

Good Friday
The Greatest Battle Ever Fought
Sermon Text: Matthew 27:45-50

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema 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 staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

Suddenly, right at noon, when the sun is brightest, it turned dark. It was so dark that there was no sunlight at all, nor moon or stars. Just darkness. Everything came to a stop. And it was no eclipse. 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 could sometimes take a couple days to die, depending upon how badly the person had been whipped. How hot and how long it must have been. 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 the King of the kingdom of truth. He was God’s special soldier. But now the warrior was dying.

This was the final battle. The big one. He had come into this world and had worked every day of his life to prepare for this. 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. The life of Jesus is the most significant single life in all of history. And what happened on the cross at his death changed the entire world and everyone who has ever lived.

1. His enemy Satan attacked Jesus relentlessly.

“From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)”

The physical agony that Jesus suffered was horrendous. He had already been distressed 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 pulling out of his beard, 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 wrists and feet and hoist the cross up and into its hole as the soldiers and the Jewish leaders mocked him. How can anyone do such things to another human being? That’s my Savior they are torturing! It’s hard to read that account.

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 an insect sting compared to the spiritual suffering that is happening on the cross. The darkness shows us how much God hates sin, that terrible thing that always separates us from him. The darkness is “both God’s reaction to the judicial murder of his Son, and God’s dreadful judgment upon sin as suffered by his Son.”

We may be grateful, in a way, for the darkness. It 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. Satan hates Jesus. And this is the moment when he now saw the Son of Man and Son of God at his weakest—where he might be vulnerable. Satan will do everything to force Jesus to give up his life’s work of paying for your guilt and mine and for atoning for the whole world’s sins.

The devil’s lying reaches a fever pitch. Perhaps he told Jesus, “You won’t make any difference, Son of God. You are not big enough to cover the whole world’s guilt and sin, Jesus. The whole history of humanity is on my side, Christ. Why care about these people? They turned on you. Even Judas and Peter did it. Thousands will turn on you later.”

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, thought, and done.

And Jesus is fighting this powerful evil angel in this great darkness, alone, pure, holy, and faithful. Still loving us. Still holding his ground. Even a child can understand that this is why Jesus is both God and man! Man to be our substitute; God to pay for all the sins of humanity.

But now the worst part: The Father’s white-hot anger is burning against him. Think of the power he had—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: “**About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘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, “My beloved.”

The Father suspends his relationship with his Son so that the 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 the 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?

You can see that while the relationship is broken, his faith is still strong, even as he is left alone. 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 took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted**” (Isaiah 53:4).

All this is because of us. Jesus remained perfect and holy in 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 can purchase forgiveness for us all! This is God's grace in all its sweat and blood!

2. When the dust had settled, came the victory cry

Perhaps the darkness began to retreat. The mockers start in again, thinking Jesus' cry was begging Elijah to come back: **“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 staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, ‘Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him’” (Matthew 27:47-49).**

But the end is near. They wait. But not long. Things happen very quickly. Jesus was thirsty. **“When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished’” (John 19:30). “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit” (Matthew 27:50).**

Mark tells us that the temple curtain was “torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38). 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. There was no more need for priests or high priests. 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!

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 ever since Eden's garden!

It is finished! Amen.

Endnotes