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Sermon Notes

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## **God the Father Interprets the Cross of Christ**

**Mark 15:33-39**

Across the centuries and all over the world, the cross of Christ is misunderstood. It should not surprise us, for people misinterpreted the cross even while it was occurring two thousand years ago. But that misinterpretation continues up to our time.

As we saw last time, Jesus' enemies utterly hated and despised him... they considered him a blasphemer and deceiver of the people. So for them, Jesus' hanging on a cross was clear vindication of these views. They officially condemned him to death:

***Mark 14:63-64 The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. <sup>64</sup> "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death.***

These religious men saw Jesus' death as punishment directly from God for his blasphemies and deceptions. The chief priests and Pharisees and teachers of the law mocked him, saying

***Matthew 27:43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'***

For these religious leaders, this shameful death on the cross was proof of Jesus being under the curse of God, obvious proof that he was NOT the Messiah, still less the Son of God. Instead, God was killing him for his blasphemies. Amazingly Isaiah had predicted that exact misinterpretation of the cross:

***Isaiah 53:4 we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.***

***Psalm 22:7-8 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: <sup>8</sup> "He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."***

The population of Jerusalem also misinterpreted the cross of Christ.. as they passed by on the road, they called out this exact mockery as well.

***Matthew 27:40 Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!***

So also the Roman soldiers in the Praetorium had joined in this shameful mocking... they knew less about Jesus' life and ministry and doctrine. To them, he was just a rabble-rousing Jew accused of being the King of the Jews. So they mocked him by putting a faded, dirty, purple robe on his shoulders, a crown of thorns on his head, and a wooden scepter in his hand. And then they scourged him and beat him and spat upon him. Finally they led him away to crucify him. How did they interpret the cross of Christ? Just another dead Jew. Nothing special.

So to this day, we have people misinterpreting the cross of Christ. Secular people see him as a man "dying for what he believed in."

Mahatma Gandhi: "I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His death on the Cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it my heart could not accept. The pious lives of Christians did not give me anything that the lives of men of other faiths had failed to give."

To Gandhi, the cross of Christ was just another example of heroism no different than others' inspirational examples.

To others, the cross of Christ is worthy of scorn. So it was to the philosopher elites that the Apostle Paul preached to on Mars Hill in Athens. They scoffed and mocked. So Paul wrote

*1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing*

*1 Corinthians 1:23-24 we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

All these people are misinterpreting the cross of Christ. Frankly, so did even Jesus' closest followers that day... they grieved deeply, displaying tremendous love for Jesus but limited faith. They definitely did not understand what was truly happening there.

In the end, only God the Father can properly interpret the cross of Christ to the human race.

This lines up with a line from William Cowper's hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way":

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain;  
**GOD IS HIS OWN INTERPRETER,**  
And He will make it plain

So, God ultimately reveals the cross to us. He began doing so that very day, by certain decisive actions he took while Jesus was on the cross. There are more things that God did when Jesus died than are recorded in Mark's abbreviated account. I'm going to focus on four key elements:

The Darkness

The Cry

The Curtain

The Confession

I will seek to show how the Father was interpreting the cross in each of these elements.

## I. The Darkness

***Mark 15:33 At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.***

### A. The Physical Darkness

1. This was an actual, physical thing
2. God shut down the daylight for three hours... from about noon till three in the afternoon... usually the height of the sun's rays
3. There is evidence that this stunning celestial event was not merely local but extended over most of that part of the world
4. The text says darkness "came over the whole land"... the Greek could mean "whole earth" or merely just that region

The Christian apologist Tertullian, writing in the second century, called it a "cosmic" or "world event" – evidently visible in Rome, Athens, and other Mediterranean cities, and challenged his non-Christian adversaries with these words: "At the moment of Christ's death, the light departed from the sun, and the land was darkened at noonday, which wonder is related in your own annals, and is preserved in your archives to this day." The Greek writer Phlegon, writing in 137 AD, reported that in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad (33 AD) there was "the greatest eclipse of the sun . . . it became night in the sixth hour of the day (noon) so that stars even appeared in the heavens."

2nd-century chronicler Phlegon of Tralles records that during the reign of Tiberius Caesar there was a complete solar eclipse at full moon from the sixth to the ninth hour. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (264 – 340), in his Chronicle, quotes Phlegon as saying that during the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad (AD 32/33) "a great eclipse of the sun occurred at the sixth hour that excelled every other before it, turning the day into such darkness of night that the stars could be seen in heaven, and the earth moved in Bithynia, toppling many buildings in the city of Nicaea."

That is AMAZING!

How did God do this? We'll never know. But in the days of Joshua, he made the sun stand still in the sky, extending the daylight so Joshua could complete his military victory. Here, God does the opposite.

## B. Spiritual Darkness

1. It seems reasonable that Almighty God, the ruler of the heavens and the earth, was communicating to the human race by this darkness
2. Light consistently represents God... goodness, virtue

***1 John 1:5 God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.***

3. Physical light was the first thing that God created, "Let there be light" and there was light. God called the light good.
4. Jesus Christ is the light of the world

***John 8:12 "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."***

5. Darkness represents sin and death

***Isaiah 9:2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.***

6. Satan's kingdom is the kingdom of darkness

***Colossians 1:13 ... the dominion of darkness***

***Ephesians 6:12 For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens.***

7. When Jesus entered the world, an angel of Lord announced his birth with supernatural LIGHT... the glory of the Lord shone around him
8. Now that Jesus was dying, the light was taken out of the world

9. The misinterpretations of the cross shows that the people of that day were in darkness... not knowing the truth

10. The future of darkness:

a. The Day of the Lord... Judgment by God on a sinful Earth

***Amos 5:20 Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light-- pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?***

Thus, to some degree it was "the Day of the Lord" for the elect when Jesus was dying for them... the darkness was representative of God's wrath on Jesus for our sins

So the future Day of the Lord will be a day of darkness:

***Isaiah 13:9-11 See, the day of the LORD is coming--a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger-- to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. <sup>10</sup> The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. <sup>11</sup> I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.***

Even worse is the terror of outer darkness... eternity in hell

b. Hell

***Matthew 25:30 [bind them hand and foot and throw them] outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'***

11. Conversely, the New Heavens and New Earth, and the New Jerusalem will be eternally radiant with the glory of God

II. The Cry

***Mark 15:34 And at 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?"***

A. This Cry from Jesus of Total Abandonment by God is INFINITELY MYSTERIOUS!

B. This Cry is so DEEP and VITAL, that the Holy Spirit wanted every generation to hear these words in Jesus' original tongue... every language into which the Bible has been translated has to mimic these syllables

***"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani"***

AND to be told immediately their meaning... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Here is the infinite mystery of God's activity at the cross.

#### C. The Eternality of the Trinity

1. God has eternally existed in Three Persons... the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
2. That cannot ever change... on the cross, Jesus didn't cease being God the Son; the entire universe depends on the eternality of the Trinity... the Father's will, the Son the Word by which the Father's will is done; the Spirit the power
3. And the Father's perfect love for God the Son is unchangeable... the link between the Father and the Son cannot be broken ever... the Father loves the Son with an intensity that is greater than the heat of the hottest star

#### D. The Mystery of the Incarnation and the Atonement

1. Yet along with this mystery is that of the Incarnation
2. Jesus Christ is fully God, and also fully human
3. By Jesus' cry from the cross, we can peer into the invisible spiritual world and see what God the Father was doing with his Son
4. Jesus cries out, like a cry from the pit of hell... total abandonment by God; deeper, total wrath poured out on him by God
5. This is the central element of hell... being totally forsaken by God, completely stripped of every good and perfect gift; no blessings from God, only wrath and curse

6. In hell, the damned can experience no pleasure, no joy, no friendship, no gifts, no happiness of any kind... a cold empty terror, of sheer loneliness and isolation
7. Other texts speak of the hotness of God's infinite wrath against sin... a raging, consuming fire; Jesus was drinking that cup as he cried out this cry
8. The only possible reason for this is the ATONEMENT... Jesus was our substitute, our propitiation
9. In and of himself, he was SINLESS... but

***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.***

10. God laid our sins on him and then forsook him entirely to his wrath

***Isaiah 53:5-6 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.***

11. If we don't understand this, we don't understand the cross
12. This is God the Father's activity at the cross, and his interpretation of it

#### E. The Fulfillment of Prophecy

1. Also we realize that, in speaking these words, Jesus is quoting a vital Old Testament prophecy... Psalm 22
2. In so doing, Jesus is both actually speaking out his experience AND pointing to the fact that he is fulfilling specific prophecy which King David wrote 1000 years before he was born
3. In that prophecy is laid out very clearly the mode of the Messiah's death... crucifixion, by which his hands and feet are pierced



***Psalm 22:16-18 Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. <sup>17</sup> I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. <sup>18</sup> They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.***

#### F. The Crowd's Misinterpretation

1. It should not be surprising that the crowd, hearing this cry, misunderstood it
2. They are the people walking in darkness
3. They misheard "Eloi, eloi" for "Eli... yah" (Elijah's name)
4. So they thought he was calling for Elijah
5. The drink... again, in fulfillment of scripture

***Mark 15:36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.***

6. John tells us that this drink was in direct fulfillment of prophecy

***John 19:28-29 Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." <sup>29</sup> A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.***

In fulfillment of this verse:

***Psalm 69:21 They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.***

Amazing providence! Some unnamed person put that jar of wine vinegar there at Golgotha, not intending anything as deep as the fulfillment of a thousand-year-old prophecy

#### G. Jesus' Death

***Mark 15:37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.***

1. Mark doesn't tell us what he cried
2. Luke and John do

***Luke 23:46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."***

***John 19:30 Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.***

This is Jesus in absolute control of his own life and death

He is the only person in history to control his own birth

And the only person in history with this kind of control over his death

***John 10:18 "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."***

3. Death penalty mandated... and paid

***Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death***

***Ephesians 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace***

III. The Curtain

***Mark 15:38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.***

A. Fascinating Insight: Mark doesn't explain this at all

1. Mark just tells us that it happened
2. It is vastly significant, eternally significant, and it requires much clear explanation
3. But despite the fact that Mark was writing for a Roman audience, who would not have understood the significance, the Holy Spirit did not move him to explain it... just to record the historical fact
4. DIVISION OF LABOR! Other passages tells us what the curtain in the temple was for and what was the significance of it being torn
5. Each book of the Bible has its function, its purpose

B. The Purpose of the Curtain

1. This curtain separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place
  2. The Holy Place was where the priests could go every day to do their ministry; the Most Holy Place was where only the High Priest could go, once a year... it represented the presence of the holy God on the surface of the earth
  3. The Old Covenant was all about BARRIERS blocking access to God; "This far you may come and no farther."
  4. God said to Moses, "Do not come any closer"
  5. God commanded Moses to put a fence around the base of Mt. Sinai lest the people should come UP into the glory cloud where God was and they would have to be put to death
  6. "This far you may come and no farther."
  7. The curtain was SUBSTANTIAL
- 60 feet long, 30 feet high, and about 4 inches thick; composed of 72 squares sewn together; so heavy that it required 300 men to lift it

#### C. The Tearing of the Curtain

1. The timing... right at the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain WAS TORN... a force was exerted on it
2. Direct cause and effect... Jesus' death effected the tearing
3. BUT it was done "from top to bottom"... in other words, by the hand of God
4. How did Mark know this? One of two ways: 1) God revealed it to him as he wrote; 2) eyewitnesses had seen it and related it to Mark... in that case, it would have been PRIESTS who were working in the temple at the time, and who later became followers of Christ, who told Mark and the other gospel writers what they saw with their own eyes
5. Only God had the right to do this!! And he DID do it

## D. Significance

### 1. The End to the Old Covenant

- a. Animal sacrifice was now obsolete from that moment
- b. The ceremonial laws were fulfilled and replaced by the New Covenant in his blood

***Hebrews 8:13*** *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.*

### 2. Access to God

***Hebrews 4:16*** *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.*

***Ephesians 3:12*** *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*

Before this, we sinners could not draw near to the holy God; our sins would cry out against us and God's fiery holiness would destroy us

But now that Jesus' blood has been shed, we have ACCESS

And not just a little tear... the curtain is rent WIDE OPEN!

This access is the point of the New Covenant, according to the writer to Hebrews

***Hebrews 10:19-22*** *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

3. The entire purpose of Christ's incarnation and atonement was to bring us distant sinners close to God

#### 4. A picture of heaven itself

***Revelation 21:22-27 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. <sup>23</sup> The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. <sup>24</sup> The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. <sup>25</sup> On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. <sup>26</sup> The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. <sup>27</sup> Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.***

Jesus has opened the way into the very presence of God for all eternity by his death on the cross!!

TRAGICALLY... at some point, the unbelieving Jewish priests sewed it back up or replaced it, and the animals sacrificial system resumed for another generation... finally forty years later, God ended it by destroying the Temple

Jesus OPENED THE WAY INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD

***Revelation 3:7 What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.***

#### IV. The Confession

***Mark 15:39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"***

##### A. The Point of Mark's Gospel

***Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.***

##### B. The Point of Every Gospel

***John 20:31 these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.***

##### C. An Answer to Jesus' Perfect and Powerful Prayer

***Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."***

He was specifically praying for the Roman soldiers who crucified him... not for the whole world

Whatever Jesus asks for in prayer, he gets because he always prays according to the Father's will

#### D. The Direct Work of the Father

***Matthew 16:16-17 Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.***

***John 6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.***

#### V. Applications

##### A. The Death of Jesus Christ is the Holiest Moment in History

1. The scripture alone records it and interprets it for us
2. God the Father told us that it happened and what it means

##### B. Four Elements:

The Darkness... the Cry... the Curtain... the Confession

1. **By the darkness**, God is pointing to the only light there is for our sinful race... Jesus Christ himself is the light of the world
2. **By the cry** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God is pulling back the veil to the agonies of Jesus on the cross, infinitely greater than anything we can conceive of... by that cry, Jesus is rescuing us from being eternally forsaken by God

By faith in Jesus, we can know that God will never forsake us!

***Hebrews 13:5 "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."***

3. **By the curtain** being torn in two, the Father is inviting you to come into his presence and live with him there...
4. Listen again to the exhortations from Hebrews

*Hebrews 4:16 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.*

*Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

Draw near! Let your faith in Christ's blood cleanse your guilty conscience. Wash your bodies in the pure water of his word

But don't stay away from this holy God!

5. **By the confession** of the centurion, we are told what we must confess

*“Truly you are the Son of God!”*