

“The Cross”

Saint Matthew's Passion, Pt.5

We are continuing our study of Saint Matthew's Passion, which is the gospel writer Matthew's account of the last days of Jesus and his suffering, death and resurrection. And today we come to the climax of the whole story – the crucifixion. You say, “Wait, isn't the Resurrection,” - which we will talk about next week on Easter, duh! - “but isn't the Resurrection the climax of the gospel story?” No, it's the *resolve* of the story, but the cross takes center place. It is the greatest accomplishment of Jesus – I would argue that the Resurrection was actually the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was just dead until he wasn't.

But the cross is central to the gospel story as it has been to Christianity ever since. Now, each week of this series we are choosing a classical painting from the world of art to depict our scene. And there are so many magnificent depictions of the crucifixion that it's a dilemma as to which to choose. I mean, every great artist has their version of the crucifixion of Christ. So I went personal. If you were to go to the conference room/library which serves as my work space, you will see this painting hanging on the wall where I can see it all day long.

Now technically, that's only a portion of the painting, the whole thing is called the Isenheim Altarpiece and it is massive. So far we've featured Italian artists – as one should – but today we come to a German. This was painted by Matthias Grünewald from 1512-1516. The painting takes its name from the location for which it was created – the Monastery of Saint Anthony at Isenheim in northeastern France. That's the monastery's patron, Saint Anthony on the right panel. And on the left panel is Saint Sebastian, who is the patron saint of...get this...plague victims.

Now, I want you to know I chose this painting well before I'd even heard of COVID-19, but God knew what He was doing. The monastery at Isenheim specialized in hospital work and was especially known for their work with plague victims. And get this, for centuries, sick people made pilgrimage to the monastery and many were said to be healed simply by looking at the painting. It certainly was meant to give comfort to the suffering as Christ's own body is depicted as covered in the sores identified with the victims themselves. Isaiah after all says that “by his wounds we are healed.”

It is a powerful and dramatic scene unfolding. Kneeling to the left is Mary Magdalene, called by one art book I read, “among the most extraordinary figures in the history of painting, due to the way she thrusts toward the body of Christ, raising her hands in almost imitation of the gesture of the crucified Christ’s fingers stretched out skyward, toward a God who is not there.” Behind her, another Mary, the mother of Jesus, swoons into the arms of a young John the apostle.

On the other side, even the lamb at Jesus’ feet looks human and grieving. But it is the figure to the right that caused me to hang this painting in my study years ago. That is John the Baptist – obviously symbolic because he himself had been executed some years before the historical event. He is included because he was the last of the prophets to announce the coming of the Messiah. Notice in his left hand he holds the Bible – the word of God – and with his right hand he points to Jesus.

I look at that painting ever day, because John the Baptist reminds me of what my job is. Church, as your pastor I will sometimes counsel you in times of crisis, but I’m not a counselor. I am responsible for overseeing the business aspects of the organization, but I am not a manager. My job – my calling – is to stand before you with the Bible in one and and point

to Jesus with the other. Because this is the answer to all the problems in your life. Are you struggling with your health? Look to Jesus. Relationship issue? Look to Jesus. Money problems? Look to Jesus. Corona isolation got you down? Come to see Jesus and him crucified.

We’ve seen every week, as Matthew tells us something more about the last days of Christ and the last hours of Jesus, we see he’s not just a reporter; he’s a teacher. Matthew doesn’t just tell us *that* Jesus died, but he always builds the narratives around certain statements and certain sayings that interpret *why* Jesus died.

You know, it’s very typical today for people to say, “Well, the cross might mean one thing for you. You interpret it your way. I interpret it my way.” But the gospel writers don’t leave that as an option actually. The gospel writers are very clear to let *Jesus* interpret - not just show us Jesus dying, but Jesus *interpreting* his death - saying *why* he was dying, what it means.

And so we’ll see this morning, when the darkness comes down, in the last moment of Jesus’ life, there are three cries in the dark. Three cries that tell us what this awful picture means. What it means for humanity and what it means for your personally and your problems. Let’s read the text and then we’ll break it down.

Matthew 27:45–56

45 From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. 46 About 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?” 47 When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” 48 Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 49 The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split 52 and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. 53 They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” 55 Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.

It’s very important that we understand again that Matthew here doesn’t just tell us what was *done*, but he makes point to tell us what was *said*. You see in verse 46, we have a loud cry. In verse 50, we have a loud cry, and actually down in verse 54, we have an exclamation, or another loud cry.

Three cries in the dark. And each one tells us something about the meaning of the cross. And we’re going to use them as our three points this morning. The cross actually addresses *every* major human problem, but we’ll just take three today. The first cry solves our *modern* dilemma, the second cry solves a *human* dilemma, and the third cry solves a *personal* dilemma. Let’s unfold it.

First of all, The first cry and the modern dilemma.

What does this mean? **V.46**, “*And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice ... My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” The “loud voice” is a Greek phrase that is never used anywhere else in the New Testament, and it really means a scream. Jesus screamed. And this is something that has troubled people for many years, because it certainly looks like at this point Jesus broke, he gave up on God, he collapsed, he’s saying to God, “You’ve failed me.” This has troubled many people.

So what does the scream *mean*? And the answer is, here we finally have the essence, the deepest revelation of the passion of Jesus. See, all along we've been using the word "passion". But now let's see what that word means. Today we think of it more in line with the iconic Elizabeth Taylor perfume, right? Are you old enough to remember the commercials? [**Passion :20**]

We think of passion as heavy breathing and romance but in Latin *passio* means "to suffer." So passion means *love*, but originally it meant *suffering*. And what the Bible is telling us, striking us with, is that deep love always entails deep suffering. That the passion of Jesus Christ is that he underwent infinite suffering out of infinite love. And this first cry from the cross shows us both. First of all, this statement reveals the infinity of his suffering. When he screams, we know something.

First of all, he does not say, "My head, my head, my hands, my feet!" He's not talking about his physical suffering. He has been beaten. He has been flogged. He has experienced all kinds of *physical* suffering, and he has never raised his voice. He hasn't said a thing. And he also doesn't say, "My friends, my friends, the betrayers, the deniers, the deserters!" He's not referring to his psychological suffering either; how alone he is, how abandoned he has been.

See up to this moment, Jesus has been unbelievably calm. Didn't you see that in the last weeks, when we looked at the arrest and the trial? He is always so calm. He is always so poised. No matter what happens to him, no matter how much physical suffering, no matter how much emotional or psychological suffering, he is completely in control. He *never* complains. He's always poised. He never raises his voice.

So here when he starts to *scream*...this is something else. This is something way beyond physical suffering. This is something infinitely beyond torture. What is it? It's not his physical sufferings. It's not his psychological sufferings. It's his infinite *spiritual* sufferings, because when the darkness came down *on the land*, that's emblematic of what was happening to Jesus spiritually.

When the biblical writers discuss or describe eternal lostness - when they describe hell - the most common metaphor - much more often than the metaphor of fire - is the metaphor of the outer darkness. Because you see, God - the presence of God - is something that our hearts and our souls need like a flower needs the sun. Now, a global pandemic is one thing, but if right now the sun went out - really *totally* disappeared - we would all be *immediately* dead. No shelter-in-place necessary. We couldn't survive a second without the sun.

And so when Jesus says, “My God, my God, you have forsaken me,” what it means is his soul is being plunged into absolute spiritual darkness. He is beginning to unravel. He is going down into utter spiritual destruction. He’s in hell. And we have to understand something about that. Neither hell nor heaven are in the realm of time. They are spiritual conditions of being in the presence of God or being utterly thrust away from the majesty and glory of God. That means when you go to hell or you go to heaven, there is no such thing as “90 minutes in heaven” or “90 minutes in hell” for that matter.

And therefore, you have to understand what Jesus was experiencing. He was not sitting there saying, “If I can just hold out for three more hours...” There was a sense of being eternally and utterly lost. He would have experienced *all* the infinite sufferings of anyone who was *eternally* cast out. He experienced an eternity, an *infinity* of suffering. In fact, let’s go one step further. No one has *ever* done what he is doing. No one has ever been cast away from God’s sight as he was saying, “Father, God, I love you. I want you. I obey you.” No one has ever been cast out like that.

We also have to remember this. If your friend rejects you, that’s terrible. If your *spouse* rejects you - and some of you have been through that - every psychologist in the world knows there’s nothing more

traumatic than your spouse rejecting you or walking out on you. You see, the level of the relationship affects the impact of the rejection. If your friend rejects you, you get over it. If your spouse rejects you, you almost never get over it.

But this is something else. This is infinitely greater. No wife has ever been so one with her husband. No child has ever been so one with his parent. No soul has ever been so one with its body as the Son was one with the Father, from all eternity. And therefore, when the Father barred the door, when the Father cast out the Son, whatever he experienced - and I know this goes beyond my ability to understand - would have been infinitely greater than *all* the hells of everyone who ever deserved to go to hell all put together.

That’s why he screamed. That’s why this is infinitely beyond everything he was experiencing before. And that means he was experiencing infinite suffering...but why? Why? That’s the question. *Why* was he being forsaken? Do you know what the answer is? This cry is not just a cry of dereliction: “My God, my God, you’ve forsaken me.” But it’s a quote of the Scripture. And that’s the answer. This is a quote of Psalm 22. When Jesus says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He’s *quoting* Psalm 22 from the Old Testament.

Look at it, **Psalms 22:1**, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?*” Look at how this whole chapter parallels the crucifixion. **V.7-8**, “*All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. “He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”* **V. 14-15**, “*I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.”* **V.17-18** “*All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.”*

But Psalm 22 - and Jesus would have certainly had it all in his mind as he was dying – actually ends on a positive note. Look at this, he isn’t *actually* abandoned, **Psalms 22:24**, “*For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”* **V.27**, “*All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him.”* **V.30-31**, “*Posterity will serve him; future generations,*” – that’s us! – “*will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!*”

So Jesus Christ, on the cross, when he says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he’s saying two things. One is, “I am suffering infinitely.” But the other thing he’s saying is, “Though God is damning me, I’m sticking with the plan. Though God is damning me, I’m holding onto His Word. Though God is condemning me and casting me out, I’m holding on. There’s something God is *doing*.” That’s what Psalm 22 is saying. “There’s something God is *accomplishing*, and I’m working it, I’m holding onto it, to the very end.”

What is he doing? What is the passion of Jesus Christ? *Why* is he forsaken? Do you get it? It’s us. You, we, are his *passion*, in the full sense of the biblical term. You and I, *we* are his passion. We are what he’s *dying* for. We are what he’s infinitely suffering for. He’s not just suffering; he’s suffering *for love*. It’s a *passion*! When he says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he’s not just uttering it. He’s quoting. He’s on the one hand saying, “I’m being absolutely forsaken,” but on the other hand he says, “*But* I’m doing this for a reason. I’m doing this for a purpose.”

Do you know the place in Moby Dick where Captain Ahab says, "...from hell's heart I stab at thee..."? That's just rhetoric. He wasn't in hell's heart, he was just drowning in the ocean. But wait a minute, there is someone who literally and truly *was* in hell's heart. And what does *he* say? "From hell's heart...I *love* thee. From hell's heart, I am loving you."

That's what Jesus is saying when he quotes Psalm 22, "From hell's heart, I'm holding on. I'm loving you." *You* are his passion. And this particular cry explains that he is willing to take infinite suffering in obedience to God's plan out of love for us, and there is no greater revelation of the passion of Jesus Christ than these words.

Now let's apply this. If that's what the cross means - passion, in the full biblical sense of the word. If this cross means Jesus is willing to take infinite suffering out of infinite love for us and obey the plan of God in order to redeem us, the first thing we have to ask ourselves is, "All right, how does this transform the way we look at the world?"

This is the key to the first point. The cross is the best answer I know, the cross is the best answer by far, to what many people call *the* modern dilemma, *the* modern problem of our culture. What is that?

We have a lot of problems, but you can certainly make the case that the chief problem in our society today, is that because of the suffering and the injustice of our age, in the minds of most of the Western cultural leaders, God is dead.

What's the big question? How can a good God exist in the face of all this human suffering? And it's not a new question. The twentieth century saw enormous injustice and suffering. And especially after the Second World War, people began to say "God is dead." The traditional God died. Why? Well, the traditional God of religion says this: "Do good, and I'll reward you. Do good, be good, be moral, and I'll give you a good life. Disobey me, be immoral, don't do good, and I'll punish you." And that's the God of religion. That God, in a sense, died when we witnessed the atrocities of the twentieth century.

Let me just give you three names. There are *plenty* more, believe me, but just three: Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Almost all historians agree that those three guys were responsible for the slaughter of 200 million people, give or take 10 or 20 million. Just the three. And see, to that kind of suffering, that kind of injustice, that kind of oppression, that kind of evil, the traditional God became completely unreal for a couple of reasons.

First, God was aloof. He didn't *do* anything about it. But secondly, the traditional God who says, "Salvation by works. Blessing through goodness. If you're good, I'll bless you, I'll give you a good life"... That concept was *completely* exploded by the twentieth century because *all kinds* of good people, all kinds of innocent people, were completely trampled upon. And as a result, as I said, in a sense, God died under the injustice and suffering and evil of the twentieth century in the hearts and minds of most of the cultural leaders of the Western societies.

In 1957, the *New York Times* reviewed a play that had come over from Germany to Broadway called *The Sign of Jonah*. It was written by a Lutheran pastor - Guenter Rutenborn...it's German artists day! - in East Germany, under communism, to try and make sense of the guilt that his nation was carrying in the aftermath of the war. Everyone was pointing fingers at everyone else for the role that they played in the Holocaust.

And in the play people start accusing one another, asking, "Did you do it? Did you know? Why did you do it?" And of course, in the play, just as in real life, when people were pointed to and asked, "Did you do it? Why did you do it?" they immediately said, "It wasn't me. I was just following orders. It was the person above me." And then they went up to that person. "Oh no, no, no. It wasn't my fault. It was the person above me." But of course then that one says, "Oh, no, no, no, it was not me. It was the person above me."

And in the play, at a certain point it begins to dawn on everybody, "Wait a minute. It's the guy all the way at the top. It's not our fault. It's God! It's God's fault. The evil and injustice of the world is God's fault." And at the end, there's a trial. They put God on trial, and they find Him guilty, and this is what they say in the play. They sentenced God to "become a human being, a wanderer on the earth, deprived of his rights, homeless, hungry, thirsty. He himself shall die. And lose a son, and suffer the agonies of fatherhood. And when at last he dies, he shall be disgraced and ridiculed." It's fairly blasphemous.

But listen, years before all the modern philosophers, years before the Holocaust, the gospel took the absurdity and the injustice and the suffering and the evil of life *very* seriously. The modern philosophers and playwrights are looking at the injustice of life and they say, "God has to die!" But the God of the gospels, in His perfect righteousness, has done even more than the blasphemy of our anger dares to demand. In other words, the philosophers and the artists were right...but in the wrong way. The injustice of the world means God must die, but He comes in the gospel and does it voluntarily.

The God of the gospel is the *only* god who doesn't just write us a book on the problem of pain and send it down and say, "Here's my explanation." The God of the gospel is the *only* god who actually comes down and *shares* in the forsakenness we feel in a universe gone wrong. We feel abandoned. We feel forsaken in the universe...and God comes down and experiences that himself.

What the gospel gives us is a God who comes down to bear the evil and injustice of this world, and even to die under it so that someday he can end evil without having to end us. Because you want to talk about responsibility for evil? Who killed God? We did! Ah, but it was God who comes and does it by a plan, the Father and the Son. Their *passion* is to save us.

You know, there's one place where God says to a father, "Abraham, now I know you love me, for you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love, from me." See, now we can say it back...In other words, the cross gives us the only God the modern world can possibly work with. The modern world *has* to have a God, but it has to be a God who's not aloof, but who has actually come down and participated in the injustice and the forsakenness we all feel. And do you know what? The Christian gospel, is the only faith that even *claims* God has done such a thing. Do you know that? So that's the answer of the first cry – the modern dilemma - the solution to pain and suffering from the God of the cross.

Now look at the second cry and the human dilemma. The second cry is **v. 50**, take a look, *And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*" Now you might be thinking, "Well, this ought to be a shorter point, because we don't even know what he said!" And that's true, Matthew doesn't actually tells us what it was that he cried out there. But thankfully, his buddy John does. Because **John 19:30** reports that, "*Jesus said, 'It is finished.'* With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." It is finished. Mission accomplished.

But do you know what? Even if you didn't have the gospel of John, you could learn from Matthew basically what he said anyway. Look at **v. 51**, "*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.*" I don't have time to go into the little mini-resurrections – it's like "Walking Dead Bible Edition". Suffice it to say they are like Lazarus and like the daughter of Jairus, that foresee and foretell how through Jesus' death we're going to be raised, but the key is the temple.

Now, if you went into the Jerusalem Temple, all you would find was one barrier after another. If you were a woman, you could only go so far in the Temple. You had a court of the women. You couldn't get all the way in to God. Women could only go so far.

If you were a Gentile – non-Jewish male - you could only go so far – the Court of the Gentiles – but then that’s it. If you were an adult Jewish male, you got in closer, but eventually you came to a “priests only” sign. I’ll let you in on a dream of mine – sometimes when I’m at Half-Price Books, I’ll catch a glimpse of the back room when somebody comes out the door. And I’ve always *longed* to go back there...but nope, employees only.

But even the priests...ah, if you’re a priest, then do you get all the way in? No! Because even though you can get into the Holy Place, there was this veil, this huge curtain 60 feet high that was so thick as to be soundproof. And only the high priest could go back there – into the Holy of Holies - into the very presence of God, and only one day a year, and then with his knees knocking for fear that he would be killed before he got out.

And so what was the Temple designed to tell us? “No Access.” “Keep Out. “No Trespassing.” The Temple tells us no matter how hard you work, no matter how many times you sacrifice, no matter how much penance you do, no matter how much atonement, how many offerings you make, how many washings and cleansings...you never get all the way in. But when Jesus Christ dies and the veil is ripped - *not* from bottom to top, that’d be a revolution by the masses - but from top to bottom, what are we saying? What is the gospel?

Here’s the gospel. Look at the two things. Jesus is cast out so we can be brought in. Jesus is cast out so we can be brought in. Jesus gets the “No Access” sign. Jesus is rejected, though he doesn’t deserve it, so we can be welcomed. So what’s that mean for the Temple system? What’s that mean for traditional religion? What does he say? ‘It is finished.’ All the sacrifices are finished. All the atonement is finished. This is the sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, what he was saying is exactly the opposite of what Buddha said when he died. If you go to the Buddhist scriptures, the last thing Buddha said was, look it up, “Work hard to gain your own salvation. Do your best.” The last thing Jesus Christ said is, “Don’t you dare work to gain your own salvation. I did all the gaining for you. It is finished.” Those are two *completely* different approaches.

And what it really does, this second cry gives us an answer to the great human dilemma. Not the modern cultural dilemma we just looked at – yes, the cross addresses the great problem of injustice and suffering. But this cry addresses a more human, practical dilemma. And that is, we want to do good. We want to do what’s right. But on the other hand, we need a *freedom* from doing good, and we need a freedom from doing right.

A perfect example of the dilemma I'm talking about is a dream Mark Twain used to have. He had such a fascinating love/hate relationship with religion. And he used to have a recurring dream where he would be lying on his back with a 300 to 400 pound Bible on his chest, just crushing him and suffocating him and cracking his ribs. Hmm...you don't really have to be Sigmund Freud to break that code!

What he was saying was this; on the one hand, you want to obey. You want to do right. You want to be good. But on the other hand, we bounce back and forth in our lives between legalism and license – this competing tension of following all the rules, but then getting burnt out and *breaking* all the rules. We ping-pong from saying “I'm going to do what my religion says I should do” to feeling crushed and saying, “I just need to be free to decide what I want to do for myself.”

And we go back and forth between these two things, but the cross, as usual, gets us through this dilemma, to the healthy balanced ground. On the one hand, on the cross we have the great act of obedience. Here is Jesus Christ quoting Scripture to the end. And that amazes me about him. You know, the secret of Jesus Christ's integrity and character was not that he was true to some principles in general, not that he was a good person in general.

Take a look. Every place he's tempted in the Bible, every place he's attacked, every place there's a decision to be made, *every* place - it is astounding - he *always* has Scripture on his mind. Always!

When you're in pain, when you're under incredible stress and duress, you don't act. You *react*. You don't compose yourself and say, “How should I act?” Your lizard brain reflexes just kick in, right? How many of us are experiencing that right now? That's how we naturally respond in crisis. But look at Jesus. When you put Jesus Christ in hell, where all he can do is just cry out in what's really deepest in his heart, what do we have? What's his stress response? He quotes the Bible. He had a heart saturated with Scripture.

So on the one hand, we have this amazing, amazing example of obedience and character and integrity. *But* if I end the sermon right now and you go home and say, “That's what *I'm* going to do. I'm going to start to really memorize the Bible so that it'll saturate me and get into my heart, so that when anything bad happens...” – that's noble – and it beats binging the Tiger documentary on Netflix! - but the next thing you know, you'll be having dreams about the Bible crushing you, because you'll never live up to it.

Look what Jesus is saying... as an *example* on the cross, he shows us someone trusting the Scripture and trusting God...but as a *substitute* he says, "It is finished." What he's really saying to us, and this is so incredible, is, "Obey, because it's finished. Don't obey in order to finish it." What do I mean by that? You have to figure that out yourself, but I'll just give you a hint.

Those of you who work too hard, can't say "no" to anybody, overcommitted all the time, need to please everybody, you go, go, go...and yet you always feel like you're sinking. Why? You're being good; you're doing the responsible thing, right? You're no slacker! But why are you always sinking? Why are you always feeling guilty? You're trying to *finish*.

You're trying to finish what God has already finished. You're not just trying to obey God out of love for Him. You're not. You're sinking because you're trying to really prove yourself. You're trying to make yourself worthy. You're trying to make yourself acceptable. Do you know the difference? It's *absolutely* critical to know the difference. Otherwise you're going to have nightmares of the Bible crushing you. Do you see that?

What the cross gives us is the perfect example. Jesus Christ says, "Yes, obey." You can't just say, "I'm going to live my life the way I want to live it." You have to obey. Your conscience *makes* you want to obey. *But*...obey because it is finished. Obey in the joy and the relaxation that it is finished.

Can I show you how this relates to sin? Because that's a dilemma isn't it? Because if, on the cross, it's finished, that means our sins are over. Nothing we ever do can bring us into condemnation. But why is there still an accounting for sin? I mean why not just sin more, that grace may abound? No, no, that's that pendulum too far. The answer is pretty easy to see actually. If I have my kids in front me, and I have my neighbor's kids in front of me, and I give them instructions, if my neighbor's kids disobey me or are rude to me, that bothers me. But if *my* kids disobey me and are rude to me, that bothers me a lot more.

When you become a Christian, in one sense your sins get to be far, far, far less of a problem than they have ever been before. In a certain sense, they're no problem at all. They can never condemn you. Jesus Christ has finished. He has done *everything* you need to be completely acceptable in God's sight. Everything! It is finished.

Yet in *another* sense, when you become a Christian, your sins become a far greater problem than they were before, because this is the One who *died* for you. This is the One who, from hell's heart, loved you. And so now, in another sense, because of our intimacy to him, the sins are a greater problem. Do you see that? Have you made the shift, though? Do you want to obey because it is finished, or are you trying to obey so that it will be finished? Those are two completely different sorts of psychologies. One will burn you out, one will grind you into the ground, and the other one will just be rest.

So you see, the cross not only solves the great corporate modern dilemma, the cultural dilemma, it also solves the very, very simple and ancient human dilemma. **Now lastly, and it's brief, the third cry and the personal dilemma.** The last cry in the dark is with the centurion saying, "Surely he was the Son of God!" Now what's so intriguing here about this is it's very clear that Matthew is showing us how *hard* it is to understand the gospel, or better yet, how easy it is to think you understand the gospel when you don't.

Because you see, there are people standing around who hear Jesus say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And what do they immediately say? **(V.47),** *When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."*

That means when they heard his Aramaic - "My God, my God", Eloi, Eloi - they thought it sounded like an abbreviated word for "Elijah" – the Old Testament prophet. Elijah is for the oppressed and the poor and so they said, "Oh, maybe he's calling for Elijah to come help him."

Now, what's intriguing about this is these are religious people. They know the Bible. And they're kind of moved. Notice they pity Jesus. They're moved. Right after this they offer him something to drink. And yet they don't get it. They completely miss what's going on. But at the same time, you have two other groups of people who, in the regards to the temple system, were total outsiders. You have the centurions - Romans, pagans, violent men - and at the very bottom of verse 55 you have "the many women" it says.

And what Matthew is saying is, here are the women, here are the pagans, here are the Gentiles, and *they* get it. And here are the religious people, here are the good people, here are the people who know the Bible, and they *don't*. I want you to realize how easy it is to think you understand the gospel when you don't; to think you really are trusting in Jesus for your salvation when you're trusting in your own good works.

You can go to church for years. I want you to know there are dozens and dozens of people who have come to this church to find that out...that they didn't get it. That they were right at the foot of the cross. They had read the Bible. They thought they understood. They were even moved by Jesus' death. But they didn't understand it. They never really got hold of the gospel – or let the gospel get hold of them.

But then there have been an awful lot of other people at Southwest Family over the years, who said, "I'm an outsider. I don't really fit in the church scene. I'm not the kind of person who ever becomes a Christian." And yet they did get it very quickly. And that's what Matthew is telling us. Over and *over* again in the Bible, it's the outsider who gets it first, because the outsider more quickly understands salvation is by grace alone and not through your pedigree, not through your goodness, not through your respectability or anything else. Do *you* understand it? Do you get it?

Here's one last thing. Christian friends, how well *do* you know the Bible? How well are you using the Bible? Do you know something weird here? This is the Son of God, and he's perfect. And every single time he has any crisis or any problem at all, anytime anybody comes after him, he relies on the Bible. He relies on the Scripture.

Now if *he* relied on the Scripture like that, do you think you're going to be able to handle life with just me reading some Bible verses to you a couple of times a month?

I mean, if *Jesus* felt he needed it...Why would Jesus feel he needed it? Because the Word of God, the Bible, is the truth of God. It's not just principles. It's not abstraction. It's the truth of God *incarnate* in narrative, incarnate in verse, incarnate in teaching. And if Jesus Christ knew he had to saturate his heart with the Scripture, and that was the secret of power...

Some of you – many of you – do need to start to more regularly read the Bible. Start today. Start in Matthew. And when you finish that, email me and I'll recommend something else. But read it. Over and over again until it gets in you – in your heart.

But don't read it to earn anything. Read it to discover what Jesus has already earned for you. It really is finished. Do you understand? Do you see how the cross transforms everything? How the cross carries us through every single dilemma? Look to the cross and be healed. For surely he *is* the Son of God.

Let's close in prayer...