

The Question ***Mark 15:33-39***

***I know the suffocating smell
Of river moss and river mud,
Of cannon trunks of trees that fell
And washed away when waters flood.***

***I've smelled the ashes and the char
Of smoking flames and burnt out dreams.
But through it all the Morning Star
Has warmed within. His glory gleams***

***Because there is no temple veil
To wall me from His holy throne.
The God I serve's no stone-faced Baal,
That's dark and distant and unknown.***

***He doesn't wait in silence for
Some palace priest to sprinkle blood
To open up His throne room door.
And I'm forever comforted***

***He tabernacles here with Me.
My God forsook His only Son
To break my bonds and set me free.
The veil is rent; salvation's won.***

The sun was high overhead. The cloudless sky was baby blue. And Jerusalem was packed with Passover pilgrims.

But the Light of the World was dying. A little knob of a hill rose up outside the western wall. The Jews called it Golgotha, because its rocky face had the eerie appearance of a grinning skull.

Three crosses were etched against the spring sky on the crest of that hill. On the center cross, Jesus writhed in agony, arching His back to catch a breath before slumping against the nails that held His hands and feet fast to the cross.

And a deep silence settled over Heaven. It was a silence of sorrow and inexpressible grief. The Son of God, the Prince of Heaven was dying. God the Father was heartbroken. And fulfilling Amos' ancient prophecy, He darkened the skies over Judea.

***When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour. Verse 33
"It will come about in that day," declares the Lord God, "that I will make the sun go down
at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight." Amos 8:9***

Suddenly, it was night at noonday. For three solid hours, stars sparked the sky. It was as if God's great hand shielded the sun that no one might look upon His beloved Son's agony and anguish.

Remembering that, we search these final moments of our Lord's life on earth with reluctance and reverence. But search we must.

For Mark's account contains immeasurable, eternal truths.

The Complaint

At the end of three agonizing hours, the sky was still as dim as an hour after sunset. Then our Lord did something He hadn't done in all His suffering, indeed, in all His life on earth. He complained.

At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani?" which is translated, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Verse 34

It comes as a surprise that Christ would complain now. When enraged ruling Jews gnashed their teeth at Him and temple policemen smashed their fists into His face, Jesus said not a word.

When Roman soldiers beat His back until only the red of His blood hid the white of His ribs, the Savior was silent. And when they mocked Him and jammed thorns into His brow, not a word came from the Master's mouth. Even when soldiers hammered spikes through His hands and feet, Christ didn't cry out or complain. And as His enemies added abuse to His agony, still He was silent.

Our Lord had been pierced with many thorns since He was led away from the garden in chains. But this was the sharpest thorn of all. He was utterly and absolutely separated and shut off from His heavenly Father.

And that raises troubling questions. Jesus was the sinless Son of God. He was so pure and perfect, more than once the Father spoke in an audible voice of His pride and pleasure concerning His Son.

This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. Matthew 3:17

This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him! Matthew 17:5

Before this last, bloody day, there was neither a thought nor a word, not even an imagination in the Master's heart that He was outside His Father's perfect will. Yet moments before He died, the Son asked the Father why He had forsaken Him.

But was it really so? Was Christ correct in believing that God had forsaken Him? Surely, He was. These couldn't be the rants and raves of a man in agony being tortured to death. We could easily forgive that in any other man. But not in Jesus. For if our Lord was mistaken in this agonized complaint, He couldn't be the Son of God.

But why? That is the question that haunts us. Why did the eternal Father, with a love for Christ that was everlasting, eternal and immeasurable, forsake His Son when He needed His powerful presence the most?

The answer to that question is the key to the very heart of Christian faith. After all, the Master's agonized question was hardly unanticipated. Uncounted generations earlier, David predicted the Messiah would utter that cry.

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, Psalm 22:1-2 (ESV)

The prophet Isaiah continued the vision when he wrote that God's Servant would suffer for the sins of all mankind.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; Isaiah 53:4-5

In his second letter to the troubled church at Corinth, Paul summed up the truth behind Christ's questioning cry on the cross.

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21

That is why the Father turned His holy face away from His beloved Son on Calvary. That is also why the sky went dark as God forsook the very spot on the ground where the Savior suffered.

Our God's perfect holiness forbade Him from even looking upon sin. And Jesus' pure and perfect body was filled and glutted with all the lusts and lies, all filthy falsehoods and foul sin of the human race.

The Father had to forsake His Son as He suffered and died. If He didn't forsake Jesus in that hour, it would mean Christ didn't really carry our sins on the cross.

But God did turn His holy face away from His beloved Son during those agonizing hours as He died the death we deserve. That is why we can be sure He will never forsake those who come to Him in confession and commitment.

He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," Hebrews 13:5

That is the blessed truth that is hidden away in the mystery of the Master's cry. Christ cried out in agony that God had forsaken Him, because our Lord was filled with our sins.

So if we dare to accept the Savior's death as the death we justly deserve, our Father God will never, ever forsake us. He won't have to. His own beloved Son paid the full and final penalty for all our lusts and lies and lawlessness.

And that isn't all. If we confess our sins to God and receive Christ as our Savior, King and Companion, all our iniquity and offenses are forever cleansed away. We are adopted into God's eternal family. Our names are indelibly inscribed in the Book of Life.

And even though we live on through the chaos and confusion of the end of the world, we never need to worry that our heavenly Father will forsake us. He forsook His Son instead.

The Curtain

About three in the afternoon, our Redeemer realized His great eternal mission on earth was finally finished. During His days on earth, He had fulfilled God's great Law by perfectly obeying it.

He had demonstrated His Father's compassion by healing lepers and the lame, the diseased and the demonized. And He had breathed new life into people who were slaves to sin and sorrow.

Now He had fully and finally paid the terrible price of blood and death for the sins of mankind. His perfect blood had been shed as the Lamb of God. And nothing remained for Him to do but to die.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. Verse 37

He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. John 19:30

It was a cry of victory, not resignation. Christ cried out that His eternal task was finally finished, consummated and completed. The price for sin had been forever paid.

So the Savior released His Spirit, consciously and purposely allowing His body to slump, limp and lifeless, against the nails.

Meanwhile, deep in the temple sanctuary, a startling commotion took place. Only a handful of priests witnessed what happened deep in the temple that moment. Later, when many of those same priests came to believe in Jesus, they told the story to the apostles.

And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Verse 38

The curtain that was torn was the heavy veil that separated the innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies, from the rest of the sanctuary. Layered six inches thick, no mere man could have torn that great curtain so suddenly.

The meaning behind the rending of the temple veil resides in what that inner chamber was designed to contain. Before Jeremiah's time, the Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant: a chest that was filled with reminders of Israel's sinfulness.

On top of that acacia wood box sat the Mercy Seat. Made of gleaming gold, the Mercy Seat was a scale model of the very throne room of Heaven.

On either end, two carved angels, called cherubim bowed toward the center of that gold covering. They represented the living creatures John's heavenly revelation tells us continually hover about God's throne, praising Him.

Early each autumn on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would push past the great veil and step inside the Holy of Holies. With a bowl of lamb's blood in his hand, he would reverently sprinkle blood on the center of the gold covering on top of the ark.

And the symbolism was complete. God said His invisible presence would remain in the open space over the Mercy Seat between the two cherubim.

The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble; He is enthroned above the cherubim, Psalm 99:1

So when blood was sprinkled below that place, the image was obvious. The blood would shield our righteous God from seeing the sins inside the chest.

That image was also a powerful promise. It was the heavenly Father's pledge that He would one day provide a sacrifice that wouldn't merely cover, but actually cleanse away man's sin.

Now, with Christ's death, the symbol was fulfilled. The blood of the Lamb of God had been sprinkled over the sins of all mankind. So the blood of a bleating lamb was no longer needed.

But that wasn't the only reason God ripped the inner veil of the temple into two ragged pieces. It was also torn to let the Jews know that God had abandoned the Holy of Holies. And in his heavenly revelation, John teaches us why.

I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God." Revelation 21:3 (NKJV)

Since the Savior suffered for our sins, God will never again shut Himself off from men. And never again will any priest have to serve as mediator between God and men.

There is but one High Priest now: the Son of God Himself.

...we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, Hebrews 4:14

...there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, 1 Timothy 2:5-6

Jesus is our high priest now. He alone brings us to God. And with Christ's blood to cleanse us, God dwells right inside the physical body of each believer. He is with His people and will never leave or forsake them.

During those golden days on earth, Christ was Immanuel: God with us. And as such, He guided, encouraged and taught His people.

But now the power of sin has been broken. And His Spirit is with each and every person who trusts Christ.

The curtain has been torn. And God has departed from the Holy of Holies.
He has come to live within His people.

The Centurion

It had to be a rude joke. Surely, the Jews who stood at the very foot of the cross heard what the Savior said. And His cry of agony, asking God why He had forsaken His Son, was clear enough.

No, without a doubt they understood what our Savior said. Their discussion about Elijah was just another ugly, ignorant joke designed to torment our Lord.

When some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah." Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down." Verses 35-36

Jesus spoke in His native tongue, Aramaic. And since *Eloi* sounds like the Hebrew word for *Elijah*, the priests turned it into mockery.

"God wouldn't help him," they were suggesting. "Now He is praying to Elijah. Let's see if he helps Him."

Amazingly, neither a rumbling earthquake nor three hours of darkness had softened those priests' hearts. To the very last, they heaped abuse upon our dying Lord.

That wouldn't be so surprising if it was not for the Roman commander, the centurion who also stood at the foot of the cross. He heard everything those Jews heard and saw the same things they saw.

Yet in spite of the fact that he was a Gentile who hadn't been bred, weaned and raised up on the words of the Holy Scriptures, that Roman officer came to a startlingly different conclusion.

When the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" Verse 39

How is it that men could stand beneath the same cross, hear the same words, and see the same things, yet reach totally different conclusions about Christ?

Why is it that a pagan military officer was so convinced Jesus was God's Son, he said so right out loud. Yet those who had heard Christ teach again and again did not?

More to the point, why is it that people today can hear about Christ's death on the cross for their sin and selfishness, yet reach radically different conclusions.

Why is it that some hear about our Lord's sacrifice and trust Him as Savior and Lord, while others dismiss it all as an empty old myth? Why does the preaching of the cross breathe light and life into some people and leave others in darkness and death?

That is the question. It isn't a matter of evidence. Faith has nothing to do with proof.

Faith is a choice. So if we are to find the sweet satisfaction of knowing Jesus as our eternal Lord, we must choose to believe He was and is God's Son who gave His life that we might live.

On execution hill, only one man found faith. All the others walked back down the slope of Calvary unforgiven and unchanged.

Now the message of Savior's sacrifice for our sins has been proclaimed to us.

And we must choose.