

Jesus Cry of Desolation

Text:

Mark 15:26-38

And the superscription of his accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left. And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors.

And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest *it* in three days, Save thyself, and come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him.

And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

And some of them that stood by, when they heard *it*, said, Behold, he calleth Elias. And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar, and put *it* on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down. And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.

Introduction:

Today we are meditating on the three darkest hours of human history, noon till 3 P. M. the day Jesus was crucified. Alfred Edersheim, one of the greatest students ever of the life of Christ, writes of these three hours: "The three hours darkness was such not only to nature; Jesus also entered into darkness: Body, Soul, and Spirit." (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. II, p. 605). Let me say right from the beginning that we cannot follow him into that darkness; we can only stand in awe, and try to grasp enough of what transpired there to have our hearts filled with gratitude. Remember he went there for us. One thing the New Testament makes abundantly clear is that the sufferings of Christ were substitutionary. He was not dying for any fault of his own, but for the sins of the world. Let me reinforce this idea by reminding you of a few key New Testament passages.

In Mark 10:45 and Matthew 20:28 Jesus, himself, said to his disciples: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” Just hours previous to his crucifixion while eating the Passover with his disciples he had taken the bread and said: “Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you” (I Corinthians 11:24). He then took the cup saying: “This cup *is* the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:42). Paul says of Jesus in Titus 2:14 that he “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” In Ephesians 1:7 he affirms that “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” And in Galatians 1:7 he says that “Christ gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father.” Peter says of him: “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed” (I Peter 2:24). And again he says: “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit”(I Peter 3:18). The writer to the Epistle to the Hebrews affirms: “but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” (Hebrews 9:26-28).

We could fill up our allotted time by continuing to quote New Testament passages that affirm this central Christian truth, but these should be sufficient to convince even the most skeptical that Jesus believed, and his apostles taught that the purpose of his suffering and death was to redeem mankind from sin.

So let me affirm again that Jesus goes into the darkness for us, and he goes there alone. The hymn that has been most on my mind as I have been meditating on this passage is not sung much now. In fact, it is no longer in our hymnbook. It was written in 1914 by a man name Ben Price. The refrain say:

- “Alone, alone,
He bore it all alone;
He gave Himself to save His own,
He suffered, bled and died alone, alone.”

The third verse says:

“Alone upon the cross He hung
That others He might save;

Forsaken then by God and man.
Alone, His life He gave.”

I. The Events

As already noted from about noon to three P.M. an unexpected darkness covers the land. As this time of darkness draws to an end Jesus breaks his silence and lets out a loud cry from the cross. Matthew and Mark have preserved it for us as he said it in his mother tongue, Aramaic: “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” It is the opening words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, Why has thou forsaken me”. It is the only full sentence preserved in the Gospels in Aramaic. It was preserved this way first because it must have made a profound impression on those who first heard it, and secondly because what happens after is due to a misunderstanding of what Jesus said.

Only Jews would have understood his words, but it is possible that at least one of the Roman soldiers knew something of the Jewish traditions about Elijah. Because of his unusual exit from earth, and because the prophecy that he would come and prepare the way for the Messiah, he played an important role in 1st century Jewish thinking. Among other things, he was believed to come to the aid of those in extreme suffering.

One of the soldiers, no doubt moved by genuine compassion at the cry of Jesus, offers him a drink. John tells us that Jesus says at this point: “I thirst”. While the drink offered may seem strange to us and even revolting, it was the normal drink of working people, and it was no doubt from the soldiers own supply that he had brought with him. It was a sour wine mixed with water that once one becomes accustomed to it, is a refreshing drink.

Others out of curiosity say: “Let’s see if Elijah will come and help him.” All of this action is based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus has said. What concerns us most however, is not the misunderstanding, but what he actually did say: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

II. The Cry

The first thing we can say about this cry is that it is most certainly authentic. The early Christians would not have invented it as it has always been difficult for Christians to understand. It takes us into the mystery of the person of Christ. We affirm that he was a unique being; that he was at the same time fully God and completely human, and that the divine and human natures were indissolubly united in one person. You cannot separate the

two. So when he suffers, he suffers both as man, and as God. This being the case how can God abandon him?

Already by the second century some were trying to explain this saying in a way other than what it seems to imply. There was a group of early Christians who were known as the Docetics. Their name came from the Greek word that means “to appear”, or “to seem”. They said that Jesus only appeared to be human, that he really wasn’t. They used a Gospel called the “Gospel of Peter. The complete Gospel no longer exists, but its account of the crucifixion does. It follows Mark closely but, when Jesus cries out from the cross, he says: “my power, my power, why hast thou forsaken me?” This fits with their belief that the divine nature departed before Jesus began to suffer, and that Jesus suffered only as a human.

In recent times some have tried to argue that Jesus’ cry of desolation was really a cry of victory. The argument goes as follows. Since Jesus quotes the opening of Psalm 22, and Psalm 22 ends on a victorious note, Jesus being a good Jew would have implied the whole Psalm in quoting just the first line, hence it is a cry of victory. There is some truth in the idea that any part of a Psalm would imply the whole Psalm, but in this case it just doesn’t work. The cry is real. That is obvious from the way it is recorded. Even in the brief account of Matthew and Mark we cannot miss its pathos. Jesus was not singing a Psalm, he was crying out in the deepest of anguish.

Others have attempted to explain it by saying that Jesus only felt abandoned. As humans we can certainly grasp such an idea. Most of us have had moments when we felt abandoned by God only to realize after that we were not. But again this seems insufficient in this case. There is something real here. The best explanation is the classical explanation. There is a time when Christ takes upon himself the sins of the world. He enters into the darkness so that we might be delivered from it. We will never fully understand all that happened nor should we try. To again quote Alfred Edersheim: “Into this, to us, fathomless depth of the mystery of His Sufferings, we dare not, as indeed we cannot enter.” But the fact that we cannot enter into them or understand them does not mean that they did not happen. They did, and because they did we have the hope of forgiveness and salvation.

If we cannot enter into it, how should we react to this unbearable agony? First, It should create in us a profound sense of gratitude. Christ went where he did so we wouldn’t have to. He bore the penalty of our sins, so we could be free of it. To take such an act lightly is unthinkable. The last stanza of the hymn I quoted from earlier, Alone says:

Can you reject such matchless love?
Can you His claim disown?
Come, give your all in gratitude,
Nor leave Him thus alone.

That expression of gratitude should be followed by hope. If Christ truly bore my sins and God truly accepted his sacrifice, then I can be forgiven. There is hope of salvation. That hope is not in anything that I might do, but it is in the finished work of Jesus Christ who alone bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might be forgiven and have the hope of eternal life.