

Part 50: The Paradox of the Cross (Easter 2019 Part 2)

Tyler Velin | Matthew 27:45-61

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For the Christian, Good Friday is a unique experience. But it's unique in a beautiful way. On the one hand we want to embrace the somberness of it. It is the day when our Lord was crucified. It is the day when the full weight of our sins are exposed in cosmic display.

But we also know that it is a day which came to pass. A day which gives way to Sunday's life and resurrection light. So because of this Good Friday cannot be only mournful pity, but it also cannot be unchecked joy.

There is in this day a unique tension of harmony and melody. In this way Good Friday is almost a microcosm of the poles from which we can view Christianity. On pole one there is only guilt and only shame. In order to feel God's grace we must learn to wallow in our failures. This is an often laborious task.

On pole two there is only relief and joy. Christianity is a life of love and happiness. Yet when we don't feel happy, we often don't feel loved. Or worse we feel that our lives are spiraling out of control but if we remind ourselves enough that God loves us then somehow those incantations will heal us. This can produce inner turmoil and flatten the grace of God.

But Good Friday stands between these two poles and holds the tension of the gospel in perfect harmony. So what we are going to do in our short time together tonight is this: we are going to look at three paradoxes of the cross which help us find the tension of grace, and then we are going to take the Lord's Supper as a reminder of that grace.

In the passage we just read in Matthew there are so very many paradoxes that we can look at, but we are going to look at the three biggest that I see in this text, the last one of which begins to already reach forward to Sunday morning in Matthew's narrative.

These three paradoxes are: **Darkness for our Light, Rejection for our Peace, and Death for our Life.**

Let's begin by looking at **Darkness for our Light**. If you were with us this past Sunday you probably witnessed what is the most understated narrative event in all of human history: **Matthew 27:35**. For Matthew there is no dramatic description of nails and wood, it is almost as if Jesus' physical suffering was merely a byline in the story: and when they had crucified him.

But this is because, as we will discuss more later, the physical aspect of Jesus' death is not the greatest pain in this story. There is something bigger going on. Something which God had long planned to do.

So monumental was this moment in history that from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, that is from noon to three in the afternoon, darkness fell. Darkness over all the land. A divine darkness. For this was the middle of the month, which means the moon was in no position to provide an eclipse of any kind.

The 17th century poet John Donne, described the events this way: "It made his own lieutenant nature shrink, it made his footstool crack and the sun wink."

This past January my family was on vacation and we went to a bioluminescent bay. It was one of a handful of bays in the world where a rare type of algae was allowed to flourish, and algae which when agitated would light up. Meaning when you swam in this bay at night, the water lit up like a fairy tale around you. It really was a remarkable experience.

But the bay itself was a pretty small bay, and surrounding the bay were a bunch of mansions who didn't really like tourists coming in at night and making a bunch of noise. So what most of these mansions did was shine massive lights onto the water in hopes that it would make it hard to see the algae glow and that you would leave.

Because you see the algae's reaction was in itself quick miraculous, but the size of them meant that the light was quite subtle. It was best seen in complete darkness.

On the cross, God the Father dimmed the lights so that all might see the subtle miracle of the cross. Small and humiliated in form, the agitation of Christ illuminated a light, small but world changing.

Do not mistake the confusion darkness in your life as God's silence. Sometimes it is God's grace to us to dim everything so that we might see in the darkness, through squinted eyes, that light is always there. Faint, miraculous light.

It was in this darkest hour that God dimmed the stage lights to draw our focus to the moment of greatest importance. If you are here today and you are wondering what the gospel is all about: look at this darkness. This is what God wants you to see: that Jesus bore your sins on this cross and it is in this darkness that you find miraculous light.

Second we see **Rejection for our Peace**. Read with me **Matthew 27:46-51**.

So in this text we see two connected scenes: Jesus' death, and the tearing of a curtain inside the temple.

It is in Jesus' death here that we see the real agony of Christ. Yes, crucifixion is horribly painful. But the pain which Jesus felt, the pain Jesus prayed to be removed in the garden was the pain proclaimed in the ninth hour: "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me."

Why would God reject Jesus here? Remember what the angel told Mary when she found out she was pregnant: "You will bear a son, you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins?"

Remember what the Father spoke when Jesus was baptized: "This is my son, in whom I am well pleased."

Remember what Jesus himself said, "If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

You might think? What Father is this? That is the wrong question. The question is what Savior is this? This is the Savior Jesus willingly chose to be for us. This is the salvation from sins. This is the pleasure of God. This is the good gift to all who ask.

You see Jesus was abandoned by his Father because in this moment the eternal spotless lamb of God became wet with the sins of humanity. The faithful husband became the whore. The child became the enemy. He who knew no sin became sin. And his Father had no choice but to turn his face from him, for sinners cannot stand in the presence of God.

Do you realize the weight of this: God the Father withdrew his very presence from his son. The eternal face dimmed not only light, but relational warmth towards his son. And once the suffering servant, rejected by men and crushed by God breathed his last lonely breath, the curtain in the temple was torn.

You see up until this point in history you could not simply approach God. In the temple there were series of sacrifices which allowed you to go into the temple, but not all the way. There were priests who carried the sacrifices further into the temple, but not all the way. There was one priest who once a year would get to go all the way in. All the way into the Holy of Holies where the very presence of God dwelt, kept apart from his people by a curtain. The holy separated from the sinful.

But when Jesus became the sinful, the curtain was torn. The final sacrifice was made. The great high priest no longer snuck under the curtain to approach God, but became the curtain torn open for God's people.

Because Jesus was rejected for us, God himself is opened to us. Through Jesus Christ we have the promise of the presence of God.

And here is the beautiful point of application: all that Jesus grieved in losing, has been given to believers in full. The very comfort of God is given to us in an unshakable way because of what Jesus did.

Do you realize that Jesus suffered without the promise of God's presence? Jesus suffered knowing God would withdraw. And he did so in order that all who trust in him might know the promise that even in the moment of greatest sorrow, God has promised to draw near.

In our fight against sin, we can draw near. In our weakest moments, we can draw near. In our pain we can draw near. Because Jesus was rejected for our sin, we can find peace despite ours.

And lastly we see **Death for our Life**. Let's look at this odd but completely reasonable text together: **Matthew 27:51-53**.

If you were to look at fatality rates for the atomic bombs dropped during WWII you would see that they measure the results in terms of death over months. Because the blast, as powerful as it was had terrible effects which radiated out over time.

In this text we just read, we see not only the power of Jesus death, but the power of what radiated out of it. In a world where death almost always begets more pain, the death of Jesus creates the radiating effects of life.

Jesus' death and resurrection was so powerful that believers who had already died were raised to life as a side effect of the cross. It overflowed in so much power that graves were split and believers physically raised. This is a foretaste of what we will look at more on Easter Sunday.

Jesus death produces shockwaves of life for those who hope in him.

But here is what I love about the oddity of this text. Theologians are puzzled as to when these people were raised, because it very clearly shows that regardless of when they were actually raised to life, they didn't go into Jerusalem until after Jesus was raised from the dead.

Why is this important? Because Jesus is always the star even in our new life. If these believers had paraded around the city prior to Christ, they would have seemed to be the miraculous ones. But the Bible is clear that it was Jesus who was the first fruit of the resurrection from the dead.

So whether they waited in their graves, or if God waited to give life till Sunday it was so that their life might bear witness to the life of Christ. That he really did it, that he really saves.

The same is true in your life. Your salvation isn't meant to point to how amazing you are, it points to how amazing your savior is and how wonderful it is to be loved by him.

The paradox of the cross shows us that our lives are lived for his glory, for his fame, because it really isn't our life anymore is it? It's Jesus life. And what happened here in this text as a by-product will one day be an intentional and universal reality for all who hope in Jesus.

But my hope is that today the tension of the cross empowers us to live with such a wonderful tension. That in Christ darkness is as light, rejection is peace, and death is as life. This is the glory of the cross.