

STUDY 8 - MATTHEW 27:45-66

Vs 45-56

Matthew gives most attention in his account of Jesus' death to what happens at the very end of his three hours on the cross. This reminds us that what was most important was not Jesus' physical suffering, but what his death achieved. We see the significance of Jesus' death by what Jesus himself says, and also by the miracles that accompanied his death. We shouldn't be embarrassed about the miracles in this passage - when Jesus entered there were miracles (remember Matthew chapters 1 and 2), so it makes sense that there would be miracles when he died. Miracles in the Bible are signs, pointing beyond themselves - so it makes sense that at the most important event this world has known there would be signs directing our attention to what is going on.

In verse 45 we are told there was darkness across the land for 3 hours in the middle of the day. This could not have been an eclipse (because of when Passover fell in the calendar year). It is attested to by witnesses writing at the time such as Diogenes. It signifies the coming of God for judgement - recalling the ninth plague which came just prior to the Passover in Exodus. So prior to the fulfilment of the Passover there is darkness again.

Jesus cried out (verse 46), an expression of his agony in being abandoned by his Father. He bore the sins of those he redeemed so experienced the righteous wrath they deserved. Yet, it is important to notice that even here Jesus cries out to God. He cries out using a text from Psalm 22, which as you read it gives the answer to the cry - it is so he will be king, and the ends of the earth will turn to The Lord. We need to hold together the fact that verse 46 is both a real cry of anguish, yet is also a real cry of faith.

Despite all of this the mockery seems to continue (verse 47-49). They talk about Elijah coming to help him - it was thought that Elijah would return to earth from heaven at some point (possibly because of Malachi 4:5).

In verse 50 Matthew gives us an account of Jesus' death. It is phrased deliberately - Jesus is in control to the last. He is not killed - he gives up his spirit.

The second miracle is recorded in verse 51. This, along with verse 52, is an explanation of what happened at Jesus' death (you could skip verses 52 and 53 and it would make no difference to the "plot" showing that these verses are explanation of what has just happened). The veil was the curtain that hung in the temple and acted as a barrier between the holy of holies and the rest of the temple. God tears this veil at the death of Jesus (it is torn from top to bottom). Although it does signify that everyone now has access to God through the death of Christ, perhaps it is more accurate to say that the glory of God now bursts out of the temple to the whole world (see Matthew 28:16-20).

The third miracle is the earthquake in verse 52. An earthquake here reminds us of the earthquake that was felt at Mount Sinai, yet now it does not symbolise condemnation but pardon and forgiveness.

A fourth miracle is recorded in verse 53. Dead saints came back to life. It is important to notice this happened "after his [Jesus'] resurrection. He was raised first. This points vividly and clearly to what Jesus achieved by his death and resurrection. The defeat of death and hope for the future.

After Jesus' death, there is a surprising response. All the way through his account Matthew recorded the mockery Jesus faced from the Romans. Yet, at the end, one Roman centurion recognised who Jesus was. He saw the signs (verse 54), and saw what they pointed to. It is likely, given the place in the narrative in Matthew, that this centurion recognised who Jesus actually was - that he was who he claimed to be.

Matthew concludes his account of Jesus' death by honouring the women who followed Jesus to the end. His disciples fled, but the two Mary's and the mother of the sons of Zebedee were at the cross (Matthew does not mention the presence of John).

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Why is it significant that Matthew gives so much space in these chapters to what happens when Jesus is towards the end of his time on the cross?

What is the first miracle/sign that occurs while Jesus is on the cross? What does this remind you of (see Exodus 10:21-29)? What is it pointing to?

What does Jesus express in verse 46? Why do you think he quotes from Psalm 22?

How do the crowds respond?

What is significant about how Jesus ends his life in verse 50?

How does the second miracle, recorded by Matthew in verse 51, explain the significance of what has just happened?

What do the second and third miracles teach us about what Jesus death has achieved (vs 51,52)?

Why is what the centurion says in verse 54 a surprise, given what we've seen about the way the Romans have treated Jesus in these chapters? Why is when this centurion says this important?

Vs 57-66

Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin (see Mark 15:43), and was a secret follower of Jesus. He requests Jesus' body from Pilate and prepares it, and laid it in his tomb. He was obeying the word of God (see Deut 21:22-23) - and it had to be done quickly because of the coming Sabbath, but more than that he was honouring Jesus even in death. Notice that a great stone was laid across the entrance to seal it, and that the women saw this happen - they knew which tomb Jesus had been laid in.

We see another of the great ironies of the gospel in verses 62-66. The Jewish leaders are still scared, even though humanly speaking they have won and Jesus is dead. They remember Jesus' promise that he will rise. So Pilate ordered that the tomb would be made very secure - and in so doing he and they made the resurrection indisputable.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Are all the Jewish leaders in opposition to Jesus? (Verse 57-59)

Is it clear where Jesus is laid? Who sees?

Are the Romans and the Jewish leaders at peace now Jesus is dead?

How do the Jewish leaders and Pilate unwittingly contribute to evidence in favour of the resurrection?