

The Dead Shall Rise: A City-Wide Prayer and Fasting Initiative (HCPN)

Unlocked by His Death (Matthew 27:32-54)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on April 13, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ **Have you ever imagined what it must be like for a total newcomer to the Christian faith to walk into this building; to join us in English service; to worship with us in this room?** Now maybe I'm describing some of you, so it's not hard for you to imagine.
 - But, for most of us, we've been going to church for years. Many of us grew up in church. Some of us in this church in particular. **So we're so used to this space and what goes on in our worship that we forget how foreign and strange all of this can be for the uninitiated, for those totally new to the faith.**

- ❖ Walk into this sanctuary and what's the most prominent feature when you look up? **It's that huge white cross looming over us.** Now I bet none of us would bat an eye at that. "This is a church building. Of course, there's a cross. What else would you expect?"
 - We take it for granted. **But imagine if a first-century Greco-Roman citizen was somehow transported into the future to join us this morning.** He would stare at that cross and think, "*Wow, what a weird way to decorate a room.*" Because from his perspective, it would be just as strange as if we had a huge hangman's noose looming over us. That would be awkward. It would make you feel uncomfortable.
 - But put yourself in the shoes of this ancient time traveller. **To him, the cross is not a religious symbol of faith. It's a hideous object of scorn.** It was a form of execution reserved for the very worst of criminals.

- ❖ **And yet, walk into any church building today, and they're decorated with crosses.** We wear them around our necks. We sing songs about them. We sing, "Oh the wonderful Cross, oh the wonderful Cross!" **Can imagine walking into a room full of people singing, "Oh the wonderful noose!"?** "Oh the wonderful electric chair!" That would be really offensive.
 - And yet the offense of the cross is what Christians today have lost sight of. It's all too familiar. It's all too comfortable. **It would do us well to remember that we are a strange people. For we sing songs of praise about a brutal instrument of torture.** Not for the sake of what it was originally intended for. But for the sake of what it has become – having been transformed by the death and resurrection of our Lord.

- ❖ **Friends, today commemorates the start of Holy Week.** The final week of Jesus's earthly life began on Palm Sunday with a celebrated welcome as he entered the gates of Jerusalem. But in five short days, he was led out those same gates, in shame, carrying his cross to Calvary. Where he was brutally executed by means of crucifixion.
 - It's a story that many of us have become far too familiar with. **We would all do well to take a fresh look at the Passion narrative.** And in line with our current series, I want to point to a strange episode found only in Matthew's Passion narrative. It's a brief reference you might have glossed over or perhaps you've never heard of it.

- ❖ As you may know, we're in a series with other churches across town in an initiative called *Awaken Houston*. We've been preaching all the texts where God raises the dead. **Before we get to Jesus's resurrection next week on Easter, I want to draw attention to this peculiar reference in Matthew 27 about dead saints being raised to life and coming out of their tombs after Jesus's resurrection.** We're told they appeared to many in Jerusalem.
 - This story doesn't get much attention. Probably because it's so brief and gets overshadowed by Jesus's resurrection in the next chapter. **My hope is to offer a fresh look at these familiar events that help you recover the true wonder of the cross.**
 - I want to highlight three realities in this episode. (1) The shameful agony that Jesus willingly endured (vv32-44). (2) The divine desertion he acutely felt (vv45-50). (3) The cosmic upheaval his death affected (vv51-54).

The Shameful Agony That He Willingly Endured

- ❖ The first thing I want to show you is the shameful agony that Jesus willingly endured throughout his Passion experience. Particularly as he was led to Calvary and nailed to the cross. **Now we started reading right in the middle of the Passion narrative.** We skipped over his arrest; his trials before the Sanhedrin and then before Pilate; and the crowds' decision to free Barabbas and demand for Jesus's crucifixion. We didn't read about the scourging he received or the mocking and beatings he endured at the hands of Roman soldiers. All of that took place in chapter 26 and the first half of 27.
- ❖ In v32, Jesus is being led out of the city to be crucified. **Now it was customary for criminals to carry their own crossbeam to the place of execution.** There it would be attached to the vertical beam that would've already been prepared and fixed in the ground. Scholars think the crossbeam itself would've weighed close to a hundred pounds. **Well, Jesus couldn't carry it any further. It was too much for him.**
 - Matthew told us earlier that Jesus was up all night in agony, praying in Gethsemane. That he had to endure multiple trials. That he was scourged – where they beat you with a whip that has multiple lashes with jagged pieces of bone or metal attached at the ends, to more easily tear into your skin. **And knowing the ruthlessness of Roman soldiers, there's no way they would let someone else carry a criminal's cross unless he literally couldn't bear the weight.** Jesus couldn't do it.
 - So the soldiers grabbed a man named Simon who just so happened to be coming into Jerusalem. Probably at the moment Jesus had fallen and dropped the crossbeam one last time. He couldn't go any further. So they compelled Simon to pick up Jesus's cross and carry it the rest of the way.
- ❖ **It's hard for me to imagine Jesus *not* having the strength to do something.** He's God after all. He's divine! Yes, but he was also human. **And in his humanness, he shared the same physical limitations as any human being.** He had a physical breaking point. Where he was so exhausted, so spent of all his strength, that he couldn't go further. **But far from making me revere him less, that makes me love him even more.** Knowing that Jesus spent every ounce of strength in what he did for me, and for you, and for anyone who trusts in him.

- ❖ Now we don't know much else about Simon. But having been compelled to carry the cross to Golgotha, it's probable that he stuck around to see them crucify Jesus. And being a witness of that likely changed him. In Mark's Gospel, Simon is described as "*the father of Alexander and Rufus,*" (Mk 15:21) which is a strange way to identify someone. Usually you identify their father. He's Simon son of so-and-so, but Mark names his sons. Highly unusual. **The most likely explanation is that Simon's sons were well-known to Mark's Christian audience.** Alexander and Rufus were likely leaders in the early church. So it's no stretch of the imagination to think that their father, Simon, was an early follower of Jesus.
- ❖ Now if we keep reading in v33, we're told that Jesus was led to a place called *Golgotha*, which means the "*Place of a Skull.*" In English, you're probably heard it called Calvary because it comes from the Latin word for skull. Some think it was named that way because the hill had the shape or look of a skull. Golgotha is probably located where the ancient Church of the Holy Sepulcher currently sits today.
 - The text goes on to say, in v34, that Jesus was offered wine mixed with gall, and after he tasted it, he refused to drink it. **Now some think this was offered as an act of mercy.** Assuming the wine mixed with gall served as a narcotic to help numb the excruciating pain he was going through. **But others think the wine was intentionally made bitter by the gall as an act of mockery.** Jesus tasted the wine hoping it would refresh, but spit it out once he realized it was a bitter joke.
- ❖ That the soldiers would offer Jesus this wine as an act of mockery as he hung there on the cross would be only fitting. **The goal of crucifixion was not only to inflict maximum pain to the criminal but to subject them to utter shame and humiliation.** Before they nailed you on that cross, they would strip you naked. That's why the soldiers were casting lots, dividing up Jesus's garments among them (v35).
 - And the Romans had these crosses set up along the major thoroughfare into town so all passersby will see you hanging there, naked and ashamed. With a sign above your head spelling out the reason you're being executed. **And because crucifixion was such a horrible, painful way to die, it was reserved for the worst of criminals.** For insurrectionists. For those who threaten the rule of Caesar.
- ❖ That's why the sign above his head said in v37, "*This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.*" That wasn't a confession of faith. That was an accusation. **They were calling Jesus a messianic pretender who threatened the peace of Rome.**
 - Notice how v38 goes on to say that he was crucified along with "*two robbers*" one on the right of him and one on the left. But the term robber (*lestes*) is too soft. **A better translation in this context would be insurrectionist or revolutionary.**
- ❖ In John 18:40, Barabbas is identified as a robber (*lestes*), but the ESV has a footnote saying it could be read "an insurrectionist." So these weren't thieves being crucified with Jesus. **They were insurrectionists and likely co-conspirators with Barabbas.** Barabbas was probably scheduled to be executed with them. That's why three crosses were ready to go that morning.

- ❖ **So that's part of the shame that Jesus bore on the cross.** He was righteous and yet numbered with transgressors (Isa 53:12). Counted among the worst of criminals. **If that's not bad enough, understand that, from a Jewish perspective, being crucified was a worser fate.** According to Deuteronomy 21:23, anyone left hung on a tree is cursed by God.
 - By Jesus's day, that would've applied to anyone hanging on a wooden cross. **That's why, earlier, the Jewish crowds were crying out, "Crucify him!" They were basically saying, "Curse him!"** For a Jew, to be condemned by Rome is bad enough. But it's infinitely worse to be cursed by God.

- ❖ None of that escaped the Jews present that day. Three groups hurled insults upon this Cursed One of God. The passersby, the religious leaders, and those crucified with him. **We're told, in v39, that the passersby derided him and wagged their heads.** That's the first of many allusions in this chapter to Psalm 22. There, in v7, the psalmist laments how his enemies mock him and wag their heads at him. Here, in this moment, Jesus is fulfilling that.
 - Look at v40 and notice how they taunt him by saying, *"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."* Prove that you're not cursed by God. Proved that you're beloved by him. Those words, *"If you are the Son of God,"* are the exact words the devil used back in Matthew 4:3. **This was truly the last temptation of Christ.** This was Satan's last shot to get Jesus to choose the path of least resistance.
 - But what the devil and the passersby couldn't comprehend is that – being the Son of God who faithfully obeys his Father's will – that's the reason why he won't come down!

- ❖ The religious leaders go on to mock him, in v42, saying that if he comes down from the cross right now, we'll believe in him. But there's the irony. **For us Christians, we believe he is the Son of God because he didn't come down.** *Because* he stayed on the cross. We know with just a word, he could've summoned twelve legions of angels to whisk him off the cross (Mt 26:53). **But he stayed. Not because the nails were too strong. But because his love was.** His love for us and for his Father was too strong. Jesus had no intention of coming down.
 - But I think what cut him the deepest was that taunt in v43. *"He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"* Those words were excruciating for Jesus to hear. Because he knew what was coming. The one thing he feared most. What kept him up all night in the Garden. **The greatest pain he would ever endure – the loss of the Father.** "You call yourself the Son of God. You say you trust in God. But God the Father is about to abandon you. And curse you. And make you the object of his wrath." Jesus knew what was coming next.

The Divine Desertion He Acutely Felt

- ❖ Let's keep reading in v45. This leads to the second reality to observe in our story – the divine desertion that Jesus acutely felt. Look at v45, *"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour."* The sixth hour is referring to 12 o'clock noon and the ninth hour is 3:00pm. **We're told that for three hours, when the sun is at its highest and brightest, there was a darkness that fell over all the land.**

- ❖ **This was a supernatural darkness.** Now some have tried to offer a natural explanation. Perhaps it was a solar eclipse. But it couldn't have been. It was astronomically impossible. Because we know these events took place during the Jewish Passover (26:18). A holiday celebrated on the first month of the lunar calendar during a *full moon*. And during a full moon the earth is positioned between the sun and the moon. But for a full solar eclipse to occur, the moon has to be between the sun and the earth. Both can't happen at the same time.
 - **So this darkness was *not* a natural phenomenon.** It was a supernatural sign. And if you study Scripture, you'll see that light is used to represent God's blessing and favor. While, on the flip side, darkness is used to represent his anger and judgement.
 - Just think of the ninth plague in Egypt, the plague of darkness. It occurred right before the slaying of Egypt's firstborn sons. That darkness was a sign of divine judgment against the sins of Egypt (cf. Amos 8:9). **In the same way, this darkness in v45 that covered all the land was a sign that God is angry against sin and is carrying out judgement on someone.** That begs the question, "With whom? Upon whom?"

- ❖ **And the answer is Jesus.** This is evident in the agonizing cry that we hear in v46, "*And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*" **That's the first line of Psalm 22.** A psalm about a righteous man suffering without just cause. Again, Jesus is fulfilling it.
 - Now v47 goes on to say that bystanders mistook his cry to *Eli* (meaning God) as a cry to Elijah the prophet. It was a popular belief back then that Elijah functioned like a guardian angel who would return to rescue righteous sufferers in times of need. So these bystanders thought Jesus was crying to Elijah for rescue and wondered if he might come. Or perhaps they were mocking what they mistook as a cry for help.

- ❖ But this wasn't a cry of help. **It was a cry of dereliction.** That's the old theological term. To be derelict means to be in a state of abandonment. **So they call it a cry of dereliction because, in that moment, Jesus truly experienced a state of abandonment.** How the Triune nature of God remained intact – how it was *not* divided nor destroyed in that moment – remains a mystery. But it's clear that the Son of God was forsaken by the Father.
 - **Scripture says God's ultimate punishment for sin is to forsake the sinner. To cut off the individual from his grace.** You see, every person alive experiences God's common grace, to some degree, even if they don't recognize it. But if we die, having never repented of our sins and trusted in Christ for salvation, then we will be cut off from grace. We will be utterly forsaken by God. That's what hell is.

- ❖ **And that's what the Son of God was experiencing on the cross.** He was being forsaken by God. Completely cut off from any ounce of grace. I'm sure that having nails pierce your hands and feet is painful beyond words. But far more agonizing for Jesus was the experience of losing the Father. **And instead, he was receiving the full measure of divine anger and judgment against human sin.**

- ❖ But why? Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father. He was sinless. He did nothing to provoke anger or deserve punishment. **So for whose sins was he being punished?**
 - It was for the sins of sinners like you and me. **We deserve to be forsaken by God, but Jesus took our place.** The Father and Son worked in concert. The plan was for the Father to forsake the Son on the cross, so that he wouldn't have to forsake those for whom the Son dies. For whom he substitutes himself. **2 Corinthians 5:21** says, *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*
- ❖ That means, on the cross, Jesus became sin. **He became the most sinful man the world has ever known because the sins of a countless multitude of believers in every age and place throughout human history were placed upon his shoulders.** For three agonizing hours, all the lies, hatred, pride, greed, lust, and jealousy – all of it was being poured out on him.
 - And in response, God the Father punished those sins by pouring out on his Son all the anger and judgement that should've fallen on sinners like us. **On the cross, Jesus was experiencing hell for us.** No wonder he screamed from the depths of his soul.
- ❖ And when it was over; when it was finished; after Jesus took it all – it says, in v50 that, *“[he] cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.”* That will never be said of any one of us. **None of us will ever yield up our spirit. No, it'll be taken from us in death. Only Jesus can be said to have “yielded up his spirit.”** Because no one took his life from him. He laid it down of his own accord.

The Cosmic Upheaval His Death Affected

- ❖ Jesus's death on the cross was not the tragic result of human betrayal and jealousy. Those factors were involved. But they were not the root cause. The point is that his death was voluntary. It was all according to the Father's will. And it changed everything. This leads to our third and final reality to observe in this text – the cosmic upheaval his death affected.
 - Just think about it. **Upon his death, right after he yields up his spirit, creation begins to unravel.** The sun had stopped shining. The earth starts shaking. Rocks start splitting. Tombs break open. And death itself is reversed. This is a cosmic upheaval. Triggered by Jesus's own death. It changes everything.
- ❖ Keep reading in v51, *“And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.”* **That's referring to the curtain in the temple that shielded the Holy of Holies.** This central room that housed the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the presence of God. It was considered his earthly throne.
 - This thick curtain, that reached up to the temple ceiling 30-feet high, covered the entrance to the Holy of Holies. **It served as a reminder that the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man cannot abide together.** It communicated that a barrier exists between God and man.

- ❖ But upon the death of Christ on the cross, this 30-foot tall curtain was torn “*from top to bottom.*” That added detail there implies that it was God himself who tore that curtain, starting from the top. The message is loud and clear: **What once barred the way – keeping us from the immediate presence of God – is now gone!**
 - Man’s sin has been punished. Man’s debt has been paid. God’s anger has been satisfied. God’s judgment has been served. All because of Jesus! **In him, we have access to enter the throne room of God.** “*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.*” (Heb 10:19)

- ❖ **And finally, we get to that peculiar reference to dead saints being raised to life and coming out of their tombs.** Look at v52, “⁵²*The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.*”
 - Now like I said earlier, there’s no reference to this event in the other Gospels. **But that doesn’t mean it’s any less likely to have occurred.** Essentially, what took place is that on Good Friday – when the earth shook and the rocks split – tombs were opened. **But the bodies of these saints didn’t come alive and come out of their tombs until after Jesus was raised.** Making him the first – the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:20).

- ❖ And unlike with Jairus’s daughter or Lazarus, these formerly-deceased saints weren’t just revived or resuscitated. **They were resurrected like Christ with new resurrected bodies.** And like Christ, at some point (we’re not given details), they must have been bodily translated to heaven, just like Elijah in 2 Kings 2 or Jesus at the end of the Gospel narrative.
 - But what was the point? **Why did God just raise a few saints from the dead at this point in time – leaving the rest to await for a future, final resurrection once the Church is complete?** What’s the point?

- ❖ **It’s to fulfill the Scriptures.** That’s been Matthew’s theme throughout his gospel. How Jesus is the fulfillment of OT Scripture. Well, in **Ezekiel 37:12-13**, the prophet said to the people of God – as they suffered in exile, facing deprivation and death – “*Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.*”
 - The prophecy says when graves are opened and the dead are raised, then you shall know that I am the LORD. Matthew knew this prophecy, and he heard of the accounts of dead saints coming out of their graves on that first Easter Sunday.
 - **So he put two and two together and included this episode in his Gospel to emphasize the underlying message – that Jesus is LORD.** He is Lord of Life and Death. He walked out of *his* tomb. And so will you – if you trust him as *your* Lord and Savior.

- ❖ **Friends, if you don't know your fate beyond the grave – if you're unsure if you'll walk out of your tomb into glory – then I invite you to place your trust in Jesus.** Trust him as the One who willingly endured the cross for you. Who bore your curse and the wrath your sins deserve. Trust in Jesus, and you can trust that your story will continue beyond the grave.
 - **And to those who have this trust and share this hope of the resurrection, I encourage you to take a look at what those resurrected saints were doing.** They didn't go straight to glory. They didn't go directly to heaven. No, they entered Jerusalem and appeared to many. Witnessing to the power of the gospel.
 - They had a mission, a task. And so do you. If you've been made alive in Christ, you have a mission too. To take this message of the cross and to witness to its power to save.

- ❖ Like I said before, the cross was once looked upon as a cruel instrument of death. **But now it's looked upon, throughout the world, as a sign of hope, forgiveness, and resurrection life.** The transformation of the cross took place the day Jesus died. Starting with one of the soldiers at the foot of the cross. **It transformed before his eyes.** Listen to v54, *“When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!””*
 - **So now, when the cross is looked upon with eyes of faith, people see the Son of God.** Who loved them and gave himself up for them. Who yielded his spirit for us and for our salvation. What do you see when you look upon the cross?