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Matthew 27:45 - 27:46



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this study of Matthew 27:45-46, Steve Gregg discusses how rejecting or postponing God's claim may lead one to not count on anything. He explains that Jesus' death does not render the possibility of accepting God's claims impossible, as Jesus bearing the sins of humanity was foreshadowed in the Old Testament through animal sacrifices. Gregg also delves into the meaning behind Jesus' saying on the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?", which can be understood in various ways.

Transcript

We're resuming our study in the Gospel of Matthew today at Matthew chapter 27, beginning at verse 45. Jesus is seen at this point already hanging on the cross. He has already experienced verbal as well as physical abuse, physically from the soldiers who put a crown of thorns on his head and who beat him and who, of course, crucified him.

And also the abuse verbally from many sources, from the crowds going by, mocking him, from the chief priests who had wrongly condemned him, who were guilty of this travesty of justice themselves, and also from the thieves on both sides of him. It says in verse 44 that even the robbers who were crucified with him reviled him with the same kind of criticism and reviling. Now we do know from Luke's Gospel, fortunately, that at least one of these two thieves stopped reviling Christ and began to apparently be impressed with Christ's demeanor and with who he was and the way he was acting and came to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be.

And actually that thief began to rebuke the other thief and tell him to leave Jesus alone because Jesus was innocent. And according to Luke chapter 23 in verses 39 through 43, this thief turned to Christ and said, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said, Verily I say to you, Today you shall be with me in paradise.

So one of these thieves changed his tune eventually before he died and is a classic example of deathbed repentance in a case where a man was a criminal right up until moments before his own death and yet repented genuinely and was saved on, as it were, his deathbed or in this case on a cross. It should not be thought that deathbed

repentance happens very often in a sincere way. Many people think that they will live their lives in the world for sin and for their own gratification and then on their deathbed they'll turn to God, they think, because they know intuitively that they must, even now, but they hope to wait to the last minute.

What they don't reckon on is the very fact that you know that God has a claim upon you, that you are rejecting or postponing, cannot leave your heart in a neutral position. Jesus said, Whoever is not with me is against me. And if you do not throw in your loyalty with Christ today or tomorrow or the next day, that every day that you are avoiding making a commitment to Christ, you are in those days making a commitment against Christ and the heart becomes set in a certain way.

You know that you can develop attitudes gradually, just by allowing a little bit at a time to develop. You suddenly have an attitude or an opinion that you simply are incapable of divesting yourself of. Or even tastes, you can develop tastes for things that you didn't naturally like, but because you determined to make yourself like them or you simply became exposed to them in a favorable way for an extended period of time, you suddenly like them and you can't change your taste about that.

Likewise, you can do with distaste. And this illustrates that the heart is not a static entity. It takes shape according to the decisions that are made day by day.

And each day that you do not commit yourself to Christ, you are rejecting him. It's not as if you're remaining neutral. You are rejecting his claims on your life.

You are aware that he has these claims on your life, but you are rejecting those claims for the time being. And you may say, well, when I'm old, when I'm on my deathbed like that thief on the cross, then I will turn to Christ and I'll get the best of both lives. I'll gratify myself throughout this entire lifetime in this world and then I'll get heaven at the last minute.

One of the problems with this, of course, is that you never know if you'll have a deathbed. Many people die suddenly and unexpectedly who may well have thought that someday they would turn to God. But worse yet, if you don't die suddenly and unexpectedly and you actually have opportunity to die slowly and to anticipate the day of your death, you may seek to repent and find your heart is not capable of being soft toward God because every day that you knew of his claims upon you and rejected them, it hardened your heart against such a surrender.

You see, if you make a career of resisting the claims of Christ and teaching your heart how to resist surrender, then you can't just throw a switch and suddenly have your heart humble and teachable and soft and ready to surrender to Christ. Your heart changes its condition. So there have been many people who were softer toward God in their youth than when they were older.

And on their deathbed, they found that they didn't have any heart in them at all for God. Although when they were younger, they had thought that they would be able to turn to God in the end. It's not necessarily anything you can count on.

The Bible says, Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows, that he also will reap.

Now, this thief on the cross, we don't know much about his earlier life. He obviously had chosen a life of crime and he is not the only person who's in history turned to God after a life of crime and found true repentance and true faith and been saved. However, we have no reason to believe that this man was very advanced in years.

He may have been very young and his heart may not have been much hardened as an older man's heart is, who has lived his life living a life of crime and of rejection of God. This man may have been a very young criminal in his 20s. If so, that might explain why he was able to have, as it were, a deathbed repentance, because he was not old and hardened.

It's hard to know to what degree he had been exposed prior to this to the claims of God. He certainly had probably not been exposed to the claims of Christ particularly before this time. So there's no reason to believe that this man had spent his life hardening himself against Christ.

It's true his initial reaction to Christ on the cross was one of contempt and reviling, just as the other thief who never repented did. But this one man, he came to see that he was wrong and that Jesus was right and became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, even though Jesus obviously was dying. Jesus was on a cross himself, and Jesus did not have a future, as it would appear in the natural eye.

It would seem as though his career was over, and yet this man said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. This either means that the man believed that Jesus would be rescued from the cross or raised from the dead or something so that he could establish the kingdom of the Messiah that the Jews anticipated in spite of the fact that he now appeared to be on his final breath practically. And that would require a great deal of faith on his part.

The man would have to believe that Jesus was going to somehow get away from this situation, either as I say by escaping from the cross or by resurrection from the dead. In either case, it was a remarkable scenario for a man to believe in those present circumstances. Or else it may be that the man understood what even the disciples at that time did not understand, namely that Jesus' kingdom was not of this world and that he was not here to establish a political kingdom such as the Jews expected, but he was going to establish a heavenly and a spiritual kingdom, in which case the death of Jesus would not necessarily in itself render that possibility impossible or improbable.

And so the man either understood that the kingdom of Jesus was a spiritual kingdom or else he believed that Jesus would rise from the dead in order to establish the political kingdom that the Jews anticipated. Whatever the man's vision may have been, it certainly was believing against all present visual evidences because Jesus appeared to be nothing more than a man at the mercy of his captors and one who was in the process of being executed and whose visible or predictable future was that he would soon die and be no more, as other men who had been crucified. So this man, by saying, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom, expressed a tremendous amount of faith, and it's remarkable that his faith was even greater than that of the disciples who at this point in time were about ready to give up all hopes that Jesus had a future as the Messiah.

Of course, they changed their mind later after Jesus rose from the dead, but at this point the disciples were very confused and did not exhibit a great deal of faith, unlike this one thief on the cross. Now, verse 45 says, Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. Now, the sixth hour is no doubt based on the Jewish way of reckoning the hours of the day.

To the Jews of the time, the day began at six in the morning, essentially at sunrise, and that was the beginning of the day. The first hour of the day would be seven in the morning, and the second hour eight, and so forth. Therefore, when it says the sixth hour here, it means noon, and the ninth hour would be three o'clock in the afternoon.

So from noon until three in the afternoon there was darkness over all the land, and noon is, of course, the one time of the day that you'd least expect darkness. It was a sign, obviously, a supernatural sign, that God was displeased with Israel, was displeased with those who crucified Jesus, and that the light of the world being put out, as it were, by the crucifixion of Christ was shown by symbolic emblem of the light of the world, the sun, being darkened for a period of time. Interestingly, three hours.

Jesus was to be in the grave for three days. Perhaps each hour was to correspond to one day. The light of the world would be extinguished for three days, and so the natural light of the world, the sun, was darkened for three hours over the land.

It says in about the ninth hour, which would be three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, That is, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And this is one of seven sayings of Christ from the cross that are recorded in the various Gospels. Luke and John and Matthew each record different selection of things that Jesus said from the cross. If you take all the accounts, we find altogether seven sayings of Jesus, which he uttered from the cross.

The exact order in which he uttered them cannot be known for sure, for the simple reason that no one narrative includes all of them, and therefore all we know is that all of them were uttered by him at one time or another during the hours that he was on the

cross. He was actually crucified at nine in the morning, and then he died at three in the afternoon, so he spent six hours alive on the cross, during which time he at least uttered seven sayings, and there may have been more that have not been recorded. The first saying of Christ on the cross was, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

This he apparently uttered while they were nailing him to the cross in Luke 23, 34. And, of course, we already mentioned that he spoke to the thief on the cross. He said, Today you will be with me in paradise.

This is also recorded in Luke, in chapter 23, in verse 43. Then there is a saying recorded by John, in John 19, verses 26 and 27, when Jesus was on the cross and he looked down and he saw his mother there at the foot of the cross, and he also saw his disciple John standing nearby, and he said to her, he said to John, John, behold your mother. And he said to the woman, Mother, behold your son.

And this was apparently his way of committing the care of his mother to John, because we're told that from that time on, John was like a son to her, and she was like a mother to him, and he took care of her, since she was by this time no doubt a widow, and needing someone to support her now that her oldest son, Jesus, was leaving, was going. The fourth saying of Jesus from the cross may have been this one, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, which we've just read in Matthew 27, 46, which seems to mean, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I say it seems to mean this because there are various ways in which the Greek can be understood, but it's apparently a quotation from Psalm 22, verse 1, which, Psalm 22, is a psalm about the crucifixion of Christ. If anyone has any doubts that Christ fulfilled Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah, it should be easy to alleviate those doubts simply by reading Psalm 22, because there is there the description of the Messiah being crucified, and many of the same things that occurred are mentioned there.

It mentions, they nailed my hands and my feet, it says, or they pierced my hands and feet. It says that they cast lots for my garments, and so forth, like they did at the foot of the cross with Jesus. It begins with the words, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? which Jesus uttered here.

It also includes the sayings of the skeptics, Let him deliver him now if he takes pleasure in him. All of these elements come from Psalm 22, and all of them occurred on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. There are other sayings from the cross that I think occurred later on.

In John 19.28, Jesus said, I thirst. In Luke 23.46, Jesus said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. And in John 19.30, what appears to have been the last words of Jesus is the saying, It is finished.

These make the total of seven sayings of Christ that have been recorded for us from the cross. Here in Matthew, the only one we receive in Matthew is this statement, Eli, Eli,

lama sabachthani, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? There are many reasons that Jesus may have said this, and no one is quite sure why. One of the reasons that I personally reject is that some people believe that Jesus lost faith at this time, that Jesus had a crisis in his trust in God at this time, and felt that God would have saved him since he was now dying on the cross, that God had abandoned him in a way that caught Jesus by surprise.

And this is what many skeptics have suggested, and even some Christians have gotten that impression. To my mind, this is very impossible. Jesus made it very clear that he was giving his life a ransom for many early on in his ministry.

He made reference to this. In fact, way back at the beginning of his ministry, he said to his enemies, he said, You destroy this temple. In three days, I'll raise it up again.

He's referring to his own body. He anticipated his death and predicted it early on, as well as his resurrection. Therefore, it cannot be that at this point in time, he was beginning to have doubts about whether things were going God's way or not.

At least it is not as likely as some other explanations would be. One very common explanation that is given of why Jesus said, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? is that God had in fact forsaken him. And it's not so much that Jesus is asking the question as if to seek an answer, as if he didn't know the answer.

But rather, it's a cry that's more rhetorical. It's not so much seeking information, but more or less declaring something emphatically in the form of a rhetorical question, which is often a manner of expressing oneself. In which case, he's not so much asking God, Why have you forsaken me? But he's just, in a sense, by the use of such a question, declaring that he is sensing the sense of being God-forsaken.

Now, was Jesus forsaken by the Father? Well, there are even different opinions about that. Some would point out that God accepts Christ, accepted right from the beginning and all the way through, and that God was the one person who never would reject Jesus, although all men might. But there's another sense in which the Bible teaches that when Jesus was on the cross, he was treated as if he were a sinner.

And that God turned his back on him in order that Jesus might experience the punishment of all sinners. Now, this idea of Jesus being treated as if he were a sinner actually goes back to the idea that he was foreshadowed in all of the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament. And when the animals were sacrificed, before they were sacrificed, the priest would lay his hand upon them.

And in the case of the Day of Atonement, the animal that was sacrificed would have all of the sins of the people confessed over its head. And it was symbolic of transferring the guilt of the nation of Israel to this animal, after which the animal would be killed. So,

although an animal cannot really become guilty of sin because it is a non-moral being, yet in the symbolism of the ritual, the animal was taking on the guilt of the nation and then dying in the place of the nation for the guilt because the wages of sin is death.

And therefore, in the ritual of Israel that God gave, the animal symbolically took on the guilt and the shame and the criminality of the sinful nation and then not only bore the guilt but also died for the guilt of it. And the Scripture indicates that that's what Jesus did. Actually, all those animal sacrifices pointed forward to Jesus doing the same thing.

It says in Isaiah 53, in verse 6, All we, like sheep, have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. That means we've all sinned against God.

But then it goes on to say, and the Lord has laid on Him, on Jesus, the iniquity of us all. That is, all of our iniquities are laid upon Him. In 2 Corinthians chapter 5, in verse 21, it says, He who knew no sin, that means who had never committed sin himself, became sin for us, that we, having died to sin, might live unto righteousness, by whose stripes ye were healed.

That is to say, I'm actually mixing two Scriptures that say kind of the same thing. One was 2 Corinthians 5. It actually says that he who knew no sin became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. The other verse I was mixing up with it is 1 Peter chapter 2, in verse 24.

It says, who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness, by whose stripes ye were healed. Both of these verses teach seemingly the same thing, that the sins of us were laid upon Jesus, and when He was crucified, He bore them. But if He bore our sins, that would mean that He would be being treated as the substitute for us.

That whereas our sins have really earned us the death penalty, that death penalty was executed on a substitute, on another who was treated as if he were us. That substitute being Jesus Christ, the Messiah. If this is true, then God would have had to treat Jesus the way He treats a condemned sinner, because Jesus was taking on that role.

And that being so, Jesus at that point on the cross may well have sensed His Father's turning upon Him, turning His back from Him, and essentially forsaking Him, because Jesus was undergoing the actual experience of a God-forsaken sinner in the place of us, so that we would not be God-forsaken, so that we would not have to have God turn His back upon us at the day of judgment. This is what many evangelicals believe was transpiring, and what Jesus was referring to when He referred to God forsaking Him. When He said, My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me? It's not so much that He wondered about it, as He's declaring it to be a fact, that it has happened.

There are some who also point out that it was a custom of the priests at festivals to read

out or call out the opening verses of certain chapters of the Old Testament Scriptures in order to have the people, the congregation, repeat back the rest of the passage. If this is so, then Jesus, as our great High Priest on the cross, may well have been calling out the first verse of Psalm 22 in order to encourage those listening to think of the remainder of the psalm, which describes His crucifixion. If so, then there's even additional meaning in His comment that calls attention to His fulfillment at that very moment of Psalm 22.

We'll have to wait until next time to continue our studies in this chapter. Hope you can join us.