was buried. Their intent was to return on the first day of the week with more spices. Perhaps in the rush to get done before the Sabbath began, these women may have thought that greater attention should be given to the preparation of the body. They returned to make their own preparations and rest on the Sabbath.

Without His death and burial there is no resurrection.

Without His death, burial, and resurrection there is no salvation.

Jesus took on Himself all our sin and then took our punishment and then in return by our faith we are given His righteousness.

When the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961, it divided the German capital in a way that reflected the division that had been forced on the conquered nation following WWII. West Germany remained free while East Germany was under the domination of the Soviet Union. Once the wall was in place people could no longer escape the communist government.

It is said that at one point during a particularly tense time in the East-West relationship in the 1970's that a group from East Berlin began throwing bags of garbage over the wall in a symbolic protest against the West. After seeing the bags of garbage, some residents of the West decided to respond. They filled bags with food and medical supplies that were in short supply in the communist run city and threw them over the wall with a note that read "each gives what he has."

Christ took on Himself all the garbage, all the stench of our lives to give us the spiritual food and medical supplies we need. He gives us His righteousness. We must accept it by faith. He has made a way into God's presence by breaking down the barrier that stood between us and God.

I want to close with just simple, but important question. The veil was torn in two so that we could have access to God. Have you entered into His presence through the shed blood of Christ who took your punishment on the cross for your sin?

He made possible the great divide. So come boldly. On this Valentine's Day the greatest demonstration of love was the sacrifice of Christ on the cross so we could enter into the presence of God.