

Nabeel Qureshi, a Muslim convert to Jesus Christ, had a "resolutely" Muslim friend named Sahar who was attracted to parts of Christianity but couldn't accept the idea of God becoming a human being. On one occasion she honestly asked, *"How can you believe Jesus is God if he was born through the birth canal of a woman and that he had to use the bathroom? Aren't these things beneath God?"*

Qureshi affirmed her questions and then asked her one in turn: *"Sahar, let's say that you are on your way to a very important ceremony and are dressed in your finest clothes. You are about to arrive just on time, but then you see your daughter drowning in a pool of mud. What would you do? Let her drown and arrive looking dignified, or rescue her but arrive at the ceremony covered in mud?"*

Her response was very matter of fact, *"Of course, I would jump in the mud and save her."* Nuancing the question more, Qureshi asked her, *"Let's say there were others with you. Would you send someone else to save her, or would you save her yourself?"*

She responded, *"If she is my daughter, how could I send anyone else? They would not care for her like I do. I would go myself, definitely."*

Qureshi said, *"If you, being human, love your daughter so much that you are willing to lay aside your dignity to save her, how much more can we expect God, if he is our loving Father, to lay aside his majesty to save us?"*

The biblical story of God eventually won Sahar's heart. As Qureshi reported, *"The message of God's selfless love had overpowered her..."*

You may already be a Christian... but we are ***all*** still just *as needful* of being overpowered by the message of God's selfless love. ... ..

So... that is my prayer... this morning... as we continue our study through Matthew's presentation of the crucifixion of Jesus.

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One of the best cards to have... when playing the game of Monopoly... is the famous "Get Out of Jail Free" card—but when you're playing the game of "real life," the card doesn't work quite so well. At least, that's what a man in Minnesota found out recently.

He was pulled over when an officer saw he wasn't wearing a seatbelt (and also that the car he was driving "was registered to someone who was wanted on a warrant"). Turns out the driver himself was also wanted—and as he was being searched, "the man pulled out the infamous Monopoly card."

The card may have "provided a few laughs for law enforcement, [but] the man still landed himself in jail."

The county sheriff's office posted on social media about the incident, saying, "We appreciate the humor! ... 'A' for effort!"

Isn't it a relief that we don't have to try card tricks on God to try and receive mercy, that we receive more than an "'A' for effort" when we stumble and fall? As the writer of Hebrews declares,

### **Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)**

*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

### **- PRAY -**

The death of Jesus is the event that all of Matthew's narrative has been pointing to. There is a sense in which the first 25 chapters of Matthew have been a long introduction to what Matthew really wants to write about. Matthew chapter 27 (which we are currently in...) is the centerpiece of the entire Gospel. Matthew's narration of Jesus' death... spares the details of the event itself... and stresses instead... the actions of others... (which are full of irony... and Old Testament allusions.) Today we will see how Jesus' death is attended by 3 hours of darkness... a rock-splitting earthquake... and Old Testament Saints who had died... rising up from their graves and entering Jerusalem. ... What was THAT all about...?

And as we try to understand what these events mean... we will also explore the meaning of what Jesus meant... when He cried out in agony... "*My God, My God... Why have You forsaken Me?*" ... Did God... the Father... actually abandon Him...? ... Was the Trinity (all of a sudden) a Duo...because the other two Members left Him...? ... Does any of this sound like the character of God...?

(We have a lot to talk about... so let's get started...)

### **Matthew 27:45**

At high noon an unearthly darkness suddenly descended to wrap the whole land in a midday midnight for three hours. No human eyes were allowed to gaze on the Lord's last hours. Of what happened in those dreadful hours

we know nothing. The Lord entered into a darkness of body, soul, and spirit, into a mystery of suffering that defies description. ... It was as though all of creation was sympathizing with the Creator.

Liberal writers have argued that this was a coincidental eclipse... or maybe even a Middle-East sandstorm. But this was not the season where sandstorms would occur. ... Furthermore... a solar eclipse lasts only a short duration and cannot account for the three hours of darkness. Therefore, this darkness must have been a supernatural occurrence wherein all of creation experienced the impact of this cataclysmic moment in history.

The darkness on that Friday afternoon was both physical and spiritual. All nature seemed to mourn over the stark tragedy of the death of God's Son. Some see a fulfillment of Amos 8:9.

**Amos 8:9-10 (ESV)**

*“And on that day,” declares the Lord GOD, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.*

Because of this... and other Old Testament passages and prophecies... the Jews believed that darkness accompanied God's severe judgments. ... There were three days of darkness in Egypt before the first Passover lambs were slaughtered (Ex. 10:21-23). ... Amazingly... however... in their sanctimonious self-assurance that they had done the right thing... these Jewish leaders did not believe that this darkness which settled over the earth applied to them. ... But the truth is... that this was the focal point of all history. It was revealing God's terrible wrath.

Now let me ask a question... before we go any further. ... If this was... indeed... a supernatural occurrence... and... if it was a focal point of our entire world's history... wouldn't it have occurred over our entire planet... and wouldn't something this dramatic capture the attention enough to be written about from pagan sources from other parts of the world during this time...? ... Are there such writings...?

Well... not every first century culture recorded history. But the Romans did... and the answer is **yes!** Tertullian (who lived about 100 years after Christ) confirmed the historical evidence of this spectacle by reviewing Roman archives. ... And Suidas... another early historian... claimed that Dionysius the Areopagite observed the phenomenon in Egypt... Dionysius wrote: "*Either the divine being suffers, or suffers with him that suffers, or the frame of the world is dissolving.*"

This darkness was also written about by a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman astronomer – Phegon... (and take note that he was a pagan... not a Christian.) He correctly identifies the timing as during the 14<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tibererius (which was when Jesus dies.) Here is what he wrote: "*the greatest eclipse of the sun that was ever known happened then, for the day was so turned into night that the stars appeared.*"

So (rest assured) history does give us collaborating evidence. What Matthew tells us happened at the death of Christ... **can** be believed! So let's now move to the next verse... which gives us a lot more confusion and controversy.

### **Matthew 27:46**

Our Lord's words... "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" has a fingernails-on-the-chalkboard feel to it.

Jesus quotes from Psalm 22:1. But why...? Why did Jesus... with almost His last breath... cry out ***this*** sentence from that verse. Why didn't He cry out something more victorious – like the ***final*** verses of this very same Psalm...? (They are also prophetic verses about the Messiah.)

**Psalm 22:29-31 (ESV)**

*All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, even the one who could not keep himself alive. Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.*

Wow! These speak of His resurrection and subsequent world-wide worship. So why the first verse of this psalm... and not the last ones...?

Well... the voice fits the setting... (a dark cry for a dark hour.) Jesus felt abandonment – which is the ultimate horror of a lost soul. When Christ had the sins of all mankind placed on Him... He experienced the worst that Hell has to offer – total isolation... complete aloneness.

(LISTEN) – We sometimes hear the ridiculous statement: "*If God sends me to Hell when I die... I won't mind... because I'll have a lot of friends there and we intend to party!*" ... Well... they have no idea what Hell will be like. They won't see or hear their friends. Much of the suffering will be total isolation... complete loneliness.

In my interpersonal communication classes that I teach at our community college... I cite a long-time study that was done at Stanford University by a researcher by the name of "Schachter." Professor Schachter and his

associates found five students who had agreed to be paid... to remain in a locked room. These researchers wanted to study the effects of isolationism. ... Of the five subjects... one could only last eight days... before he simply had to be released. (It was too much.) But he held out the longest! The other four did not last nearly as long. Three held out for only two days. One of them emphatically commented, "*Never again!*" ... The fifth subject only lasted two hours.

Human beings are wired for contact and companionship – NOT to be in isolation... cut off from others. It is severe punishment to be alone without any ability to be able to communicate with others. It is (literally) Hell.

When W. Carl Jackson (an adventurer) sailed across the Atlantic Ocean alone for 51 days... he wrote that he found the loneliness excruciating. He said that he always thought of himself as self-sufficient... but he learned that he has a definite need for somebody to talk to... someone real... alive... and breathing. ... Prisoners of War from Viet Nam also testify about the absolute torment that isolation brings.

The isolation of Hell will be excruciating. (It will be eternal) ... And on the cross... Jesus tasted the ultimate horror of a lost soul. He was experiencing yours and my punishment. It had to be what you and I would experience... that is – total forsakenness.

Jesus' question provides us with Jesus' theology of the cross—"forsaken." The world's greatest religion of the time—Judaism—has forsaken Him. The world's strongest and seemingly most civilized empire—Rome—has forsaken Him. His own disciples have forsaken Him. And now His Father has forsaken Him.

Borrowing an illustration from Tim Keller... If after a service some Sunday morning one of the members of our church comes to me and says, "*I never want to see you or talk to you again,*" I will feel pretty bad. ... But if today my wife comes up to me and says, "*I never want to see you or talk to you again,*" that's a lot worse. The longer the love... (the deeper the love)... the greater the torment of its loss.

But ***this*** forsakenness... (***this*** loss)... was between the Father and the Son... Who had loved each other from all eternity. ... Jesus was experiencing Judgment Day. "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" It wasn't a rhetorical question. Jesus knew what the answer was. And the answer is: For you, for me, for us. Jesus was forsaken by God so that we would never have to be. The judgment that should have fallen on ***us*** ... fell instead on Jesus.

Part of the Jewish Law gives us a vivid picture of the despair Jesus went through... in crying out... "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

**Leviticus 16:21-22 (ESV)**

*And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.*

Once a year the High priest would do this. ... There... far from human civilization... far from any other goat or animal of its kind... it was abandoned amid scenes of appalling desolation. ... There... with never a drop of water... never a blade of grass... It was simply left alone to die. ... In indescribable loneliness and isolation... it raised its plaintive cry — which



was answered with total and awful silence. ... In the same way our Savior suffered. His orphan cry rang up to Heaven and the only answer in the darkness was impenetrable... imponderable... complete silence.

The situation of this scapegoat is a prophetic picture of Jesus having our sins placed on Him... and being forsaken while left to die.

**2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV)**

*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

**Before the cross, we were cast out of God's presence; because of the cross, we are now invited into God's presence.**

Jesus experienced the manifestation... to His soul... of God's hatred of sin. ... But God was about to show that He was pleased with His Son... and accepted His sacrifice. ... In just a few verses we will see the signs of God's approval... but first... we read about more mocking of Jesus by man.

**Matthew 27:47-49**

Because Elijah was thought never to have died... some rabbis felt that he was sent on errands like the angels... often to deliver pious rabbis from trouble. ... So they taunted Jesus... pretending that Jesus (even though He hung on a cross like a common criminal)... considered Himself to be a pious rabbi... and that He thought that He could call on Elijah to come and help. *“Let's see if he will actually come... ha... ha... ha..”*

Although I cannot say for sure... I think that the only reason they gave Jesus some refreshment... when He said that He was thirsty... was to prolong His life (or at least His consciousness) a little... so they could

continue their heartless mockery. That is the only connection that makes sense to me... from verse 47 to verse 48. “*He calling for Elijah – and one of them **at once** ran and took a sponge...*” These two verses fit together if they wanted to keep on ridiculing His supposed desire for Elijah’s aid.

### **Matthew 27:50**

A condemned man's last few hours on a cross were usually spent in a state of semiconscious struggle... until he eventually lapsed into a coma and then died. ... The fact that Jesus cried out "*in a loud voice*" just before He died... indicates that Jesus remained fully conscious - to the **end**. ... He knew exactly where He was and why He was there.

Note the language — he “yielded up his spirit.” ... This portrays Jesus as once again sovereign over His sufferings. ... It’s as if the fully obedient Son — the moment His heart is to rupture... or his lungs asphyxiate... or He lose too much blood to live... (whatever physical ailment finally did Him in) — Jesus hands His Father His last breath as a gift.

John tells us the content of this final cry... “*It is finished*” (John 19:30). ... It is a divine victory proclamation. “Jesus dies a victor with a shout of triumph on His lips.”

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After Jesus gives up “his spirit,” the Spirit of God goes to work on the world. Heaven showers down its signs of vindication and victory. The justification of God **outshouts** the voice of scorn and confusion. ... The Father has not abandoned His righteous suffering Son... and He gives an earthshaking...

tomb-breaking... curtain-tearing ceremony to celebrate! ... God the Father unmistakably affirms that Jesus' sacrifice was accepted. ... *Hear* and see and *feel* now... the divine fireworks set off by Jesus' death.

### **Matthew 27:51-53**

The first post-crucifixion supernatural sign is the rending of the temple's veil. We know it is supernatural because huge... handwoven tapestries aren't usually "torn *in two*" and "*from top to bottom*"... as verse 51 declares.

Well... it was just cloth. Cloth is easy to tear. ... But from the way that Moses prescribed for the Temple curtain to be made... and from ancient Jewish writings... we know that the veil was the width of a man's palm. ... Consider how strong material THAT THICK would be. Alfred Eidersheim said that not even a team of oxen would be able to tear it.

The split veil of the temple says two truths about the temple: (1) judgment ('it is all over!') and (2) salvation ('it is all open!')."

The moment after Jesus breathed His last breath... the temple in Jerusalem became a desolate house. ... Once "the true High Priest had at length appeared... the true Lamb of God had been slain... the true mercy-seat was at length revealed" - there is "no more need of an earthly high priest... an earthly mercy-seat... a sprinkling of blood... an offering of incense... a scapegoat... or a day of atonement." Jesus' death brings final judgment to the temple. It's all over!

However... while closing one door... Jesus' death opens another. ...Now... through Jesus (and Him alone)... the whole world is invited into the presence of God. ... It's all open!

Both the demanding restrictions on access to God... and the distinction between Jew and Gentile... have been abolished. Those “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” ... Now it is not merely the high priest and him alone who can enter into the Holy of Holies and lay his hands upon the head of the innocent lamb to find forgiveness for the people. ... Now all the people—Jews and Gentiles... clergy and laity... old and young... male and female—can obtain direct access to God by faith. ... There was no more need of temples... priests... altars... or sacrifices. ... Jesus had finished the work of salvation on the cross.

... ..

Accompanying the sign of the veil... was the sign of the stones. There was a terrible earthquake. Just as when the Law was given to Moses... the earth shook violently... and the people had great fear of God. Something every bit as significant as the giving of the Law... had just occurred.

And then a third sign... also happened. Graves were opened... and bodies of Old Testament saints were resurrected. ... Here is the message... that I think this is to convey: Jesus' death is as effective BC as it was AD. Jesus' death is as retroactive into the past (with Old Testament believers)... as it is proactive into the future (among believing Christians). ... Thus Christ's death is as cosmic in *time* (BC – AD... past - future). Old Testament

believers in the Messiah... are somehow affected by Jesus' death for them as well.

How is Jesus' death applied to these Old Testament saints. How do they place their faith in Jesus... the Messiah...? ... We might also want to know... how many people were raised? ... Were there ten or 10,000? ... And while we are at it... who exactly were these people? ... Were they Israel's old saints like Moses or David... or Christianity's new ones like the recently beheaded John the Baptist? ... Were they "celebrity" saints or common ones?

We have so many questions. We might want to know... how old were these people? ... Who did they talk to and what did they say? ... What happened to them after this resurrection? ... Did they die soon after? ... Did they go on living for another two decades? ... Did they ascend into Heaven with Jesus?

Matthew is the only one who writes about this incident and he fails to satisfy our curiosities. ... Here is why I think Matthew leaves us all hanging on this... Because there is only one point he wants us to know. (He says more by saying less.) He does not so much want us to know *everything* we can know about these people... but **one** significant something about Jesus. That Jesus' death... defeated death. Or as Augustine nicely phrased it... "His death ... kill[ed] death." ... So "Not only is Jesus' death strong enough to split the veil of the Holy of Holies and so cancel *sin*; it is also strong enough to open tombs and so cancel *death*."

The earthquake reminds us of what happened at Mount Sinai when God gave the Law to Moses (Ex. 19:16ff). The earthquake at Calvary signified

that the demands of the Law had been met and the curse of the Law forever abolished. The earthquake suggests that He conquered the Law and fulfilled it. ... The torn veil indicates that the Temple and its systems are no longer needed. ... And the resurrections prove that He defeated death.

### **Matthew 27:54**

At the foot of the cross, this Roman officer openly acknowledged what the Jewish people failed to recognize.

Not least among the signs of that day... was the conversion of the group of Roman soldiers... "the centurion, and they that were with him." ... Watching Jesus... they had seen a man dying with dignity and grace... forgiving His foes... giving a thief who moments before had been cursing Him the promise of paradise... making final arrangements for the well-being of His mother... talking to God as Father... and crying out in thirst of body and unfathomable throes of spiritual torment. They had seen the orchestrated outrage of nature as darkened sky and rending rocks protested His death.

These Roman legionnaires... who had witnessed many a scene of horror in that callous age... "were filled with awe" (which means that they "feared greatly.") ... Their harsh training in the Roman army... their iron discipline... and their reputed courage in the face of danger... all conspired to make them men who were fearless... but they "feared greatly." ... What sent shudders through these soldiers was the fact that the One whom they had crucified was the Son of God. ... They had heard the rabble scoff at

Christ's claim... they had heard the rabbis deride it... and they had heard the robbers make fun of it... but these Romans believed it.

Some have written that these men merely recognized that Jesus may be like one of their Roman Gods... and they could not possibly understand the Jewish understanding of the Son of God. But please notice... They did not say, "This was a son of the *gods*." They said, "This was the Son of God."

I believe that they were the first fruits among the vast army of Gentiles who have since made the same confession. Matthew emphasized their conversion to set in greater contrast and condemnation the unbelief of the Jews.

### **Matthew 27:55-56**

A largely unsung group of believers watched the death of Jesus... no doubt in horror over the pain and taunting but in awe over the subsequent earthquake. These were the women... who in days to come... would be the first to learn of the resurrection of Jesus... meet the resurrected Jesus himself... and... finally... tell the disciples about it. The preeminence of these faithful women in the account of the death of Jesus... taken alongside the shameful absence of the disciples... is a powerful rebuke against those who say that the Bible demeans women. And let it warn against any feelings of male superiority in the community of Jesus' disciples.

... ..

All history revolves around this scene in Matthew 27... and all our lives are determined by what we do in response to this scene. ... At least two

responses are appropriate as we think about the cross. ... First...

**surrender your heart to God.** ... If you are an unbeliever... turn from sin and trust in Christ. ... Do not seek to add to His infinitely gracious and worthy sacrifice... but instead repent and embrace this free gift of salvation. If you are a believer... continue daily to trust in Christ... your substitute. Stop toying with sin and pursue the One who died to set you free from it.

Second... the cross ought to compel us to proclaim the hope of the gospel. ... Here's the gospel: you're more sinful than you ever dared believe; you're more loved than you ever dared hope.

The gospel is the greatest news in all the world. Many people know *that* Jesus died... but they don't know *why*. ... They don't know why the cross is the centerpiece of all history... and the determinant of our eternity - but you do! ... So tell them... and pray for their salvation. Let everyone know that the Son of God has come to save sinners... and that He has given His life on the cross for those who deserve His wrath. ... This is the good news... and it is our great privilege to proclaim it.