

Good Friday Meditations

The Greatest Battle Ever Fought

Matthew 27:45-49

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "This fellow is calling for Elijah." Immediately one of them ran, took a sponge, and soaked it with sour wine. Then he put it on a stick and gave him a drink. The rest said, "Leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

All of a sudden, right at noon, when the sun is brightest, it turns dark. It was so dark that there was no sunlight at all, nor moon or stars. Just darkness. Everything came to a stop. Historians tell us that as far away as Egypt, everyone was experiencing the same mysterious and frightening darkness. The darkness came because of a crucifixion—an ugly way to put people to death. It was a slow and painful death. The executed criminal's diaphragm worked slower and slower until he was asphyxiated as his breaths became shallower and shallower.

Jesus was with two others on their crosses outside of Jerusalem. Thousands and thousands of people had followed him, listening intently to him and singing his praises. Less than a week before, a crowd had called him Savior. A few hours before this moment, he had acknowledged that he was a king. Yet this king also was God's special soldier. But now the warrior was dying. This was the final battle. Your future, my future, and the future of everyone who has ever lived was hanging on the outcome of this battle - the greatest battle ever fought.

Websites that list "the greatest battles of all time" say their criteria is usually based on the influence of a battle on history. Battles, cultures, countries, leaders, and forms of government all have influence on history. But they come and go. Except for Jesus and this battle. What makes Jesus and this battle the greatest battle ever? It's because what happened on the cross at his death changed the entire world and everyone who has ever lived.

The physical agony that Jesus suffered was horrendous. He had already prayed in distress and was sorrowful to the point of death the night before in Gethsemane. There was no sleep at all that night because of the trials. Then came the special punishment: the crown of thorns, the constant mocking, the blows to his face, the humiliation of having his clothing stripped off, the cruel scourging that ripped out skin and flesh down to the bone with each lash. Weakened, he was forced to carry that heavy crossbeam until he collapsed. Only after all that did they lay him down on the cross and drive long nails through his hands and feet and hoist the cross up into its hole as the soldiers and the Jewish leaders mocked him. That's my Savior they are torturing! It's hard to read that account without cringing in horror wondering how anyone can do such things to another human being.

But Jesus withstands that pain and agony without complaint! As a matter of fact, you hear him speak some amazing words on the cross: First, he offered a prayer asking the Father to forgive all those who crucified and mocked him. Then he answered the desperate prayer of the thief who believed in him with a tremendous gospel promise of heaven that very day. And calmly and with a tender concern for his mother, he told John to care for her.

But there was darkness. And we begin to realize that all his physical suffering was perhaps like a mosquito bite compared to the spiritual suffering that he endures on the cross in the darkness. That darkness shows us how much God hates sin, that terrible thing that always separates us from him. The darkness is God's dreadful judgment upon sin as suffered by his Son. That darkness certainly must have shut up the mockers. But it also covered up what no eyes should ever have to see as Jesus was on that cross, alone, against all the forces of hell.

The internal pain and pressure mount higher and higher. So much darkness! What have I done to cause this? What have you done that Jesus should suffer so? The weight of the sins of billions upon billions of people are pressing down—all the massacres in the world, all the abortions, all the divorces, all the horrible things you and I have ever said, the terrible things I have done to others, even the stray sinful thought of our hearts - every single one of them!

But now the worst part: The Father's white-hot anger is burning against him. Think of the power he has—the Creator of the universe who crushed that world with a gigantic flood, who smashed Sodom and Gomorrah, who made the mountain tremble and shake for Moses—that's who is directing his full anger and fury against Jesus. You can hear it in Jesus' voice as his tone changes. An awful and loud cry came from those tortured lungs. Perhaps it's a scream: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We know our triune God is one eternal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So I can't get my head around the fact that the Son is now forsaken. The Father, source of all true love in this world, turns his back on the Son whom he had so clearly declared at his baptism and on the transfiguration mountain as his son whom he loves. The Father suspends his relationship with his Son so that his warrior Son could pay for this entire world's sins. It must have torn at the Father's heart. His wrath is focused on the evil that Jesus bore because he so hates the malignant tumor of sin that is causing our human race to rot.

At the beginning of this suffering, Jesus called him "Father." You can see the intimacy, the closeness. Now it is "My God, my God" as he loudly asks that big why question. Notice how formal that is? This is the moment of sheer horror for our warrior. It's the worst moment of his life, and his lonely suffering has reached its peak on that cross. It is here that the battle is either going to be won or lost as Jesus suffers for us.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah explains what is happening: **"Surely he was taking up our weaknesses, and he was carrying our sufferings. We thought it was because of God that he was stricken, smitten, and afflicted, but it was because of our rebellion that he was pierced. He was crushed for the guilt our sins deserved. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."** (53:4-5)

All this is because of us. Jesus remained perfect and holy himself this entire time. Yet our sin was charged to him and he was willingly paying for it. No matter how old you are, by now you have noticed something about yourself, as have I. We are not always aware of how much we sin. But we are aware that something is broken inside us. Often we think that we will just work harder to break that anger habit, that laziness habit, that lust habit, that greed habit, that overeating habit, and all the other sins we find ourselves falling back on. News flash: Our problem is bigger. We cannot work hard enough. We need a bigger warrior who could fight the greatest battle of all time to purchase forgiveness for us all! That warrior is Jesus. What we see in the darkness and hear in this agonizing plea is God's grace in all its sweat and blood!

When the dust had settled, came the victory cry

John 19:30; Matthew 27:50; Luke 23:46-54

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished!" Then, bowing his head, he gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

After Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. (Matthew 27:50)

Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" When he had said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had happened, he began to glorify God, saying, "This man really was righteous." When all the groups of people who had gathered to see this spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their chests. All those who knew Jesus, and the women who followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man. He had not agreed with their plan and action. He was looking forward to the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. He took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and placed it in a tomb that was cut out of rock, where no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was beginning. (Luke 23:46-54)

The end was near. Those who watched and mocked waited. But not long. Things happen very quickly after his outcry in the dark. Jesus was thirsty. When the dust of the battle had settled the victory cry was proclaimed. "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished'" (John 19:30). "After Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, he gave up his spirit" (Matthew 27:50). Matthew and Mark both tell us that the temple curtain was "torn in two from top to bottom". Someone has said that was God's way of saying "Amen" to Jesus' words "It is finished." That means that there is no more need for sacrificing. No more sheep, goats, or bulls need to be killed. All the restrictions that were in place to keep God's chosen people separate were all removed. Every prophecy in the Old Testament about the coming Savior has been fully kept. God has opened up access to himself for all people, nations, languages, cultures, and generations through the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. He actually transferred the righteousness of Jesus to us!

Notice how we can tell that the sacrifice of Jesus is completed: He says, "Father" again! God's anger has been spent. The terrible separation between Father and Son no longer exists. That loud cry, "It is finished," says everything. In this greatest battle of all time, the work of atoning for humanity is over! Jesus has smashed Satan's head, as predicted in Eden. It's a clear knockout blow. The devil is mortally wounded, still walking around, but he can no longer win. Satan had thought he had heaven's gates locked down tightly. Jesus took off the locks and has locked Satan down with a restricting chain! Our home in heaven is prepaid! There is nothing more you or I, or even God, has to do to pay for our guilt and sin! We are forgiven!

The battle is won. His work is done. He's exhausted, but everything is just as it should be. So it's time for him to leave. The soldiers, the mockers, hell, and Satan could not kill him. Now, of his own free will, he gives his soul into his Father's loving hands. Our holy Jesus, who remained unspotted and unblemished as he experienced our hell, now offers his pure and perfect life as the final, once-and-for-all sacrifice that had been promised! My friends, it is finished! Amen.