WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Matthew 27:32-61

Key Verse: 46

“About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

For the last two weeks we studied about Jesus’ trail before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate. At the trial by the Jews, Jesus was spit at, stricken and slapped. At the trial by the Roman governor, he was flogged, which was a terrible torture, and was again spit at and stricken on his thorn-crowned head by the staff of the Roman soldiers. He was physically and psychologically abused. He was made a king momentarily and mocked for his kingship, though he was the true king. We deserve all such treatments because of our sin. But Jesus received them for us so that we might be saved from eternal judgment. In today’s passage, Jesus was crucified and then died on the cross. This passage clearly testifies to the historical fact of Jesus’ crucifixion unto death and excellently shows the meaning of his death on the cross.

After mocking Jesus, the governor’s soldiers led him away to crucify him. Verse 32 says, “As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.” Simon was one of those pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for the Passover. He was coming into the city, while Jesus was going out of the city, carrying the cross. Simon was forced to carry the cross. It shows that Jesus was crumbling under the heavy cross, more than 200 lbs, although he was undoubtedly the strongest person who ever lived because he was sinless. Yet, as for Simon, this encounter with Jesus was a moment of divine grace that changed his life forever. Not only did he himself become a believer, but the names of his two sons and wife are written in the Bible as indispensable members of the early Christian church. Those who carry the cross, even forcibly, those who participate in the sufferings of Christ in any way, are all blessed.

They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). The execution site was called Golgotha because its shape was like a skull. Probably it took one or two hours to come to this place of execution from the Praetorium of Pilate. There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. Even in such a situation he did not want to lessen the pain but to take it fully, surely to fully obey God the Father.

Then verse 35 says, “When they crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.” We are surprised by this short description of the crucifixion of Jesus. The whole ministry of Jesus had been directed to this time of Christ Jesus’ crucifixion, much more the whole history of God headed to the crucifixion of the Son of God as its focal point! But what a simple expression, not even as the main clause, but a subordinate one according to Matthew’s account! Even in this sentence, the main clause was the soldiers’ dividing up his clothes. What is the point? They say that around 30,000 Jews were crucified by Romans. Jesus’ crucifixion was one of them, nothing special to the eyes of the people of the world. They were all crucified in unbearable pain and died. That’s it. What more could be written? However, as for Jesus, so many remarkable things happened surrounding the cross of Jesus. It was beyond human understanding. Yes, Jesus’ crucifixion was one of 30,000 cases, as common, yet uncommon, standing out among all the crucifixions. This was not only a historical fact, but a unique event in human history.

Although the meaning of Christ’s crucifixion is profound, it is good to know the pain of crucifixion itself. The cross would be lying on the ground, and the victim would be placed down on the cross. First, His feet would be put together one on top of the other and extended. His toes would be pulled down and then a large nail would be driven through the arch of one foot and then through the arch of another foot. And then his hands would be extended allowing his knees to flex a little bit and there would be great nails driven through his wrists just below the bottom part of his hand, the heel of his hand, because there is the place where it would hold. In the middle of the hand it wouldn’t hold, for it would pull through the fingers.

Once the victim was nailed there, the cross would be picked up and dropped into a hole. And when it hit the bottom of the socket, it would rip and tear the flesh and send the nerve impulses to make explosions in the brain regarding pain. Slowly he would begin to sag, the weight placed upon the nails through his wrists increasing. The excruciating fiery pain would shoot up the arms and into the mind. Pressure put on the median nerves would be beyond almost the ability to endure. He then would try to push to relieve the pain, pushing with his feet, on the two wounds in his feet. Hour after hour, this wrenching, twisting torment of the body back and forth, trying to relieve one and then the other, the hands and the feet, it would become impossible after a while to do any pushing upward because of the pain, and the sagging would put the greatest weight upon the hands. At a certain point air could be drawn into the lungs, but not exhaled. The victim would fight to raise himself to get even one short breath. Nonetheless to say, crucifixion was the most cruel and terrible manmade ways of killing a fellowman.

Under such crucifixion, the Roman soldiers were just playing games, dividing up Jesus’ clothes by casting lots. Still they were doing their jobs, sitting down and keeping watch over him there. According to John’s description, the soldiers’ mean act and their casual speaking were all exact fulfillments of God’s prophies, revealing God’s sovereign will. But Matthew simply exposes the evilness of man, which Matthew continues in his description of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS, which Jesus unambiguously stated before Pilate. Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Interestingly on that day not just Jesus one person but two others were crucified, stressing the undeniable historical fact of Jesus’ crucifixion. And among the three, one was extraordinary, one on the middle.

Now in verses 39 and 40 it says, “Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’” The passersby relied on the false information that was spread from the Sanhedrin court at Jesus’ trial. They also knew the world philosophy of life, that is, “save yourself.” They were attacking Jesus’ divine Sonship, tempting him to come down from the cross as the Son of God. The altered Christianity tainted by the world is Christ Jesus coming down from the cross and becoming a superhero, sensational and powerful in the world. We should watch out for such tainting and alternations to the word of God.

Then in verses 41-43, “In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” The religious leaders had observed the work of Christ Jesus, healing the sick, driving out demons, feeding the hungry and caring for the various kinds of the needy. Jesus saved others in many ways. But Jesus did not save himself, which was not fit to their idea of the Messiah. They did not know the paradoxical truth concerning God’s Anointed Messiah and King, the King of Israel that he did not save himself to save others. The Christ of God did not come down from the cross but stayed there in obedience to God. They tried to tempt Jesus to doubt God’s love even using the words of God in Psalm 22:8, “He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.” It is true that God rescues those who trust in him without fail, but in his way, not in man’s way. God would indeed rescue Jesus through his resurrection, but the religious leaders thought that God would rescue him from the cross, if God was pleased with him. Their final attack to Jesus concerned his divine Sonship. Interestingly the mocking of the religious leaders seemed to be more intellectual and psychological, speaking about Christ in the third person, while the passersby were straightforward, talking directly to Jesus on the cross.

Then in verse 44, “In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.” They were in the extreme pain of the crucifixion along with Jesus and would be gone soon from this world, yet with their last remaining strength they insulted Jesus, hardening their hearts to the end.

All these four groups of people seem to well represent the people of the world. The Roman soldiers were completely ignorant of Christ and Christianity and the Scriptures. In sheer ignorance, they mocked Jesus. The passersby could be the superficial and fickle so-called believers. The cross of Jesus revealed the colour of their belief. The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders, could be sophisticated and professional so-called believers who knew a lot about God and Christ and the Scriptures, yet do not truly know Christ. And there are those who just harden their hearts toward Jesus in their difficulties of life. All these reveal the evilness of mankind.

The world despises and hates the cross of Jesus. We are reminded of 1 Corinthians 2:22-24, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to whom God has called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Now Matthew wants us to know the deep meaning of Jesus’ death. Verse 45 says, “From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.” It was from noon to 3pm, when the land was expected to be brightest under the glowing sun. According to Luke 23:45, it was because the sun stopped shining. In the Bible darkness refers to God’s judgment. The world had committed a great crime in crucifying the Son of God. God’s salvation is seen as light, then God’s judgment is seen as darkness. In the past, when God came in judgment he was associated with darkness. One of ten plagues on the Egyptians was the plague of darkness that total darkness covered all Egypt for three days, while all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived (Ex 10:22-23). In the future when he comes in final judgment, it will be associated with darkness. It is written in Isaiah 13:9-10, “See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate…The rising sun will be darkened…” In the Tribulation time, God brings to the world great darkness so that there’s a gnawing on the part of men in the horror of unrelieved blackness. Revelation 16:10 says, “The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony.” While Jesus was hanging on the cross, God made the middle of the day midnight. This is a divine judgment on sin, as attested by supernatural darkness.

Then what happened amid the unnatural darkness? Verse 46 says, “About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani*?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” God’s wrath was explicitly poured out on the cross to which the Son was nailed and hanging. The target of God’s wrathful judgment was the Son crucified, who became a sin offering for mankind. According to Habakkuk 1:13, God’s eyes are too pure to look on evil and sin. He hates sin. God and sin cannot coexist. God’s thorough hatred toward sin was surged on the Son, who was made the very sin taking all the sin of mankind upon himself. God turned his back on his Son, at which the Son cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The Son Jesus could not call God even Father, my Father. It was complete separation and total abandonment, which the Son could not bear it. The Son could not but cry out in a loud voice keenly sensing God forsaking him. In this cry of the Son, we see God’s great love for sinners and sure salvation from sin and dreadful judgment and eternal abandonment into the hell. Truly the cross is the mighty refuge and shadow and shelter from the outpouring wrath of God. In the cross, we find complete relief and true salvation and everlasting love of God. In the Son’s crying, those who repent and believe in Jesus are accepted, welcomed and embraced in the bosom of God the Father. In this acceptance, welcoming and embracing we have nothing to cry about, though it is easy for us to cry for trivial things, being sensitive for a little gain or loss in this world. Yet, we need to cry when our relationship with Gd is broken and when our loved ones’ relationship with God is broken. This is the reason Paul says in 2 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.” As we become the righteousness of God, all the blessings of God is there. Praise God the Father for his great love, and praise Jesus for being forsaken totally for our eternal welcoming into the open-arms of God the Father and his eternal house.

The wonderful grace of God was revealed through the great anguish and cry of Christ Jesus. But what happened right away? Verse 47 says, “When some of those standing there heard this, they said, ‘He’s calling Elijah.’” According to the footnote in NIV, in some manuscripts, “Eloi” is “Eli” and we know that “El” is the name for God in Hebrew. Surely the people knew the word “Eli” meaning “my God” different from “Elijah.” Even in that utter darkness of God’s judgment, they were cynical making a kind of joke while Jesus cried in great anguish and pain. Immediately, one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. He probably did this out of sympathy for Jesus. But the rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” They were really sarcastic, trying to irritate Jesus to the last moment.

In verse 50, “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.” Jesus still had strength to make another loud cry. According to Luke 23:46, this cry is “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Then he gave up his spirit. All who died were swallowed up by the power of death, but not Jesus. He had power over death. He controlled living and dying. He chose to die in obedience to the will of God the Father.

Then something really amazing took place. Verse 51 says, “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” In other translations (ESV, KJV), “And behold…” The curtain between the Holy Place and the Most Holy was torn from top to bottom, absolutely by the act of God. During the past around 1500 years, only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, into the very presence of God, once a year, on the day of atonement. At the moment of Jesus’ death the curtain that divided God and man was ripped up. When the Son cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” there was no verbal answer. Yet, at that moment God answered in this way, ripping off the curtain by his finger, because the Son paid the unpayable debt for our sin. He paid it all with his very life. What an answer, unspoken, silent, powerful answer! It was the end of the temple. It was the end of sacrifices. It was the end of the priesthood. It was the end of the whole system of Judaism. It was over. It was gone. The author of Hebrews said in Hebrews 10:19-22, “…since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body…Let us draw near to God…” What a way we have to come to the presence of God in Christ Jesus! So Hebrews 4:16 also says, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” In Toronto, there are highways like HWY 401 and the Don Valley. Those who drive on these highways know how useful these roads are. Yet there are those who do not know the effect of these highways, although they are there. It is truly amazing that the way to God is wide open to all through the death of God’s Son, a new and living way. God really wants us to experience the effect of this marvelous way more and more. We have freedom to the access to the very presence of God. What a freedom we have! Truly, the greatest privilege free to all in Christ Jesus!

What happened next? In verses 51-53 it says, “The earth shook and the rocks split. The tomb broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.” This is another answer from God at the Son’s cry, unspoken, loud and powerful outside the temple. Wow! The power of Jesus’ death right away affected the earth and dead holy people. This can be the preview of the resurrection of the dead in Christ and his coming kingdom and the eternal kingdom of God in a new heaven and a new earth.

The power of Jesus’ death on the cross influenced even unholy, unbelieving people. In verse 52, “When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God.!’” This is also amazing. In making this confession, the centurion and his soldiers would make their lives in great danger, most probably losing their job right away and becoming an object of scorn and ridicule. Yet, they could not resist this confession through the conviction of their hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit on top of their careful observation.

In verses 55 and 56 it says, “Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.” They were coming closer to the cross, as we refer to John 19:25, “Near the cross of Jesus stood…” They were really loyal, sacrificial and bold women of God.

The crucified were not expected to be buried properly. They were to be left on the streets or thrown into a pit. But Jesus was buried by a rich, prominent man. It says, “As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him.” In doing these, Joseph had to defile himself as he entered the Gentile residence and touched the dead body. Moreover he would be cast out of the Sanhedrin and the Jewish community. But Joseph did not mind, for he was deeply moved by the death of Jesus, the Son of God. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. His faith in and love for Jesus was really notable, yet his heart and mind could not reach the resurrection of Christ Jesus. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb. These women’s loyalty and faithfulness were outstanding.

Thank God for the crucifixion and death of Christ Jesus. The world despises and hates the cross of Jesus. But we may cherish and cling to it. May we draw near to God through the new and living way opened for us, so that we can go deeper into the fellowship with God our Father and the Lord Christ Jesus and overcome the world with the message of the cross for his kingdom.