

“GOD’S EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CROSS” MATTHEW 27:45-54

Last week we looked at a lengthy passage from Matthew that described Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion, and it was almost impossible not to wonder how Jesus felt as He was mercilessly mocked, punched, slapped, spit at, flogged, and then nailed to a cross. Today, as we look at what happened while Jesus hung on that cross, we are going to consider how God, His Father, felt. I have entitled my message, “God’s Emotional Response to the Cross.”

I should tell you that there are theologians who assert that God does not have emotions. They contend that references in Scripture that ascribe emotions to God—like anger, delight, grief, or regret—are figures of speech called *anthropopathisms* (attributing human emotions to God). I could not disagree more. The Bible says we are made in God’s image, and I believe that includes our intellect, emotions, and will. In other words, we have emotions because God has emotions.

If that is true, it stands to reason that God was never *more* emotional than when He watched His Son suffer and die on the cross. And we are going to see that He expressed those emotions in profound ways, all of which were saturated with spiritual significance. Look at **verse 45**. *45 Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.*

Ironically, when Jesus was born, God made a dramatic statement by lighting up the night sky near Bethlehem as the brilliant, blinding glory of the Lord shone upon unsuspecting shepherds (Lk.2:9). As Jesus was dying, God made an equally dramatic statement by shrouding the world in dreadful darkness.

It began at noon, when the sun is at its zenith and Jesus had been on the cross for about three hours, and it lasted until 3:00 PM. Some have tried to explain it as a solar eclipse, but that is not possible since there is always a full moon at Passover. Some have suggested that the darkness was due to a massive sandstorm that coincidentally blew through Jerusalem while Jesus was on the cross. If that was the case, however, surely Matthew, with his penchant for detail, would have mentioned the wind and the sand, as would the other Gospel writers.

What is more, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that “there was darkness over all the land.” Land can also be translated “earth,” and though it is not possible from the text to determine how widespread the darkness was, there are some references in extrabiblical literature that suggest the darkness was worldwide. Pilate wrote a report to Tiberius, the Roman Emperor, that assumed the emperor knew about this widespread darkness, even mentioning that it was from twelve to three in the afternoon (MacArthur, 268). Furthermore, two church Fathers, Origen and Tertullian, made reference to Roman historical records and archives that documented this widespread darkness.

But what is its significance? The purpose for the darkness is not explained in the gospels or elsewhere in the New Testament. We do know that darkness was often associated with sin and evil in Scripture, and that there are several references where darkness is associated with God’s judgment (Isa. 5:30; 13:10–11; Joel 3:14–15, etc.).

With that in mind, consider what Isaiah prophesied seven hundred years before Jesus lived on earth. He said that the Lord would lay on the Suffering Servant the iniquity (sin) of us all, and that He would be crushed for our iniquities (Isa. 53:6,4). Peter said, “He Himself

bore our sins in His body on the tree" (1 Pet. 1:21). And Paul said, "He who knew no sin became sin for us..." (2 Cor. 5:21).

As Jesus suffered and died on the cross, it seems reasonable to interpret the darkness as God's judgment on sin. The darkness, therefore, was a manifestation of God's wrath being revealed against sin as He funneled that wrath upon the body of His sinless Son which bore the sins of the world. So, the darkness, I believe, was the first of God's emotional responses to the cross.

Verse 46. *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?"*

The four Gospel accounts record a total of seven statements that Jesus made while hanging on the cross. This, the fourth of those seven sayings, is the only one that Matthew records. Perhaps because of the power and significance of Jesus' cry of dereliction, Matthew preserves the Aramaic in his account and then translates it into Greek.

It is noteworthy that this is the only time in the Gospels that Jesus did not address God as *Father*. And while this statement, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me," is recorded Psalm 22:1, Jesus was not quoting Scripture perfunctorily. Something was occurring at the moment Jesus said this that made Him feel enormous anguish as if He was being abandoned by God.

Don't forget, Jesus and His Father had experienced perfect, unbroken, uninterrupted communion with one another for all eternity. But when God transferred the sins of world upon Jesus' body, He turned His back on His Son for the very first time. Why? The prophet Habakkuk declared of God, "Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing" (Hab. 1:13). So, since God cannot deny Himself, when He who knew no sin became sin for us, God could not look upon His Son. Thus, the communion between the Father and the Son was mysteriously broken. And sensing this abrupt loss of communion, Jesus lets out a loud cry of dereliction.

But we should bear in mind that this separation was not a dissolution of their relationship. Jesus did not cease to be God's Son any more than a child who sins against his earthly father ceases to be his child. But Jesus temporarily ceased to experience the intimacy that He had always known with His heavenly Father, and because that love and intimacy was so deep, it was extraordinarily painful.

This is the second of God's emotional responses to the cross, made by God the Son.

Verse 47-49. *⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." ⁴⁸ 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. ⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him."*

Apparently, despite the loudness of Jesus' cry in Aramaic, it was not understood by at least some of the bystanders. In Hebrew the word for "my God" is not so very different from the word for "Elijah," and some of those near the cross thought that Jesus was calling for him. Elijah, you'll recall, had not died in the usual way but had been taken up into heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Furthermore, in the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi, predicted that Elijah would come back to earth just before the great and awesome day of the Lord.

Because of this, many Jews in the first century viewed Elijah as a sort of miracle worker who could be called up to rescue those who were being oppressed, and it is possible that some of the bystanders thought that Jesus was summoning Elijah for this purpose. When someone offered Him sour wine, a mild analgesic that might give Jesus some slight relief

from His misery, they protested, wanting Him to remain desperate in order to see if one miracle worker might, indeed, show up to help another miracle worker.

Verse 50. *⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit.*

John reports that immediately before Jesus' death, He cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). It seems likely that this is that very cry. If so, it points to the completion of the saving work that Jesus came to do (Morris). He had now given His life "a ransom for many" (20:28). With that loud cry Jesus *yielded up His spirit*. None of the Gospel writers use any of the usual ways of saying that Jesus died, and this may be part of the way they bring out the truth that there was something in His death that set it apart from all other deaths. There appears to be an element of voluntariness (Morris).

Verse 51a. *⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.*

That curtain was in the Jerusalem temple, and it separated the Most Holy Place—the earthly dwelling place of God's presence—from the Holy Place where the priests performed their duties. This curtain signified that mankind was separated from God by sin, and that a holy God could not be in the presence of sinful men. Only the high priest was permitted to pass beyond this curtain to enter into God's presence, and he had to follow a very strict protocol. First, He had to offer a sacrifice for Himself and His family, and then He offered a separate sacrifice for the sins of all Israel, thereby making atonement and securing God's forgiveness (Lev. 16). This happened only once each year, on the Day of Atonement.

This curtain in the temple was a constant reminder that sin makes 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. And so, when this massive veil—sixty feet high and four inches thick—was torn in two, from top to bottom, it dramatically symbolized that Jesus' death, the shedding of His own blood as a sacrifice, was the *sufficient* atonement for our sins, it provided *real* forgiveness, and it opened the way into the God's holy presence for all people for all time. Jesus, through His death, removed the barriers between God and man, and now we may approach Him with confidence and boldness.

Listen to the words of the writer of Hebrews: *¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19-22).* That word, "confidence," in verse 19, is a word that has to do with free or open expression or conduct. It's just the opposite of having to "walk on eggshells," or cower in fear. We can feel comfortable and unashamed in God's presence, because our sin and guilt have been removed by Jesus. We can feel right at home.

Now, this does *not* mean we have permission to approach God in a flippant, conceited, or cavalier manner. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't fear God. It simply means that we can approach God's throne of grace with *confidence*—confidence in Jesus, our great high priest!

This is the third of God's emotional responses to the cross.

Verse 51b. *And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.* In the Old Testament, God's presence was often accompanied by an earthquake. When He appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai the whole mountain trembled greatly (Ex. 19:18). When He appeared to Elijah on a mountain, *¹¹ ...A great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD...And after the wind an earthquake (1 Kings 19:11).*

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and David also tell us that earthquakes are associated with God's wrath and judgment against sin. Could it be that when the earth quaked and the rocks split at the death of Jesus, God was venting His pent-up anger toward the sin of mankind? Or could it be that God was expressing His intense grief over the death of His Son? In either interpretation, God was clearly making Himself known, and providing yet another emotional response to the cross.

Verses 52-53. *⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.*

In the first century, tombs were carved in rock outcroppings above the ground. It would not be unusual for them to burst open in a large earthquake. But an earthquake does not explain how *“many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.”* Notice, it was not all the saints, but a selective group that the Lord had chosen. There were literally tens of thousands of Jews who had been buried in tombs outside the walls of Jerusalem. Who were these “saints,” and why were they chosen?

Matthew, who is the only Gospel writer to record this miracle, does not tell us. “Saints” literally means “holy ones,” so we can assume that they were devoted to the Lord God. Were they followers of Jesus who had recently died, or were they saints in Old Testament times who had eagerly anticipated the coming of Messiah? We cannot be certain. Nor do we know who any of them are, how many of them there were, why they were selected by the Lord to be raised, or how long they remained alive after this resurrection.

What we do know is that these saints came to life when Jesus died and that after His resurrection they entered Jerusalem, the holy city. This has theological significance. Typically, theologians assert that the resurrection of Jesus is the basis for the resurrection of the saints. Matthew tells us that “It is the *death* of Jesus which triggers the resurrection of the saints” (Morris).

Just as the rending of the temple curtain makes it clear that the way to God is open for all, so the raising of the saints shows that death has been conquered. Matthew is also giving expression to his conviction that Jesus is Lord over both the living and the dead (Morris). This is yet another divine exclamation mark regarding the significance of the cross.

Verse 54. *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!”*

The centurion and those with him were Roman soldiers who were assigned the gruesome duty of supervising crucifixions. Undoubtedly, they had seen many, for historians tell us that by the time of Christ the Romans had crucified 30,000 people in Palestine alone. It is easy to imagine these soldiers as hardened and desensitized by the time Jesus was crucified. Yet we are told that they were filled with awe. Actually, the word translated “awe” is most often translated “fear” or “terror.” These soldiers, after witnessing the death of Jesus and the phenomena surrounding His death, were terrified—so terrified that they were convinced that Jesus had to be the Son of God.

Truly is not the same as “maybe.” It points to certainty - “He really was the Son of God!” Even to these Gentiles it was clear that there was something in the death of Jesus, together with the accompanying phenomena, that showed that He was not just another man. He had a special relationship to God, and it was important for Matthew that this be made clear (Morris).

I have entitled this message, "God's Emotional Response to the Cross." I want to be clear that God was not having a meltdown when Jesus was on the cross, nor could we describe His reactions as emotional *outbursts*. Let's not forget that God not only knew that Jesus would become a sacrifice for sins when He inspired Isaiah to write about it 740 years before Jesus was born (Isa. 53), Scripture tells us that He knew about it and planned it before He even created the world. What happened on the day Jesus was crucified was the pinnacle of God's plan to save the world through Him. And, as I said earlier, God's responses to the cross, even His emotional responses to the cross, have enormous significance for us.

First, He diverted His wrath from sinners (like you and me) and vented it upon the body of His sinless Son. Second, by rending the temple curtain from top to bottom, He signified that through Christ we now have access into His presence, twenty-four/seven. And third, He not only took care of our sin problem, but our death problem, which we will explore more next week.

But please bear in mind that this dramatic story of Jesus' death on the cross accompanied by all manner of special effects, was not divine theater. God didn't do all this for entertainment purposes, nor did He do it just to show us how He felt about sin or about His Son. He did this for one reason: because there was no other way for human beings to be saved from their sin and from the penalty of their sin, which is eternal separation from God in hell.

Jesus died on the cross in our place. He was punished instead of us for our sin. That's what Paul meant when he said, "*God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*" (2 Cor. 5:21).

And there is one specific and one necessary application for us if we are to personally benefit from Jesus' death on our behalf. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16).

I benefit from Jesus' death on my behalf when I believe that Jesus bore my sins in His body, that He was punished by God instead of me for my sins, that I am helpless to save myself apart from what Jesus did for me, and it is through Him and Him only that I am forgiven, reconciled with God, and have eternal life.

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Main Idea: *God validated the identity of His Son and the significance of His death by performing several miracles during His crucifixion.*

Before Jesus dies, God turns daylight into darkness for three hours (45)
The significance of darkness

What God was doing to Jesus

Jesus’ cry of dereliction (46)

Bystanders react to Jesus’ cry (47-49)
Some assume He has become delusional

One tries to assist Him

Some hope to be entertained by Him

With another loud cry, Jesus dies (50)

God reacts to His Son’s death (51-53)
The temple curtain is torn in two (51a)

The earth quakes and rocks split (51b)

Tombs are opened and followers of Jesus are raised (52-53)
They go into Jerusalem

They appear to many

Roman guards have a spiritual awakening (54)