

# The Power of the Cross

Matthew 27:45-54

The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the apex of history. No other event, no matter how earth-shattering even comes close.

In the summer of 2001 when Vladimir Putin met with George W. Bush, the Russian president shared a personal story that our former president hasn't forgotten.

Putin said that when he was young, his mother gave him a cross to wear around his neck. As an avowed member of the communist party, he did not wear the cross but hid it in a jewelry case. But even though Putin was not a believer, out of respect for his mother he eventually decided to wear it. He even had it blessed while on a trip to Jerusalem. It became a treasured symbol of a mother's love and her cherished faith.

When the cross turned up missing following a house fire, Putin was greatly disturbed. He dispatched an employee to sift through the charred remains of the building to try and find it. After an exhaustive search, the employee reported to Putin and held out a closed hand. He opened it and revealed the prized cross.

In her book When Character Was King, author Peggy Noonan records Putin's remarks as they were told to her by President Bush.

Putin told Bush: "It was as if something meant for me to have the cross."

To which President Bush said, "Mr. Putin, that's what it's all about--that's THE story of the cross."

And he was right. The real story of the cross is that it is meant for you. There is a power in the cross of Christ, in His death, burial and resurrection to change lives—even yours. Something, *someone* meant for you to have the cross. That's what it's all about. That's THE story of the cross.

There is an awesome power about the cross of Christ. Jesus said, **"And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself."** John 12:32.

Paul wrote the following words in 1 Cor 1:18; **"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it IS the power of God..."**

Matthew 27 tells us the story of Calvary, the place of the cross. There Jesus was crucified, having already been betrayed by one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot. Jesus had been arrested while at prayer in Gethsemane. Matthew tells us that after Jesus was arrested he stood trial before Caiaphas, the high priest, and the Jewish supreme court called the Sanhedrin. Early in the morning they came to the decision to put Jesus to death (27:1) and handed him over to Pilate, the Roman Governor (27:2). Jesus then stood trial before Pilate (27:11). Even though Pilate knew it was out of envy that they handed Jesus over to him (27:18), he eventually gave in and sentenced Jesus to be executed by crucifixion (27:26).

The gospel accounts divide the six hours of Jesus' crucifixion into two parts. According to Mark.15:25, Jesus was nailed to the cross at the **"third hour"** or nine o'clock in the morning. He hung there until the **"ninth hour"** which would be three o'clock in the afternoon. Jesus was on the cross for six hours.

Last week we looked at Matthew 27:27-44 which focus on the physical side of Jesus' crucifixion during the first three hours. Jesus had already been beaten, humiliated, mocked, and spit upon when they led him out to be crucified (27:27-31). Carrying His own cross until he no longer could, they led him to Golgotha or Calvary (which means the place of the skull). There they crucified him, nailing his hands and feet to the cross and lifting it up as the people scoffed and ridiculed him (27:32-44).

Starting in Matthew 27:45 we see the second half of Jesus' ordeal on the cross. Here we will see the power of the cross. In the latter three hours, from noon until 3:00 p.m., the focus is on the supernatural, the powerful things that accompanied the atoning death of the Lord of heaven and earth. Let's see the power of the cross as the sky became dark, Jesus cried out, He gave up His spirit, the temple veil was torn, the earth was shaken, the dead were raised, and the centurion was convinced.

## **I. The Sky Became Dark (v.45).**

Do you remember the miraculous events that surrounded the birth of the Lord Jesus? Jesus was born at night, under the cover of darkness. Yet when the angels announced His birth to the shepherds, a supernatural light broke the darkness as **"the glory of the Lord shone around them"** (Luke 2:9).

What a contrast with His death. Jesus died in the middle of the day. Yet when the sun was at its highest, as v.45 says, **"from the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land."** Just as a supernatural light pierced the darkness of the night at His birth, a supernatural darkness overshadowed the light of day at His death.

Imagine what that must have been like! Imagine the crowds that condemned Jesus, those who stood and mocked him as the eerie **"darkness"** covered the land in the middle of the day.

Though the Bible doesn't specifically state the purpose of this **"darkness,"** in the Old Testament, darkness often indicates the judgment of God. A three day long darkness was the last plague on Egypt before the Passover. The prophet Amos spoke about God's judgment on Israel in Amos 8:9-10, **"And it shall come to pass in that day," says the Lord GOD, "That I will make the sun go down at noon, And I will darken the earth in broad daylight; I will turn your feasts into mourning, And all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist, And baldness on every head; I will make it like mourning for an only son, And its end like a bitter day."**

I believe this darkness signified God's judgment for the sin of mankind and His sorrow at the sacrifice of His beloved Son.

What does this mean for us today? It means we have a Savior who took our darkness, so that we might be people of the light. (1 Pet 2:9 NIV) **"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."**

## **II. The Savior Cried Out (vv.46-47).**

After the **"darkness"** filled the sky for three hours, **"at the ninth hour"** or 3:00 p.m., **"Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama**

**sabachthani?"** Matthew interprets these Hebrew and Aramaic words for us. They mean **"My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"**

Most Bible students know, as did some of **"those standing there"** (v. 47) that Jesus was speaking the words of Psalm 22:1, **"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning?"** Psalm 22 is the most quoted Psalm in the New Testament. David wrote this anguished prayer describing the undeserved suffering of a righteous man.

This verse is one of the mysteries of Scripture. Somehow, on the cross, God the Son was forsaken, separated from God the Father. For the only time in history, Jesus was not one with His Father. Jesus was taking the sin of the world upon Himself. Jesus was covered with the wretched filth of every sin of every man of Adam's race. In His holiness, the Father seemingly turned His face away from His sin-coated Son.

Habakkuk 1:13 says of the Lord, **"Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness."** Sin separated the Son from the Father... our sin.

This fact is so mysterious that it is said that Martin Luther went into seclusion for a long period of time in order to try and understand it. He gave up and came away as baffled as when he began.

We can only say for certain what the Scriptures say. Is.53:5 says, **"He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities..."** Rom.4:25 says He **"was delivered over to death for our sins."** 1 Cor.15:3 says, **"Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures."** 2 Cor.5:21 says plainly, **"God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."** Gal.3:13 says **"Christ... became a curse for us."** 1 Pet.2:24 says **"He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree."** 1 Pet.3:18 says, **"For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous."** 1 Jn.2:2 says, **"And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."**

In a mysterious, unfathomable way, Jesus not only suffered the excruciating physical pain of the cross, but He also endured the incomprehensible suffering of being separated from His Father as He bore our sin. Jesus did not stop being God's Son any more than you can stop being your father's son or daughter. He did not lose His divinity for a second but He did suffer the loss of intimacy with His Father. None of us could even begin to understand that depth of that sacrifice. Jesus suffered separation from His Father so that we could be reconciled to Him.

What does this mean for us at New Covenant Baptist Church? It means that because Jesus was forsaken on the cross, we will never be forsaken. (Heb 13:5b NIV) **"God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?""**

### **III. His Spirit Was Given Up (vv.48-50).**

John 19:28 tells us that about that time, Jesus cried out, "**I thirst.**" Someone, perhaps a Roman soldier "**took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put on a reed and offered it to Him to drink.**" This was not so much an act of mercy, but of prolonging the suffering of the condemned.

Obviously, "**the rest,**" the Jewish leaders in the crowd objected even to this aide. They said, "**Now leave Him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save Him**" (v. 49). Nothing, not even the supernatural darkness could distract them nor turn them from their determination to see Jesus dead.

Perhaps Jesus used the wetness of that "**wine vinegar**" to clear His throat because "**He cried out again in a loud voice**" (v. 50). John tells us that the words He cried out were, "**It is finished**" (John 19:30). It was a victory cry when Jesus had completed His atoning work on the cross.

Summoning His strength, Jesus cried out at last, "**It is finished!**" (Jn.19:30) and said, "**Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.**" Luke adds, "**Having said this, He breathed His last**" (Lk.23:46).

Jesus' life did not slip away from Him as He grew weaker and weaker on the cross. Jesus did not die with a wimper, but in the strength of a loud voice, He "**gave up His Spirit**" (v. 50). "**Gave up**" comes from a word that means "letting go or sending away, indicating an act of the will." Jesus knew He had paid the price for our sin. He knew the time was at hand. He had suffered enough. He willingly gave up His spirit.

Crucifixions usually lasted much longer than six hours. Sometimes it took days. When Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body, Mark tells us the governor "**was surprised to hear that He was already dead**" (Mark 15:44) and sent a centurion to verify the information.

Jesus was no victim on the cross. He was the victor! Hanging on that cross, Jesus still held sovereign control over the whole scene. He had said about His life in John 10:18, "**No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.**"

What does this mean for us? Because Jesus gave His life, and took it up again He also has the power to give life to all who come to Him. (John 5:21 NIV) "**For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.**"

#### **IV. The Temple Veil Was Torn (v.51a).**

Next, Matthew says, "**At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.**" The inner sanctuary of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, was divided from the outer sanctuary by a large woven veil or curtain some 60 feet high, 30 feet wide and as thick as the palm of your hand. Josephus says it was primarily blue and elaborately decorated. Each year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest went beyond the veil to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat which symbolized God's presence.

At the exact moment Jesus died "**the veil was torn in two.**" And look how it was torn: "**from top to bottom.**" It was as though a large sword from heaven had been dropped upon it, as if God Himself reached down from heaven and ripped it in two. It was torn "**from top to bottom**" because God tore it, not man.

There was no longer a need for a veil or a high priest to offer a sacrifice in that man-made temple. The author of Hebrews tells us, **"But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."** (Heb. 9:11-12).

Because the veil is torn, we have access to the very presence of God and we can come to Him with confidence through the blood of Jesus. Hebrews 10:19-22 says,

**Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.**

The once-for-all sacrifice has been made; the new and living way is opened. Therefore, Heb.4:16 says, **"Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."**

What does this mean for us? We have open access to the Father through Jesus. WE are a people of grace because we have received grace!

## **V. The Earth Was Shaken (v.51b).**

At just the moment that Jesus **"cried out... and gave up His Spirit"** not only was the temple veil torn but **"the earth shook** [violently trembled, moved back and forth] **and the rocks split."** This was no mere coincidence, but a sign of God's judgment.

Many times throughout the OT, earthquakes accompanied God's presence. For example, When God met with Moses on Mt. Sinai, **"the whole mountain tembled violently"** (Ex.19:18). In many other passages we see the ground shaking in the Lord's presence.

Do you remember what Jesus said about the worshippers at His triumphal entry? He said in Lk.19:40 **"if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."** While He hung on the cross, there was no one to sing and shout praises to Him, but a supernatural shattering of stone signaled the completion of His redemptive work and foreshadowed God's judgment to come.

We are a people who have been shaken by God's power. Let's not wait for the rocks to cry out. *We* should be praising the Lord!

## **VI. The Dead Were Raised (vv.52-53).**

As **"the earth quaked and the rocks were split"** Matthew says that **"the tombs broke open."** That's not so uncommon in an earthquake but what is uncommon is that **"many bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs."**

Not *all* but "**many**" of the spirits of the saints were joined again with their bodies which had been glorified. They prefigure at Jesus' crucifixion what will accompany His work in the end times when "**the dead in Christ will rise**" (1 Thess.4:16).

The English translation here is a bit confusing. It sounds as though these OT saints did not come out of the graves until after His resurrection. However, the literal meaning is that "**after the resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.**" They did not appear in Jerusalem until after Jesus' resurrection in order that He might be "**the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep**" (1 Cor.15:20).

## VII. The Centurion Was Convinced (v.54).

A "**Centurion**" was a Roman officer given charge over 100 men. He and "**those with him**" who supervised and guarded over the crucifixion saw everything that happened to Jesus. Surely they saw Him scourged in the Praetorium. Maybe they were among those who mocked Him and put a crown of thorns on His head. And they were the ones who drove the nails in His hands and feet and gambled for His clothing.

I am sure that the sudden mid-day darkness must have unnerved them. However, when the ground began to shake violently and the rocks broke apart, "**they were terrified.**" The "**centurion**" and his men sensed that this was not some strange circumstance but that what Jesus had claimed was true. They proclaimed, "**Truly He was the Son of God.**"

There is no miracle greater than when God transforms any person from a hardened sinner to a humble saint. Perhaps the greatest evidence of Jesus' work on the cross was that those who started the day abusing Him finished the day adoring Him.

Let me close with a story that shows the power of the cross:

Most of you know about the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941. Few people know the amazing story of Mitsuo Fuchida. He was the Japanese Naval Air Force's top pilot in 1941 and was tapped to command the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Fuchida's was the voice that sent his aircraft carrier the message "**Tora! Tora! Tora!**" (Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!) indicating the success of the surprise mission. He served in many other engagements being wounded during the battle of Midway in 1942. He spent the rest of the war as a staff officer. Fuchida was in Hiroshima the day before the atom bomb was dropped and returned to Hiroshima the day after the bombing on a party sent to examine and assess the damage of the bomb. Later, all members of Fuchida's search party died from radiation poisoning but Fuchida suffered no symptoms.

Here is the rest of the story. It begins with an American sergeant named Jacob DeShazer. On that Sunday in 1941 while Fuchida was in the air over Pearl Harbor, an American soldier named Jake DeShazer had been on K.P. duty in an Army camp in California. When the radio announced the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, he hurled a potato at the wall and shouted, "Jap, just wait and see what we'll do to you!"

One month later he volunteered for a secret mission with the Jimmy Doolittle Squadron -- a surprise raid on Tokyo from the carrier Hornet. On April 18, 1942, DeShazer was one of the bombardiers, and was filled with elation at getting his revenge. After the bombing raid, they flew on towards China, but ran out of fuel and were forced to parachute into Japanese-held territory. The next morning, DeShazer found himself a prisoner of Japan.

During the next forty long months as a POW, DeShazer was cruelly treated. He recalls that his violent hatred for the maltreating Japanese guards almost drove him insane at one point. But after twenty-five months there in Nanking, China, the U.S. prisoners were given a Bible to read. There in the Japanese P.O.W. camp, he read and read and eventually came to understand that the book was more than an historical classic. Its message became relevant to him right there in his cell.

There, in the suffering of that place, he found Christ. Having been born again, DeShazer found his heart softened toward his Japanese captors. The dynamic power of Christ which Jake DeShazer accepted into his life changed his entire attitude. His hatred turned to love and concern, and he resolved that should his country win the war and he be liberated, he would someday return to Japan to introduce others to this life-changing book.

And DeShazer did just that. He returned to Japan in 1948 as a missionary. He wrote a widely distributed essay called, "I Was a Prisoner of the Japanese," detailing his experiences of capture, conversion, and forgiveness.

Fuchida received a copy of DeShazer's testimony and read it. And his story was something Fuchida could not explain nor forget. He bought a Bible, began to read it, and finally came to the climactic drama -- the Crucifixion. He read in Luke 23:34 the prayer of Jesus Christ at His death: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Fuchida said, "I was impressed that I was certainly one of those for whom He had prayed ... Right at that moment, I seemed to meet Jesus for the first time. I understood the meaning of His death as a substitute for my wickedness."

Fuchida and DeShazer met in 1950. DeShazer welcomed the new convert and encouraged him to be baptized. While DeShazer continued to plant churches throughout Japan, Fuchida spent the rest of his life as an evangelist, spreading the gospel throughout Japan and the Orient.

He wrote this testimony in his book, "From Pearl Harbor to Golgotha", "**I would give anything to retract my actions of twenty-nine years ago at Pearl Harbor, but it is impossible. Instead, I now work at striking the death-blow to the basic hatred which infests the human heart and causes such tragedies. And that hatred cannot be uprooted without assistance from Jesus Christ. He is the only One Who was powerful enough to change my life and inspire it with His thoughts. He was the only answer to Jake DeShazer's tormented life. He is the only answer for young people today.**" – From the tract originally entitled, "From Pearl Harbor to Golgotha" (1953).

That is the story of the cross. It is meant for you. Jesus will transform your life. That is the power of the cross.