

## Supernatural Witnesses to the Christ of Calvary

Matt. 27:45-54

**Intro.** It's been estimated that leading up to the time of Jesus and in Palestine alone, the Romans had crucified 30,000 men judged guilty of criminal behavior. Yet history only records in detail the crucifixion of one man...Jesus Christ. This fact is remarkable all by itself. But as we said last time, the crucifixion of Jesus is the centerpiece of history and the absolute key to God's plan to redeem us from the dominion of sin and death. Apart from the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the world is without hope. And as we found last time, the key words that explain all that Jesus suffered can be reduced to two...**"for us."** This greatest crime in all of history was the greatest proof that God loves us and wants to save us from the punishment we deserve. Last Sunday I hope you went away from worship with the sermon title ringing in your ears... *"He did this for me...He did this for me."*

But for us to personally benefit from God's salvation, God requires that we believe Him. The free gift He offers must be received by faith. We must take God at His Word and believe that Christ alone has the power to save us. One of the many verses that declares this faith requirement is **Jn. 5:24 - "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.** And God hasn't made it difficult to believe. The opposite is true. He has made it difficult to not believe! It's the Adversary who wants us to think it's really hard to believe and that faith is contrary to reason. In Know Why You Believe, Paul Little tells the story of a SS teacher who asked her class *"What is faith?"* A young boy's hand shot up. He said, *"Faith is believing something you know isn't true."* Where did that idea come from? Satan wants people to think they have to check their brains at the door to believe and worship a God we can't see. He perpetrates the lie that faith is a "blind leap." But God never said that! This evil master of deception persuades people to think that science, history and logic are in direct conflict with faith. But nothing could be further from the truth. Throughout history, God has provided evidence to encourage and strengthen our faith. He really wants us to believe Him!

But faith is a choice. Listen to what the Lord said in **Num. 14:11 - The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in Me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?** Jesus alludes to this stubborn refusal to believe in the story about the rich man and Lazarus. When the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers so they might believe and be spared from torment **"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' " "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" - Lk. 16:29-31** That's just the way it is! I doubt if many would be convinced and converted even if Noah's Ark and the Garden of Eden were found. The fact is...because of the fall, each of us inherited a powerful bias against God and His truth. So faith is a choice. It's a decision based on what God has revealed. It's strengthened by evidence that is undeniable and completely reasonable. Faith in the Biblical sense goes beyond reason, but it's never contrary to reason!

This AM we're told what God did the day Jesus was crucified. He gave the world 6 witnesses that testified to the identity of His Son. Though most of the crowd refused to believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be, God's witnesses weren't ignored by everyone. Notice **v.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!"** These Roman soldiers had seen many men executed and none of them were godlike. What was it about the death of Jesus that made such an impact on them? In the words of the centurion, they believed Jesus was the Son of God because of **all that had happened.** Let's consider the six witnesses in **vs. 45-53.**

1. **The witness of supernatural darkness – v. 45 - From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.** According to the way the Jews reckon time, the **sixth hour** is high noon and the **ninth hour** is 3 PM. These are normally hours that call for sun screen and sunglasses. But not this day. The verse says, **darkness came over all the land.** We could quibble about whether **all the land** means the entire earth / the Middle East / or just the land of Israel...but let's not do that. Thanks to astronomical records, we know the sun and moon were far apart that year. That means the darkness couldn't be written off as a solar eclipse. What happened that day was supernatural...it was a darkness imposed by God. It may have affected the entire Middle East but that's just my guess and it really doesn't matter. In Moses' day God caused great darkness to cover the land of Egypt. In Elijah's day He caused the sun to stand still. For the Creator who said, "**Let there be light**" it was no big deal to say, "*Let there not be light!*"

Only a handful will remember this, but one Sunday years ago, the power went out in the middle of our worship service. After the repair was made Consumers Energy told us a ground hog had chewed into the main feed to the transformer out at the street. That poor unsuspecting rodent was cooked by 4,150 volts! A true crispy critter! Now our old worship center was an interior room that had no windows. Someone once described it as a catacomb. When the lights went off, it was total darkness. A few gasps and shrieks were heard...babies cried. Nobody moved except for the ushers who did what we all do when the lights go out...they tried all the switches...just in case.

Would you agree...people tend to notice when the lights are suddenly turned off? We can hide in the darkness but darkness is quite conspicuous. Darkness is the absence of light and the sudden absence of light is arresting and often terrifying. People plunged in darkness instinctively want to know what happened and why. So, when Jesus was on the cross, God sent supernatural darkness to put a hard stop to whatever people were doing so He might capture their attention.

Now the birth of Jesus was accompanied by a supernatural display of light. The same will be true when He returns. He is after all, **the light of the world.** On some dark Judean hillside, a band of shepherds saw this glory light that testified to His birth. God used supernatural light to gain their attention. The shepherds were terrified, amazed and filled with praise. Now 33 years later, this same Jesus is dying on a cross. He had come to His own and His own did not receive Him. At the time of day when the sun is normally at it's peak, His death was witnessed, not by a band of humble shepherds, but by a band of hardened soldiers. And once again, God did something only He can do. He shut off the lights. It's just my opinion, but I doubt there was any cloud cover that day. God made sure false explanations were disallowed so people would know this darkness was His doing.

Scholars suggest a variety of reasons to explain why God did this. But throughout the Bible, darkness is associated with ignorance, evil and judgment. I think the main reason for the darkness relates to what Jesus said in **Jn. 3:19.** He said, **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** The Shekinah glory accompanied Christ's birth but now dense darkness accompanied His death. By means of this supernatural darkness, God affirmed His verdict against this greatest of all crimes. For that 3 hour period, the world was given a preview of the extreme darkness ahead for all who reject Jesus. Though many refuse to believe that God will someday intervene and hold them accountable for their sin, Peter writes, **But, the Day of the Lord will come...** That day is described as a period of terrible darkness and gloom. The same is true in an ultimate sense whenever Hell is described. But for some in whom God's Spirit was working, the darkness was a witness given to inspire and encourage faith. As Jesus was dying on the cross, people instinctively asked, "*What happened to the sun...what's up with this darkness? Who is responsible for this? I wonder if it has anything to do with this man we've crucified?*"

2. **The witness of sin's separation and Scripture fulfilled - vs. 46-49**

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?" When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." 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. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." Jesus was on the cross a total of 6 hours. During the first 3 hours, He spoke only 3 times. Luke records His first statement. **Lk. 23:34 - Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** Remembering the injustice and abuse Jesus suffered...let those words sink in. And then with me, be ashamed of the grievances we've harbored for petty offenses too insignificant to mention. A short time later, Jesus spoke to the repentant thief beside Him and said, **"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."** - **Lk. 23:43.** Need support for salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Here it is. This criminal did nothing to merit heaven. He simply turned to Jesus with the barest shred of faith. After that Jesus **said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple (John), "Here is your mother."**

Darkness came over the land at the beginning of the second 3 hours. Then God gave a second witness. Though this witness wasn't visible, it was very real and full of meaning. Those who believe are arrested by it. Jesus said, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** He fulfilled **Psa. 22:1** written 1,000 yrs. earlier. What Jesus said, meant nothing to the Romans. But to the Jews, these words had profound impact. Somehow, Jesus who is God was separated from God. Martin Luther was so perplexed by this he went into seclusion in an attempt to figure it out. When he finally came out of his room, he admitted he still didn't get it. Before this moment, God the Father and God the Son enjoyed perfect unbroken fellowship. But when Jesus bore our sin, the Father turned away and Jesus was alone. As we pointed out last time, **Hab. 1:13** explains why God turned away. The prophet said, **"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."** God turned away because our sins really were transferred to Jesus. Jesus really did bear our sins in His own body on the tree. Not only did Jesus bear our sin, but the Bible says He became sin for us. (**II Cor. 5:21**)

K 19: The Widowmaker, is the true story of a Russian nuclear submarine and its crew. On its first mission, this hastily engineered and untested submarine suffered a rupture to its cooling system. Sacrificing themselves, the engineering crew rigged a secondary coolant system and kept the reactor from meltdown. The story's impact centers on those sailors who voluntarily allowed themselves to be fatally contaminated. By prolonged exposure to radioactivity, their bodies actually became radioactive. They made this sacrifice to save their comrades. This helps me understand how Jesus became sin for us. For our sake, He allowed Himself to be fatally contaminated.

Remember, Jesus had already left the glories of His Father's presence to come to this sin ravaged earth. But when He assumed the full weight of our sin, the Father had to turn away from the Son He loves. Though these words were a powerful witness to His identity very few grasped their significance. Because Jesus spoke in Hebrew, the Romans thought He was calling out to Elijah. Then just after Jesus cried out to God, He said, **"I am thirsty."** - **Jn.19:28** The One who is the source of living water, experienced acute dehydration. **Psa. 22:15** says, **My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.** We'd like to think the soldiers offered Jesus some of their **wine vinegar** as an act of mercy and compassion and maybe they did. But in view of their taunts and abuse, it seems more likely they offered this drink to further their sadistic amusement. They wanted to hear what He was saying, but with his mouth and throat so dry, they couldn't make it out. God's Spirit inspired Matthew to record this detail because He wanted his Jewish readers to see how it fulfilled **Psa. 69:21** which says, **They...gave me vinegar for my thirst.** He wants his readers to recognize the witness of Scripture fulfilled. He wants us to realize that God was in charge of all this...even to the smallest detail. Regardless of their motivation, the wine vinegar enabled Jesus to cry out with a loud voice as the next verse says He did.

**3. The witness of sovereign control over death - v. 50 - And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.** Though these Roman soldiers had witnessed many crucifixions, the death of Jesus wasn't like any they had ever seen. The life in Jesus didn't ebb away because of the beatings / the flogging / the blood loss or the hours He spent nailed to the cross. In other words, the Romans didn't kill Jesus...and somehow they knew it. The Greek verb *apheimi* is translated **gave up** or yielded up. It means that Jesus let go of his spirit. The mystery of that moment when the spirit leaves the body was entirely under the Savior's control. In other words, Jesus' life wasn't taken from Him...He voluntarily gave it up. It's worth noting that Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was already dead. He sought confirmation from a soldier because Jesus died sooner than anticipated. With apologies Friedrich Nietzsche, if the God who is eternal could die or be killed by men...He wouldn't be God!

Earlier Jesus told His disciples that He was the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for His sheep. Concerning His life Jesus said, **"No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."** So Jesus exercised sovereign authority over His life and over His death. His last words from the cross are found in **Jn. 19:30** which says, **When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.**

Jesus told His disciples He came not to do His own will, but to complete the work His Father had given Him. That work culminated in the cross where the penalty for our sin was paid once for all. So, Jesus gave up His spirit precisely when the work of redemption was finished. But the sovereign control and voluntary surrender of His life separates Him from every other human being who has ever lived and died. **Mk.15:39** says, **And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"** Once again, God had given the world a witness to encourage us to believe in Jesus and be saved.

**4. The witness of salvation completed – v.51a - At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.** The **curtain of the temple** was a thick wall of fabric that separated the holy of holies from the temple's outer courts. Josephus says it was predominantly blue and ornately decorated. Like the fence erected around Sinai to keep people a safe distance from God, it served as a barrier. It shielded men from the God who is holy. Whoever entered the Holy of Holies entered God's presence. In fact, if anyone other than the High Priest presumed to enter the Holy of Holies, he would die. And the High Priest could only go behind the curtain once a year, on the day called Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The fact that this curtain was torn from top to bottom proves that God did it. God did what no man could ever do. He opened the way into His presence. The tearing of this temple curtain signified the beginning of Christ's ministry as High Priest. This divine accomplishment is described in the letter to the Hebrews. Ever since that day, worshippers no longer have to bring a lamb to be sacrificed or go through a priest to have access to God. We can go directly to through Christ who now serves in that role. **1 Tim. 2:5** declares...**there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...** When the curtain was torn, the Holy of Holies was exposed. Though hidden to Israel, God's presence was now accessible to everyone. Can you imagine how shocking this was to the priests who ministered in the temple that day? What was shocking to them is incredibly good news for all who trust Jesus. The torn curtain represents Christ's body sacrificed for us. It proves His death has atoned for sins and made us right before God. When Jesus cried out **"It is finished!"** He announced the completion of God's redemptive plan. The age of animal sacrifice had ended. The ultimate offering had been made and the way to God was now thrown open wide. **Heb. 10:19, 20** say, **Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...** But once again, God had given His people a dramatic witness to encourage them to believe.

**5. The witness of a great earthquake – vs.51b-53 - The earth shook and the rocks split.** Few things are more terrifying than the earth violently shaking beneath you. In 1994 while Pastor Len attended the Shepherd's Conference, we visited my elderly Aunt and Uncle. It was just days after the devastating North Ridge earthquake. The quake struck at 4:30 AM. As my relatives told their story, we could still sense the quivering after-shock of emotion in their voices. It seems a china cabinet fell over making it impossible for them to open their bedroom door. Amid sirens, flashing lights and numerous aftershocks, they were trapped in that room until the next afternoon when help arrived.

When Moses was given the Law at Sinai, **Ex. 19:18** says, ...the whole mountain trembled violently. Then later when the Lord appeared to Elijah, **I Kings 19:11** says, **Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD...** Earthquakes were non-existent in God's original creation. These destructive natural forces and others were part of the curse God pronounced on the ground because of Adam's sin. God has often used earthquakes as punishment and to gain attention when people aren't listening to Him. Hello? The Bible says an earthquake of unprecedented proportion will happen during the coming Tribulation. **Heb. 12:26** says, "**Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.**"

Now remember, these supernatural phenomena happened as Jesus was dying on the cross. They happened in a way that made the connection obvious. An earthquake in some other part of the world wouldn't have had the same impact as rocks splitting in the immediate vicinity of Christ on the cross. Nothing like this happened when 30,000 other men were crucified. But the earth shook the afternoon Jesus died. The quake served as a witness to who Jesus is. Not only was divine power over nature put on display, but God gave the world a foretaste of what He has promised to do in a coming day. To believe in Jesus, God wasn't asking people to take a blind leap of faith. The earthquake provided Israel with both encouragement and incentive to believe.

**6. The witness of OT believers resurrected - vs. 52, 53 - The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.** vs. 52, 53 is a passage that raises as many questions as it answers and I'm OK with that. While some questions remain, certain facts are revealed. Let's check them out. First it seems clear that 3 things happened simultaneously when Jesus said, "**It is finished.**" The 3 things are... the temple curtain was torn / there was a great earthquake / and many holy people were resurrected. Warren Wiersbe suggests. *"the torn curtain proves that Jesus conquered sin / the earthquake proves that He conquered the Law / and the resurrections prove that He defeated death."* He's much smarter than me so I'll go with that.

Though we'd love to have the guest list, these verses don't tell us who these resurrected people were except that **many** were raised and they were **holy people who had died**. This leads us to believe they were redeemed people from the OT period. Though they may have been dead for centuries, they came out of the tombs alive. Like Jesus, who entered a room after His resurrection without use of the door, they came out of the grave in a form that was different from the one they had when they died. Scholars suggest the best interpretation of **v. 53** is helped if a period replaces the comma after the phrase, **They came out of the tombs**. In that case, the new sentence would read, **And after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people**. In other words, since Israel's burial grounds lay outside the city walls, these resurrected saints didn't enter the city and show themselves until the 3<sup>rd</sup> day when Jesus was raised.

Now because we're so close to the end of the message I don't want to wander too far out in the weeds. But the word translated **appeared** is *emphanizo* in Greek. The primary meaning of this word is to shine, to be manifest, or to become evident. In **Heb. 9:24** it's used of Christ appearing in God's presence in Heaven for us. But I'm intrigued by how this word denotes shining.

It reminds me of **Dan. 12:2, 3** which promises, **Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.** **Dan.12** speaks of a resurrection that will happen in the future. Without trying to answer questions we simply can't answer, when Jesus died, I think God provided a preview of what will happen when He returns. These resurrected saints didn't appear until after Jesus was raised because as **I Cor. 15:20** Christ is the firstfruits.

But let's think about this...Was God compelled to provide these supernatural witnesses? Did He have to send darkness? / Did He have to tear the Temple curtain? / Did He have to trigger an earthquake? / Did He have to resurrect these OT saints? I'm thinking NO, He didn't. But God provided these supernatural signs as witnesses to the truth about His Son. You see, God really wants people to believe in Jesus and be saved! He really does. In **Jn. 20:30, 31** the Holy Spirit tells us why seven sign miracles Jesus performed are recorded. He wrote, **Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** In other words, God gave this record through John so we might believe that Jesus is the Christ and be saved. And as we see in **v. 54**, the supernatural witnesses that accompanied Christ's crucifixion had their intended effect on some who were there.

**7. The witnesses acknowledged and believed - v. 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!"** God had gained attention and opened the eyes of this centurion and the others with him. God's Spirit was at work producing faith in them.

Now Satan is a liar who is determined to keep people from the truth about Jesus. He insists that faith in Jesus is a blind leap and contrary to reason. But just think of the many witnesses that testify to His truth. Think of the Universe He created with all of its infinite complexity and beauty and ask yourself, "who made all these things." Look up at a star lit sky. What message is it sending? Is it saying there is no God or is it declaring the glory of its Creator? Examine your hand or your eye? Can such remarkable design exist without a designer? Read the Bible and consider how often God did extraordinary things to reveal Himself and capture the attention of those who weren't listening. Just after Thanksgiving we'll consider **Matt. 28**. What about the greatest miracle of all...the resurrection of Jesus? And let's not forget the remarkable things God has done to bring you to Himself. Along with His Spirit and the proclamation of His Word, God uses circumstances and redeemed people as witnesses to His truth. With so many credible witnesses, we're left without excuse for not believing.

I want to ask Malori Pickell to come up and tell us one short story as we finish.

In **Acts 1:8** Jesus said, **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** This morning we've considered 6 witnesses God gave to help people believe in Jesus and be saved. These witnesses testified mainly to those alive at the time. As redemptive history moved forward, Jesus said...**you will be my witnesses**. In other words...we who believe are His witnesses. Now that doesn't mean we should be like a power failure or an earthquake! Jesus said our lives should be like lights in a dark place and our lips should continually speak His praise. The reason the Church remains on earth and the highest purpose for every Christian is to join God in His mission to save as many as will believe. By the power of His Holy Spirit working in us, He causes each believer to be a supernatural witness to the truth about Jesus Christ. May His light shine brightly in each of us.