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Matthew 27:46 - 27:53



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg interprets the passage Matthew 27:46-27:53 which chronicles Jesus' crucifixion. He notes that the mention of Elijah in Jesus' cry does not necessarily mean he was calling for Elijah's help or presence. Instead, it is likely a reference to the Jewish belief that Elijah must return before the arrival of the Messiah. Gregg further explains the significance of the temple veil tearing upon Jesus' death as well as the possibility of saints' graves being opened when Jesus was resurrected. Overall, he delves into the spiritual and physical sufferings endured by Jesus.

Transcript

We're continuing now our study of the narrative in Matthew of Jesus on the cross. There is some detail given and we've been taking a few sessions looking at it together. We're talking about Matthew 27 and beginning at verse 47.

Actually, one cannot understand 47 correctly unless we look back at verse 46 where Jesus, hanging on the cross, cried out, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani. That's not really the correct pronunciation. I don't speak Aramaic, but that's the language he spoke.

And the English translation is, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Now, in response to that call from Jesus, some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, this man is calling for Elijah. And immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. The rest said, let him alone, let us see if Elijah will come to save him.

Now, this reference to Elijah seems peculiar to us. He said, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, and they say, oh, he's calling for Elijah. Why would they say that? Well, Eli, or probably pronounced more like Eli, is Aramaic.

It's like the Hebrew. It means, my God, my God. But there were many pilgrims from other lands there.

Jews from all over the world would come to Jerusalem during the Passover season, and this was the Passover. So there were foreign Jews present who may not have known the

local dialect, Aramaic. They would know Greek, however.

Greek was the common language of the entire Roman Empire, and therefore there would be many people there who would not be very familiar with the Aramaic, but would be conversant in Greek. Well, it so happens that in the Greek language, the name Elijah is Elias, or Eliás, and it sounds similar enough to the word Eli that these Greek-speaking Jews would probably have mistaken the word Eli for the name Elias, and therefore thought that Jesus was calling out for Elijah, Elijah being the Hebrew form of the name and Elias being the Greek form of the name. Well, it was a total misunderstanding, and why they would think he would call out for Elijah is not necessarily easy to explain, although of course the Jews did believe that Elijah, the man Elijah from the Old Testament, would return and would come and precede the Messiah's appearance.

This is based on their understanding of Malachi chapter 4, verses 5 and 6, and because they anticipated this, those who said, oh, he's calling for Elijah, might well have thought that Jesus is the Messiah, or at least thought he was the Messiah, and was anticipating before his death the coming of Elijah to rescue him. Now, there's nothing in the Old Testament to say that Elijah would come and rescue the Messiah. This would be only their way of putting the pieces together in their own mind.

They did believe that Elijah would come back before the Messiah. They knew that Jesus was at least heralded by some to be the Messiah, and if he was, or even if he thought he was, he might call out to Elijah to at this point in the hour of his greatest extremity, hanging on a cross and near death, to come and rescue him, and such a supernatural deliverance would be a great sign to Israel that the Messiah had come and Elijah with him. This must be what was going on in their minds, though it was very far from what was going on in Jesus' mind.

Jesus was not calling for Elijah. He was not even calling out to be rescued. He was simply calling out the first line of Psalm 22, which declared that the man felt abandoned by God, and it also went on, the psalm went on, to describe the very events that were taking place here, the crucifixion of the Messiah.

But as usual, Jesus was being misunderstood. You know, among the many things that Jesus suffered, and there were many, and many of them were physical afflictions, one of the things he suffered that we might underestimate, if we don't pause to think about it, is the almost continual misunderstanding of what he was saying. This misunderstanding existed among his enemies as well as his friends.

There were many times that he spoke to his disciples and they misunderstood what he meant. He said to them, beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees, and they thought he was talking about literal bread on one occasion. He said, if you destroy this temple, in three days I will raise it up, and they misunderstood what he said about that.

Now what's worse, they not only misunderstood what he said, but they began to misquote him, so that when he was on the cross, many said to him, you who say you will destroy the temple and raise it in three days, come down from there. Well, Jesus, of course, never said he would destroy the temple. He challenged them, you destroy this temple, he meant to the body, and in three days I will raise it up.

They misunderstood his meaning and they even misquoted his words because of their misunderstanding. Likewise here, he's crying out in agony of soul to his father, and people misunderstand what he's doing and say, I think he's calling for Elijah to come to save him. And so, in addition to the physical agonies and spiritual agonies of the crucifixion, Jesus had to go through the additional suffering of people thinking they knew what he was talking about, but not.

Misunderstanding his intentions, misunderstanding what he was saying, and that can be very aggravating too. It was perhaps not the greatest aggravation he experienced while he was there on the cross, but it was added to the other things that made it such an agonizing experience. Now, it says that immediately one of them ran and took a sponge and filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.

This may have been the occasion spoken of in John chapter 19 and verse 28, where Jesus actually said, I thirst, and someone did bring him something like that on a sponge. But here we read that although some were trying to do this for him, trying to, I guess, relieve his agony, others said, let him alone, let's just see if Elijah will come to save him. Of course, Elijah did not come to save him, nor did that have anything to do with what Jesus was calling for, but they were misunderstanding his words.

Jesus, when he had cried out again with a loud voice, yielded up his spirit, or he gave up the ghost. That means he died. Now, the fact that Jesus yielded up his spirit means that he died, in this case, voluntarily.

Back in John chapter 10, Jesus said, No man can take my life from me. I lay my life down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again.

There was actually no one who was able to take Jesus' life from him. He was in control of the situation. He yielded his life.

He yielded himself to the hands of those who arrested him. Had he wished, as he himself said, he could have called 12 legions of angels to come, and they would have rescued him. There was nobody that could take Jesus against his will.

Furthermore, when he was on the cross, there was nobody who could really hasten his death. He would die when he would die. And on this occasion, after only six hours hanging on the cross, he yielded up the spirit and died.

Now, I say after only six hours. You might think, Well, that's a very long time. And I'm sure it is a very long time to suffer on the cross.

But it's a very short time for a man to expire on the cross. It was not at all uncommon for men crucified on crosses to linger for days. It is said of Peter in the traditions of his death that he was crucified upside down in Rome, and that hanging from the cross, he lingered for three days before he died.

And that was not too unusual. And yet Jesus hung for six hours, and then he gave up the spirit. Later on, we're going to read that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus actually went to Pilate to get permission to take Jesus down from the cross and bury him.

And Pilate was amazed to hear that Jesus was already dead. In fact, he didn't believe it. He sent guards or messengers to discover whether this was really true.

And sure enough, he was. So it was a marvelous thing that Jesus died as quickly as he did. And he did so by choice.

He gave up his spirit. In fact, one of his dying remarks, it may have been his last, was, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit or I commit my spirit. This is not recorded here in Matthew, but it is recorded in Luke 23-46.

And by the way, that statement, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit, is a quotation from the Old Testament. It's from Psalm 31-5. And I am instructed that this is a bedtime prayer that small children were taught in Israel to pray at their bedside.

It corresponds almost the same in meaning to that traditional bedtime prayer of our culture where children are taught to pray, Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray to your Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray to your Lord my soul to take. The idea is I'm going to sleep now.

I'm vulnerable. If I happen to die, I hope my soul may end up in your hands, God. I hope you will keep my soul.

If I die before I wake, you keep my soul with you. Well, it's the same thought. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit is essentially the same idea uttered in the Old Testament in Psalm 31-5.

And it was, as I am told, the bedtime prayer of small Jewish children. It is very probably the first prayer Jesus learned to pray when he was a child. And his mother Mary, who taught him that prayer in all likelihood, was there at the foot of the cross to hear him utter it this final time.

And so that must have been a poignant moment for Mary, presuming that she taught him to pray that prayer at his bedside when he was possibly a toddler, to hear him now

at age 33 and his final breath uttering that prayer again. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. He also said at this point, and the exact order of the sayings we do not know for sure, but he said, It is finished.

Tetelestai is one Greek word. We don't know what words he used in Aramaic, but the words seem to mean victory. It seems to mean like the battle is finished and we've won.

And some have felt that when Jesus said, It is finished, that he was giving a cry of despair. But actually the words, It is finished, in the Greek, as they've come down to us, are a military term of victory. And that he is saying, I have accomplished it.

I've been through the course. I've spent 33 years under test and trial. I've had a mission to fulfill, and it is fulfilled in this moment, as he gave up his spirit.

That saying of Jesus is found in John 19, in verse 30. And it says in verse 51, And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth quaked and the rocks were split. Now the tearing of the veil from top to bottom is mentioned only here in Matthew.

The other gospels do not mention it. But the veil was in the temple, not far away from where Jesus was crucified. Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem, and the temple was the central attraction in Jerusalem.

It was divided into compartments, after the same general design as the tabernacle that God gave to Moses. And there would be three major compartments, an outer court, and then a building, and the enclosed area would have two main parts, the holy place and the holy of holies. And the holy of holies was separated from the holy place by this thick veil that hung there in the doorway.

No one was allowed to go through that veil into the holy of holies, except for the high priest on the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, which was only once a year. And only he could go in and follow a prescribed ritual. The reason was because the holy of holies was considered to be too sacred a place for an ordinary person to enter.

It was counted to be the place where God was, God's house, where the glory of God was encountered. And ordinary man, in his sinful condition, has no access to the immediate presence of God. And therefore, only one man, the high priest, was allowed to go in symbolically on the day of atonement, to make atonement for the nation of Israel.

But even then, it was inaccessible for another year, until the next day of atonement. God was simply not that approachable under the terms of the law. And when Jesus died, this veil that separated all men from the holy of holies, which was the habitation of God in ritual of Judaism, this veil was torn in two, as if the barrier between God and man, that which prevented the average person from being able to approach God, was now removed.

And it was removed by the tearing of another veil, the veil of Jesus' flesh, Jesus' body. With Jesus dying, the sacrifice for sins was complete. And because of that, there remained no more need for such artificial barriers between man and God.

So this is symbolically depicted by the divine act of tearing the veil in two. We have no reason to believe that the Jews left the veil torn. They either replaced it or repaired it.

But the act of tearing the veil in two from top to bottom shows it to be a divine act. And the fact that it was from top to bottom is perhaps symbolic too, because it mentions that specific detail, originating from the top. It's a top-down kind of an action from God to man.

Anyway, that veil was torn, and there were other phenomena that indicated that the death of Jesus was significant. It had already been dark for three hours in the middle of the afternoon. You have this tearing of the veil when Jesus gives up his spirit, and we also read that the earth quaked and the rocks were split.

That doesn't mean that every rock in Jerusalem was split, of course, but it just means there was a violent earthquake, there were fissures in the rocks or faults that split open. And it says, The graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming out of the graves after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

Now these saints who came out of the graves when Jesus rose from the dead, who were they? Were these the Old Testament guys like Samuel and Moses and David? I think not, and the reason I think not is because such men, if they came and appeared alive in Jerusalem, would not be recognized by anybody because no one had seen them in their lifetime. And they didn't have photographs or statues of them to make them recognizable. So I'm not inclined to believe that these saints who came out of their graves when Jesus did and who were seen alive in Jerusalem, I'm not inclined to believe they were ancient saints.

I believe they were probably people who had been known in that generation to be godly people, but who had died not too long hence. And therefore there were many people still living who would recognize them. In fact, there's reason to suspect that they may have been people who had died within the last few days or at least a very short time because their bodies otherwise would be somewhat decomposed.

Now, there's no problem, of course, with God resurrecting decomposed bodies. We know on the last day God's going to resurrect all bodies, including those that have completely decomposed. That's not the problem.

The problem is, though, that for God to take decomposed bodies and reconstruct them is an act of resurrection, which the Bible indicates that Jesus is the first fruits of those who

slept to be so resurrected, and then after that, those of us who are his at his coming. That doesn't allow for these other people to have experienced that kind of a resurrection. You see, there's a difference between the resurrection of that kind and a mere reanimation of a dead body.

Lazarus, for example, is an example of the latter. Lazarus died, and four days later, Jesus called him back to life. This man's body had not very much decomposed.

There was a miracle of calling life back into his body, but not of reconstructing his body from basic elements. And the body that came out of the grave of Lazarus was Lazarus' body, but probably not glorified. I say probably not because Jesus had not yet been glorified, and I don't believe any bodies were raised in a glorified form before Jesus.

He was the first fruits of those that slept. Therefore, Lazarus, we must assume, came out of the grave as a mortal. He had died once.

He would die again. He came forth, and his life was prolonged, a little bit as if he had been awakened from a coma or just raised up from a sickbed. Though he had been actually dead and raised from the dead, his life was prolonged, but it was a natural life that was prolonged.

We have every reason to believe he was still the same age when he came out of the grave that he was when he died, and that he lived out the rest of a natural lifetime and died again. And this would be no doubt true for Jairus' daughter and for the son of the widow of Nain and for Eutychus and others that were raised from the dead in Scripture. These people did not receive their glorified bodies and their immortal state.

They were simply called back to life again in their natural bodies. And that being so, we would not include them among those who have been resurrected. They've simply been called back to life again.

The resurrection of the last day, like the resurrection of Christ, will involve the total transformation of nature, of our bodies, from mortal to immortal, from dishonorable to glorious, from weak to powerful. The body that is sown is not the body that will come forth. It will be a different kind of body that we receive in the resurrection.

And we have no reason to believe that these saints who came out of their graves and were seen in Jerusalem when Jesus came out of his grave, as I say, we have no reason to believe that they had glorified bodies such as Jesus had when he came out. And therefore, it seems likely to me that they were not very much decomposed, but that they were more like Lazarus or Jairus' daughter who were simply called back to life as a sign to the people of Israel that a miracle had occurred. And if that is so, then in all likelihood, these saints who had died were saints who had died probably within the last several days.

It says there were many, but how many would it take to be many? I mean, how many saints usually rise from the dead on any given day? None. So if a handful of them did, that would be a pretty good number. And we simply don't know.

We don't know the details. Matthew gives us no more than what we have here. But we do read that when Jesus rose from the dead, there were certain graves open of godly people.

And these men were, some of them were resurrected, or if not resurrected, just brought back to life, not in glorified bodies, but in their ordinary bodies. And they were seen and recognized in Jerusalem. So it became a sign to many that something was afoot.

Interestingly, although God allowed the people of Jerusalem to see these people who came out of their graves, he did not allow them to see Jesus come out of his grave. Jesus' resurrection, or his post-resurrection appearances, were made only to those who believed. We do not have record of him appearing to anyone who did not believe except for his brother James, who became a believer on that occasion.

But the rest were disciples of his who saw him, brethren of his, in one way or another. And so, Jesus did not present himself, for example, after his resurrection to Pilate, or to Herod, or to Caiaphas, or to any of his enemies, and say, look, here I am, I'm back. But, well, I mean, it just wasn't the will of God.

He wasn't going to give them that advantage. But he did give them the advantage of knowing of others who were righteous men who came out of their graves at that time and were seen in Jerusalem, which is a remarkable miracle, and one that would be enough to verify that, you know, Jesus may well have risen from the grave at that time, as would soon be reported. Later, in later weeks, when the disciples would report in Jerusalem that Jesus had come out of his grave, although no one had seen him do so, they would remember that certain men had come out of their graves at that time, and that their doing so was like a company of persons accompanying Jesus out of the tomb.

These ones, however, probably lived out natural lives and continued in this world, whereas Jesus himself soon afterward ascended into heaven, where he has been ever since, and from which we expect his return. We'll look at more of these things surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus when we come back to the material in our next session. I hope you may be able to join us at that time as we continue through Matthew.