

**CELEBRATE EASTER 2017
DEATH BRINGS CHANGE**

Luke 23:44-49

We are focusing on this particular passage dealing with the death of Christ. I am going to read it and pray that God would move in our midst this morning as we exalt his word. Luke 23:44-49. Let's read God's word.

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

This is God's word. Let's pray. Father, capture our minds this morning. Capture our hearts, our spirits. May we not be distracted. May we not be looking for just a superficial experience this morning. Help us, God, to be changed at the deepest level by your word, by your truth, and by the preached word this morning. We need you, God, and we ask for your Spirit to be with us and to impact us this morning. May we not leave the same way that we came. We need you. We love you. We pray that our minds and hearts would be alert and attentive and that we would receive your word in a powerful way this morning. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, this is the death of Jesus. These verses are the death of Jesus. What I want to try to do this morning is to help us kind of pull away from the normal mindset that we have when we're reading the scriptures. Many of us, maybe all of us, know the story, know what's coming. I think sometimes that it's wonderful that we have all that in us, but it removes the impact that this should have on us. So what I want to try to do is help us, and maybe pretend for a minute that we don't know how the rest of the story goes.

Just put yourself in the position of those who were there. Maybe you are one of the crowd following Jesus around. Maybe you are one of the disciples. Maybe you are one of the Pharisees.

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You are there. You are seeing this event unfold. Maybe you've been hearing about Jesus, you've been watching him from afar, walking with him. Maybe you left everything to follow him. He has made some bold claims, right? He has claimed in so many words that he is the Son of God. He is the promised Messiah, the Christ. And he has done amazing things. Where people couldn't see, they are seeing now. Where they couldn't hear, they are able to hear. People who can't walk, who are lame - they are picking up their beds and they are walking. Miracles are taking place. He has promised a new life for all those who follow him. He has promised a new kingdom. He has promised to crush the oppressors, to rescue his people from captivity.

And here we are with these simple words: "He breathed his last." Let's put ourselves in that position, to see this unfold. What do you do with this? What do you do with what just happened? Everything that they gave their life to is now over, from their perspective over. He is crucified, and from their perspective, a crucified Messiah is a failed Messiah. It is a curse to be crucified. It is not what they thought was going to happen. So, what do they do? They scatter. They start to reflect on the last three years of their lives. Your friend, your leader, your savior is gone, so you have to reflect.

Death has a way of doing that, of bringing change, of bringing reflection. We all will experience death in this life one way or the other - someone we know, or obviously ourselves. What it does is force us to evaluate our lives, to make us grateful for our life. We start asking important questions when we're at someone's funeral. When something like this happens we start evaluating our own life and the choices we've made. Am I making the most of my time? What am I taking for granted? What comes next after death? Am I ready for that? The big questions of life come when we encounter life-threatening situations.

As I was studying for this and thinking through it, I was remembering a moment in my life. I was in my mid-twenties and I had contracted a terrible throat infection. It was horrible. It was one of the worse sicknesses I've ever had. It was so painful that I couldn't swallow. The doctors were giving me what I considered to be the wrong medicine. At one point, I woke up one morning feeling like I couldn't breathe through my mouth very well, and I started to freak out a little bit. I called my wife and said, "Hey, I think I need to go to the hospital." So she comes home and we go to the hospital. I get there, they give me some shots to try to reduce the swelling, and I'm out of it. I'm lying on the bed, kind of in and out of sleep, so to speak. And I have this vivid memory of being in this daze, kind of sleeping, then I hear my mom and she starts reading the 23rd psalm.

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You might be thinking, “This is really sweet. Your mother comes to the hospital and starts reading scripture over you.” In my mind, the 23rd psalm is what you read to people when they’re dying. I remember hearing, “The Lord is my shepherd...” Uh oh. I’m like, “I’m up! I’m up! I’m okay! It’s not that bad!” I remember thinking, “Oh my goodness, what is going on?” In those few moments, it’s comical. As I think back I laugh at that, going, “Man, I’m getting my last rites read to me by my mother.”

I remember coming out of that sickness. It wasn’t life-threatening, thank God, but you know everything just changes when you come out of that. The grass is a little greener, the sky is bluer, the air is crisp. The reality is that when life is threatened, everything changes.

And it’s no different when we look at the death of Jesus here, because it should impact us, right? It should force us to evaluate life. What we read here in the text should force us to evaluate our life. It did for his followers. It did for his disciples, right? At this moment they are crushed. This man that they had faithfully followed has just been killed on the cross. Everything that they’ve given their life to is over, from their perspective. It’s gone, and they don’t know what to do.

So they go home and start to reevaluate things. For us, the impact of this moment is softened because we know the rest of the story. We can breeze through these six verses, think about the disciples, and say to them, “Hey, guys, don’t worry. Just turn the page. It’s going to be okay. In a few days you’re going to be laughing about this. It’s going to be all different.” But we realize the next three days for these men and women – it’s rough. They are completely shell shocked because they didn’t get it. They didn’t understand what was happening. No one did.

You have the Pharisees who were there, who were putting him to death. They are saying, “Alright, it’s done. I told you so.” His disciples are saying, “We put all our hope and faith into this guy and now he’s on this cross.” He breathes his last breath and it’s over! They are like, “Were they right? Were we just fools?” No one understood that in order for Jesus to do what he came here to do he had to suffer and die for the sins of mankind. We sang about it this morning. We sang wonderful songs about the fact that we are sinners, separated from a perfect and holy God, and he cannot just look away from our sin. Something had to be done. God’s wrath had to be justified for the sins of his people. So Jesus comes and dies. That’s the punishment for our sin.

Look at what 2 Corinthians 5:21 says. This is the Apostle Paul. He says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is

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extremely important. For whose sake? For our sake. "He made him to be sin who knew no sin." He knew no sin. We see this! We see this at the end of the passage. The centurion - the guy who actively puts him to death in one way or another - he says, "Oh no, this was an innocent man." People are leaving, beating their breasts. It's this image of sadness, like, "I have made a terrible mistake! We've made a terrible mistake!" There was this spectacle. He knew no sin. We have to be very clear about that, that Jesus did not in any way deserve the death that he took on the cross. He became sin on that cross. Our sin was put on him and the wrath of God was poured out on his Son to pay the penalty for our sin.

You see, they felt that the Messiah was going to come and overthrow the government. They thought the Messiah was going to come and save his people with a swinging sword and some sort of military operation. "Yes! You are going to save us from our captors. You are going to save us from our oppressors, and that's going to be with might and force." Peter is swinging swords around and cutting people's ears off, and Jesus is saying, "No, no, no, no. This is not what I'm about." They don't understand.

Then, he's on the cross, which is what he is about, and they have no idea. No one understood that a crucified Messiah wasn't a failure - but it was a victorious Messiah. They really didn't understand who Jesus was, what he came to do, and how what he did was going to change their lives forever. It's very easy to sit back and think, "Man, these guys just didn't get it. They are just clueless."

The question that we have to continually wrestle with, that I have to continually wrestle with is: Do I get it? Do I understand Jesus? Because I think the reality is too often I do not. We do not. We don't understand him. What we like to do is take snapshots of him and put them together to create kind of the perfect Jesus that we want. That's what we're used to, right? In our culture right now we have Facebook, we have Instagram, Snapchat - all our social media avenues. What do we do? We see people in snapshots, and it looks like their lives are amazing all the time. Life looks perfect. People are traveling. They are laughing. They are having fun. Their children look like perfect little angels. We are scrolling through, then we turn around to look at our own lives and we are like, "Oh my goodness. Why isn't my life this glorious? You guys must be having the time of your lives."

Intellectually we know that surely no one's life is that perfect, but it's powerful. What we do is take the snapshots of these people's lives and create a whole reality for them. We are like, "Wow, they must be perfect. Look at them. We need to go out more, because look at how much they are going

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out to dinner. And look at their children. Why can't you be more like the picture of Johnny over here?"

I think we tend to do this with Jesus in one form or another. We take snippets of his life - maybe the ones that we really like -- and we craft Jesus into something we really like, but maybe something that's not fully him. We want him to be a certain way, right? We want to create the God that we can control, that we can tame, so we can live the way we want, but still utilize his power.

Maybe we really love the way Jesus teaches, so we are like, "Man, he is just a great teacher." Or we love his personality and we are like, "Man, I think he is such a good guy and I'm going to model my life after the way he lives his life." Or we see him as humble or selfless. Maybe we love Christmastime and we just love sweet little Baby Jesus in the manger and that's all we want of him.

Or we like to think of him as our friend. "I love Jesus as a friend, but that's all I want from him." Or we love it when Jesus goes in and flips tables over in the temple and we say, "Man, that's the Jesus I like. That's what I want. That's my Jesus. But that's all I want." We start to diminish the fullness of who Jesus is because we don't get it. We craft Jesus into these little pockets of his character, but the reality is he's so much bigger than that. He's so much better than those things. He's bigger and better than we can even imagine.

And this event - the death of Jesus - is a stark reminder that he is different, and that his ways are different. Because I'll tell you this: If we were on a mission to save humanity from their sins, I'm fairly certain we would not do it the way that he did. We wouldn't choose this path. What our text here from Luke 23 does for us is force us to enlarge our view of Jesus and see how significant his death is for us, and the change that it brings for us.

What I want to do quickly is look at three things from the text to help us understand the significance of Jesus' death - just straight from the text, these big anchors for us to latch onto. We are going to look at the sky, we are going to look at the veil, and the people.

I. The Sky.

Something amazing happens as we start talking about the sky in verses 44 and 45. Something incredible happens. As Jesus dies, Luke tells us that darkness comes over the land. In fact, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, three gospel writers, all go to pretty great lengths to show us that there is

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darkness over the land when Jesus dies, as he was crucified. We see that from the sixth to the ninth hour it gets dark.

Just so we're clear and understand (usually there are little footnotes in your bible that can help you see what actual time that was) we are talking about from noon to 3:00 pm. They start marking the day at 6:00 am, and six hours from 6:00 is 12:00, so high noon to 3:00 pm. The sunniest part of the day gets dark. Why does that matter? Why is that significant? Well, for one, it doesn't normally get dark at that time of day. Some might think, "Well, maybe there was an eclipse." It's not an eclipse. Eclipses don't last that long. If it was an eclipse, it would be the most supernatural eclipse ever because three hours is not a normal time.

We are forced into a spot of saying that this is a miracle. Something is happening here other than the ordinary activity of nature. It's supernatural. Something symbolic is happening. I think it's recorded and emphasized to show that this was no ordinary man on a cross. This was God's Son. Jesus himself, when he describes who he is, says, "I'm the light of the world," in a couple places. One of them is in John 9. He says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." It's interesting because the light of the world is being crucified, and as he breathes his last, darkness comes over the land.

It's almost like the light of the world is being extinguished, at least for a short time, and the physical world is responding. Darkness is a symbol of death. It's fitting that as the Son of God breathes his last breath, darkness follows. The dark sky, I think, also symbolizes our darkness, the darkness of our sin that Jesus took on himself. He took our sin. We read that earlier from 2 Corinthians. He took our sin. He took our death, our darkness, and as his work finishes, the world mirrors that transaction.

It was a dark event that took place that day, and it teaches us, I think, something important - that God uses suffering and darkness in our lives to remind us of this event, of the gospel. It reminds us and helps us to value the gospel, what Jesus did for us, to help us in our dark moments. If I said, "Raise your hand if you're going through a dark moment," I promise that a lot of people would raise their hand right now. If you're going through darkness or coming out of a season of darkness, we all experience dark moments. That's a for sure thing in this life. We will experience pain and darkness and trouble in this world. This passage and this event are great reminders of how God can and will use even the dark moments of life for our good. For our good.

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We can't deny that this is probably the most wicked event in all of human history – the perfect, innocent Jesus, Son of God being crucified on a cross. So this is an identifying marker for us. Paul says it this way in Philippians 3:10. He's talking about Jesus: "...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

When we come to Christ there is a death that takes place in us. We die to self. We die to the power of sin in us. Jesus comes and does something amazing in us. So whatever sin that you are struggling with, or whatever life battle you are dealing with, whatever darkness is happening in your life -- it's an opportunity for us to identify with Jesus in this very unique moment. Thank God, we don't have to go on the cross, bearing the weight of all of our sin. He did that. But as we go through the trouble in life, we can look to this and read and say, "God uses even the most wicked events to bring out the good for me in my life and I'm going to trust him for that."

The sky gets dark and something else amazing happens. Let's move to our second point.

II. The Veil.

In verse 45 it may not be as overtly clear to us what's happening, but another miracle happens. We are told that as Jesus is dying, the temple veil is torn in half from top to bottom. Let me explain what's happening here. The veil in the temple was important. It was a thick, linen curtain that separated two rooms in the temple. In the temple there was the Holy Place, then there was the Most Holy Place, and there was a big curtain that hung in between. It was like 60 feet high and 4 inches thick, and it is ripped down the middle from top to bottom. It's really interesting.

You see, the Most Holy Place, that special room, was where the presence of the Lord was supposed to dwell. Only the high priest was able to go into that room one time a year. He had to make a lot of preparations for himself so that he could approach God rightly, but only the high priest could go in once a year. What would he do in there? He would atone for the sins of the people. He would make a sacrifice for the whole nation, saying, "God, forgive them." He was the mediator between God and the people, so this veil was a symbol. This curtain was a symbol, a barrier that shielded God's holiness from the sin of man, and it kept man from carelessly entering God's presence and worshipping him incorrectly.

So when it's torn in half, what happens? It breaks down the barrier between God and man. Jesus, as he is dying, breaks down the barrier between God and man, making God's presence available to everyone. By sacrificing himself on the cross, he becomes the new mediator between God and man.

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The veil was a barrier between us and God, and at the death of Christ, the barrier is ripped in half, giving us access to the Father. There is no division anymore. The author of Hebrews says it like this: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh...” You see, there is a curtain that’s been torn away. It has been removed by his blood through his flesh. “... and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Man, this is good news! As Jesus is dying on the cross, this veil is ripped, saying, “Listen, it’s done! It’s finished!” In the other gospel account, we read when Jesus says, “It is finished,” it means it is done. It is paid for. The veil is ripped in half, and now what once was a separating barrier between us and God is now broken down because we don’t need to be shielded from God’s wrath anymore because Jesus took it. He is the sacrifice. The high priest doesn’t go in anymore and make a sacrifice. Jesus was the sacrifice on the cross.

And only God could have ripped that curtain from top to bottom. It was a symbol to show that God did this. There was no one down there with scissors cutting this veil in half. He did it so that we can enter his presence with confidence. You see, there was no confidence before. The priest would go into the Holy of Holies and it was a scary place. This was a statement that Jesus, who was the true temple of God, is our doorway to relationship with the Father. His sacrifice bought our redemption. His sacrifice bought the forgiveness of our sins.

So what does this mean for us? Listen, this is important. Yes, our sins are forgiven in him. When we put our trust in Christ, those have been atoned for. We trust in him and our sins are forgiven. But it also means that we don’t have to prove ourselves to God in order for him to favor us. Let’s face it my friends, you and I do this. Again, we try to create God the way that we want to relate to him sometimes. So we work hard to try to prove who we are to him. We say, “Alright, I might have done this, but let me balance out the scales by telling you what I did here and how much I did for you. Remember, I didn’t get angry when that guy cut me off on the road, and I gave a little extra at church today to maybe offset what I did last night.” It’s madness. It’s prison. And it doesn’t work.

The death of Christ, the gospel, frees us from trying to prove ourselves to God all the time, trying to always balance out the scales, because we can’t. All our striving to be made right and all our

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attempts to do that, to do good, to find worth – all of that has been accomplished by Jesus, by his sacrifice.

What's left for us is to trust him, to worship him, to believe that he is the Son of God, and only in him do we find salvation and freedom. This changes the way that we live. It changes the way that we have friendships. It changes the way that we parent our children, how we work in the business marketplace, how we treat our spouse – all of this. If we are putting on other people the mandate to live by the law with us when God has crushed that, then we don't understand it. We have to think about how we are living lives with one another and how we are living the gospel out.

God doesn't make us jump through hoops every single day in order to be right with him. Jesus makes us right. How we treat others, how we let others relate to us should be a reflection of what God has done to us. We can't do enough to earn God's forgiveness, his love, his approval – and we don't have to. Jesus did it.

So what does this do? This truth, this reality that comes through the death of Christ has to provoke a response in us. It has to provoke a response. It did in the people who were watching. It certainly evoked a response in them. And this is our final point, as we look at the people in verses 47 and 48.

III. The People.

Look, everyone who encounters Jesus, whether in his life or in his death, has to respond. We can't ignore him. We can't dismiss him. You can't sit here reading these words and just say, "Hmm," because he existed. He did these things. Whether you believe who he was is a different story. You can't just think of him as a great teacher. You can't just think of him as a great guy. We are forced into a position here. C.S. Lewis did a great job in laying this out for us. He made famous the idea that our response to Jesus is either that Jesus is a lunatic, he's a liar, or he is what he says he is, and that's Lord. Look at what he says in [Mere Christianity](#).

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill

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Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God.

The people who came out to see Jesus tortured and killed thought they were coming to see a madman executed -- a criminal. But at the end of the day they saw something else. They saw the innocent Son of God hanging on a cross. Look at the responses! We talked about this earlier. People are leaving, beating their breasts. They know something is wrong. The centurion who was active in putting him down praised God, it says. It says he was praising God, saying, "Truly this man was innocent." The sky is getting dark. Veils are ripping apart. Other things are happening. These people are watching, going, "Oh man, we done wrong." When confronted with Jesus, either by his life or by his death, we are forced to evaluate our life and we are forced to decide what we think about him.

I want to help you think about this a little more. As you came in, I gave you this little card. You can use it as a bookmark. It's yours. It's not meant to be an invitation for other people. I came across a poem of sorts. The text of the poem is on the back of this card as a reminder for you after today. It's an adaptation of something written by Kevin DeYoung, who is a pastor in Michigan. I want to show you a video which this text is on to give us a fuller picture of Jesus.

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