

THE VINEGAR, THE VEIL AND THE VAULT**MATTHEW 27:45-66**

When I was growing up I knew absolutely nothing about Lent. Now, I had very godly parents and attended enthusiastic, Bible-believing churches. In the Christian tradition I grew up in, however, we were always a bit skeptical and suspicious of things like Lent because it smacked of Roman Catholicism or – even worse - theological liberalism. It's only as I've gotten older and had more exposure to the diversity of the Christian faith that I've come to appreciate what some call the seasons of the church year – things like the four Sundays of Advent and this 40 day period of time we're in right now leading up to Easter Day called Lent. Now, let's be clear. Observing Lent doesn't in and of itself make you one inch closer to God than not observing Lent. Then, why bother with it? Well, because it does provide a period of time every year to focus in on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus which is the very center of our faith. I like how Marlene Kropf explains the value of observing Lent personally. She says, "In the daily round of life, dust and cobwebs accumulate in our souls. The hidden corners of our hearts become encrusted with grime or filled with forgotten debris. During the weeks of Lent, God's Spirit is given opportunity to clear away the clutter, sweep away the dust and wash us clean. We are invited to prepare ourselves—heart, soul, mind, and body—for the new life of Easter."

Today we continue our Lenten message series entitled "Pictures of the Passion." Now, "passion" is a word that can refer to the most amazing, remarkable week in the life of Jesus – the week that tells us about His suffering, death and resurrection. Many of those events are recorded for us in the last three chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew. Each week this Lenten season we've consider three pictures, three images or three scenes found in Matthew 26, 27 or 28. We return to where we left off last week in our study – Jesus hanging upon the cross. The first picture we want to consider is of ...

THE VINEGAR (v. 45-50)

As Jesus hung upon the cross, He was offered wine vinegar in a sponge attached to a stick. Vinegar, which can be made from many different kinds of food substances, is often added to other foods to enhance flavor. It's never intended to be something you drink by itself. It's extremely sour, bitter and distasteful. The Old Testament predicted this scene with startling precision. In one of David's psalms, the Holy Spirit prompted him to say this about his own enemies, "But instead, they give me poison for food; they offer me sour wine for my thirst." (Ps 69:21 NLT)

Vinegar can be a picture or a reminder of how bitter, sour and distasteful sin happens to be. What does sin do in your life and mine? It sours your mind and attitudes towards life. It makes your heart bitter. Sin spews bitterness into your relationships with other people. Sin will push you toward being self-centered and self-absorbed which is the quickest way to a sour life. Sin has a way of setting

your teeth on edge – spiritually speaking – so that life becomes distasteful. When Jesus drank that sour, distasteful wine vinegar, it pictured His willingness to take your sin and mine upon Himself. If sin can be compared to a cup of vinegar, we've all drunk from it. We've all drunk from that cup, so to speak; we're all sinners. But Jesus drank it all. He experienced the full bitterness and utter sourness of sin. When He died in your place and mine, He tasted the finality of what sin can do to a human being.

There are some very interesting statements made by Jesus both before and after He drank this wine vinegar. Before He drank it, the Bible says, "At about three o'clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, '*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*' which means 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'" (Mt 27:46 NLT) What was that all about? Jesus was actually quoting the Bible – Psalm 22:1 to be precise. There, David says in one of his psalms, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help?" (Ps 22:1 NLT) At the very least, we know that Jesus saw His suffering and death as a fulfillment of prophecy or, in other words, the fulfillment of His Father's will. I have also come to believe that Jesus was experiencing at that very moment the weight of the world's sin upon His heart, mind and spirit. The One who had never committed sin Himself had now become like a receptacle collecting all of our sin in Himself. As a result, He was absolutely separated from His Father.

It had to be the worst moment in Jesus' life – far worse than being rejected by the Jewish leaders, far worse than being failed by His disciples, far worse than being whipped and beaten by Roman soldiers, and even far worse than the physical agony of crucifixion. For some period of time, Jesus was totally abandoned and forsaken by God, His Father. Now, I can neither comprehend nor communicate to you adequately what all that meant. There are some events that just demand speechless awe and wonder and this is one of them.

Jesus was determined to identify fully with us as human beings. Have you ever been rejected? So has Jesus. Have you ever been betrayed? So has Jesus. Have you ever been failed by others? So has Jesus. Have you ever been the victim of some terrible injustice? So has Jesus. Have you ever been deeply humiliated or shamed? So has Jesus. Now, think about this next question. Have you ever gone through a time in your life when you felt as if God had abandoned you, forsaken you or forgotten all about you? Have you ever wondered if God was on vacation? Have you ever felt like your prayers were just bouncing off the ceiling? Well, so has Jesus! Identification. Jesus, God in human flesh, can even identify with you when you feel God-forsaken, God-forgotten and God-abandoned. Jesus actually experienced all of that.

But there is greater encouragement in that thought than just identification. God had to abandon Jesus for a brief period of time in order that His judgment against your sin and mine could be enforced. But, precisely because Jesus bore your sin, God will not and cannot abandon you now. Jesus endured the full reality of

being forsaken by God, so that you would never have to face its reality. Many of us have felt abandoned or forsaken by God at some point in our lives. Some have referred to the experience as "the dark night of the soul." Feelings are real, to be sure. But, feelings are not reality. Despite what you might have felt, child of God, and no matter how powerful and terrible those feelings might have been, God hasn't forsaken you and He can't abandon you precisely because Jesus already bore the reality of God's abandonment on the cross for you.

Christian author, Ian Leitch, spoke to a group of business people about faith in Jesus. A young woman asked to speak with him afterwards privately. She said, "Ian, when I was 22, I was in a serious car accident, and my boyfriend was killed. I have gone through a lot of surgery and am now doing well. When that happened, I lost my faith." What do you say to someone like that? Well, Ian prayed and said, as kindly as he could, "You know, when they built the Queen Mary, the Queen Elizabeth, and the QE2, they didn't test them in dry dock. They didn't leave them in dry dock and get big hoses on them to see if they would leak. They got those ships out into the open ocean to put them through sea trials. These trials weren't intended to sink the ship. These trials were to prove that the ship was seaworthy. The only way you can know whether your faith is real or not is when the pressures of life come, when you go through trials. Then you know if you are seaworthy or not. Can I ask you honestly, did you lose your faith or did you find you had none?" She said, "I guess you are right, I had none."

There will be times when your faith in God is tested. They aren't meant to destroy your faith, but to build it up. Jesus was literally abandoned by His Father, but then the relationship was restored. You're going to go through some very dark places in your journey through life when it seems like God has forsaken you. Keep on holding on to God and clinging to Him by faith especially in those dark times. Refuse to give into those feelings that God has left you. Never let go of your faith even when your faith feels weak. Hold on to God like Jesus did even in life's blackest moments. I promise you, that like Jesus, God will bring you back into the light of His presence, His joy and His peace.

Jesus also said something most interesting after He drank this vinegar. Now Matthew puts it like this, "Then Jesus shouted out again, and he released his spirit." (Mt 27:50 NLT) John, in his account, captures this same moment like this, "A jar of sour wine was sitting there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. When Jesus had tasted it, he said, 'It is finished!' Then he bowed his head and released his spirit." (Jo 19:29-30 NLT) What did Jesus mean by that? What was finished? What Jesus came to do. Before the world was even created, God knew that human beings would become sinful. He already knew the only way to save us would be to send Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus, into this broken, sinful world. He also knew that the only way our sin could be forgiven required the death of His Son and that an eternal relationship with Him required the resurrection of His Son. Jesus' shout from the cross was one of accomplishment. He had finished the mission His

Father had given to Him. Jesus didn't just sort of whimper away. He died with a shout of victory and triumph on His lips: "Finished! Accomplished! Done!" The second picture of the passion today is of...

THE VEIL (v. 51-56)

READ, p. 988. Here we're told that several unusual and supernatural events occurred around Jesus death. Before His death, a strange darkness covered the scene which was probably a full eclipse of the sun. Then, when Jesus died, an earthquake occurred that was powerful enough to open several graves. Stranger yet, we're told that the remains of these dead people were resurrected back again to physical life. After Jesus' resurrection, some of these resurrected folk were actually seen by many people in the city of Jerusalem. That reminds me of something the apostle Paul wrote some years later to the Corinthian Christians, "But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died." (1 Cor. 15:20 NLT) When Jesus died and rose again, death itself was conquered. Here God was already demonstrating that death itself had lost its ultimate power over human beings.

Another strange occurrence involved a veil or a curtain hanging in the Temple there in Jerusalem. The great Temple – the central place where Jewish people gathered to worship God – had two interior sections or rooms of different sizes. The larger area, called the Holy Place, was accessible only to the priests who entered it to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. The smaller room, called the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies, had just one piece of furniture in it. That was the Ark of the Covenant constructed way back in the time of Moses some 1400 years earlier. The Ark was a symbol of God's relationship with and His presence among the Jewish people. Between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place hung a great, heavy curtain or veil. And here we learn that at the moment of Jesus' death, an unseen hand ripped that veil from top to bottom.

What's the point? What was God trying to say? Let me offer two answers. The first one comes from our friend, John Kirn, who I heard share this idea in his Sunday School class awhile back. First, God might have been revealing His own intense grief and anguish at the death of His Son, Jesus. You might already know that when Jewish people back in that day and time wanted to express their grief and heartache over some great loss, they would literally tear their clothes apart into pieces. For example, when Jacob learned that his favorite son, Joseph, had died, the Bible says, "Then Jacob tore his clothes and dressed himself in burlap. He mourned deeply for his son for a long time." (Gen 37:34 NLT) We don't think very often what emotions or feelings were aroused in God the Father as He watched His beloved Son, Jesus, suffering and dying on the cross. Or, we assume that God the Father maintained this rather stoic, matter of fact, business like demeanor throughout. Perhaps the tearing of this veil in the Temple was God the Father giving expression to His own inner turmoil and grief in a way that Jewish people would have recognized and appreciated.

Secondly, by tearing the veil apart, God revealed that open access to Him was now available to everyone through the death of His Son, Jesus. A little background here is helpful. Only one man was ever allowed in this smaller of the two rooms separated by the veil: the High Priest. And even he was only allowed to enter the Most Holy Place once a year on Yom Kippur – the great Day of Atonement. The message? Yes, access to God was possible, but it was very limited and very infrequent. You cannot approach God on your own. You cannot have any kind of a relationship with Him unless there is a mediator – a go between. God is loving and gracious, but you cannot really know God in any personal way. The great curtain or veil in the Temple reinforced those truths.

On that one day, the Day of Atonement, the blood of an ox or a ram was offered up to God as a sacrifice for the sins of the Jewish people by the High Priest. He took some of this blood through this veil into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled it on the Ark itself. You might think that's a very odd, even gruesome act of worship. What was the point of it all? God was conveying spiritual truth to His people. Sin has an inevitable consequence: death. Because God is an absolutely holy Being, sin always separates us from God and creates a huge wall of separation between us. But God Himself resolved this problem by providing and accepting a substitute.

Now, the killing of an innocent animal as a substitute for human sin was only a temporary situation until God's real and final remedy appeared on the scene. The permanent solution was always Jesus and His death on the cross. There the full and more than adequate substitution was provided for all time. The torn veil pointed to this truth. The Holy Spirit made this truth very clear to the first followers of Jesus, because in the New Testament we read, "And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's house, let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him...." (Heb 10:19-22 NLT)

There was an immediate verification of this great truth. Several pagan, godless Roman soldiers, who perhaps had even helped to hammer the nails into Jesus' hands or feet, after witnessing Jesus' death said, "...This man truly was the Son of God!" (Mt. 27:54 NLT) Jesus Himself has predicted that the cross would have this kind of spiritually magnetic pull on people. He said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man on the cross, then you will understand that I Am he...." (Jo 8:28 NLT) Those Roman soldiers were the first fulfillment of that prophecy. The Holy Spirit was present and active even at the cross. Roman soldiers were being pulled toward God through Jesus. Jesus' death changed everything. God is still absolutely holy, but He's no longer distant, remote, or separated from us. God provided the ultimate, permanent and final substitute for your sin and mine: Jesus. And to symbolize this event, God supernaturally tore open the curtain, the veil, in the Temple from top to bottom. Everyone, come on in! Come in

through the blood of Jesus! God wants to save you. God wants to know you. God wants to live with you forever. The final picture of the passion today is of the vault. A vault is another name for a tomb or a grave. It reminds us of where Jesus was placed after His body was taken down from the cross.

THE VAULT (v. 57-66)

Jesus was buried in a borrowed vault or tomb – a grave that belonged to a wealthy, influential Pharisee named Joseph of Arimathea. Here we learn that Joseph was a follower of Jesus, but John, in his account, gives us more information. “Afterward Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus (because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate for permission to take down Jesus’ body....” (John 19:38 NLT) Why was Joseph a secret disciple of Jesus? He was afraid of his peers – the other Jewish leaders. He was afraid of their ridicule. Perhaps he was afraid of losing whatever influence, prestige or clout he had at the time. The Bible never tells us what exactly happened to Joseph or if he ever became an open follower of Jesus.

It occurs to me that some people today still try to be “secret disciples” of Jesus. How so? You might come to church occasionally, but you’ve never identified yourself publicly as a follower of Jesus. Why not? Perhaps for the same “reasons” that Joseph claimed. Like Joseph, you might find Jesus and the Christian faith enormously attractive, but you’re afraid of what others might think of you if they knew that you wanted to follow Jesus openly. You might be terribly concerned what those who don’t follow Jesus would think of you if they knew you are attracted to Jesus. Or, perhaps you’re afraid of what God will ask of you if you surrender your life to Jesus. Or, perhaps you’ve bought into the devil’s myth that following Jesus means this hard, restricted, joyless life, when, in fact, it’s an invitation into the only life worth living this side of Heaven. Whatever the reason or excuse, secret discipleship didn’t work for Joseph and it won’t work for you! You need to make a choice. True joy in this life and a relationship with God in eternity depends on it. I plead with you to care more about what God thinks of you than what people think of you. I invite you to begin to experience life as God intended by becoming an open, public and committed follower of Jesus today!

Emma Daniel Gray died on June 8, 2009, at the age of 95. There was a big story about her in the Washington Post because for 24 years she was the woman who cleaned the office of the President of the United States. She served six presidents until she retired in 1979. There she is with Jimmy Carter who was President when she retired. Her official title? Charwoman. What made the story even more interesting for me was the fact that Mrs. Gray was a devout Christian. She would stand and pray over the President's chair each time she dusted it— her cleaning supplies in one hand, the other on the chair. She'd pray for blessings, wisdom, and safety. While reflecting on the way she lived life, her pastor said, "... you couldn't be around her and not know what she believed."

“You couldn’t be around her and not know what she believed.” I like that. Look with me again at the cross – *the* central picture of the passion. When I look at the cross, I think of how impossible it is to try and be a secret disciple of Jesus. Doesn’t what happened there demand that you publicly and openly declare your commitment to Jesus? Could someone say that about you? “You can’t be around him/her and not know what he/she believes.” Do members of your family know that you’re a follower of Jesus? How about people at work? How about people at school? How about the people who live next door to you, or above you or below you? Do people really know what you believe and who you follow? Really? When Jesus called people to Himself, He called them publicly. Stop trying to be a secret disciple of Jesus. That – the cross - demands it.