

The Theology of Good Friday

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, March 26, 2023
PASSAGES	Habakkuk 1; 2 Chronicles 16; Psalm 22; Hebrews 9; John 16; 2 Corinthians 5; 1 Peter 3; John 10
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:53:51 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

A very common way of explaining the cross says that the Father turned his face away, that the Son was cut off from God, and that this separation is what paid for sin. Matt argued, text by text, that none of that is what the Bible says. The Father, the Son and the Spirit were at work on the cross in one purpose — and the punishment Jesus endured was not a cold shoulder. It was death.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The idea that God cannot bear to look at sin comes from one half of a prophet's complaint, and the complaint contradicts itself in the same sentence. It is not a foundation to build a belief about God on.
- ◆ Every interaction God has ever had with any human being requires that he can look at sin and be near sinners. Otherwise there is no Exodus, no Job, no Peter, no gospel.
- ◆ When Jesus quotes the first line of Psalm 22, he is pointing at the whole psalm — and that psalm says explicitly that God has *not* hidden his face from the afflicted one.
- ◆ David felt physically abandoned, not relationally abandoned. Jesus was echoing the same thing: nobody rescued him from the cross, and the Father was still with him.
- ◆ Hebrews puts the Spirit inside the offering and Paul puts the Father inside the reconciling. If there were a rupture in the Trinity at Calvary, the Father would be the odd man out — which is absurd.
- ◆ The wages of sin is death, not passive aggression. Jesus was a divine blood donor, and it is his poured-out life, not his sense of abandonment, that atones.

- ◆ Jesus is not talking the Father into loving you. The cross is the Father's love on full display, which is why you can turn to him while you are still in the sin.

► 0:55:49

This message exists because of a calendar problem. The Good Friday service at Hope is given to reflection rather than teaching; the Sunday before it is Palm Sunday, which deserves its own attention; the Sunday after it is Easter. That left this Sunday as the only place a message on the crucifixion could reasonably go. “Unlike last week, I’m not going to do anything granular or academic,” Matt said. “I want to talk about really regular basic stuff today. You’ve got to major on the majors.”

The version of the cross he wants us to delete

► 0:57:29

He started with something he does not believe, because the true thing is easier to see against a contrast. The familiar presentation runs like this: God cannot bear to look on sin, so the Father turned his face away; therefore Jesus was cut off from God; and Jesus’ finite suffering of that separation roughly equates to the infinite separation we deserved, which is what he means by “it is finished.” Four ideas, each leaning on the one before it.

Matt’s objection was not that the picture is thin. It is that the Bible says the opposite of much of it — and that what it actually says is, in his words, “much more glorious, much more beautiful,” and reveals the Father’s love in a way the other version cannot.

1. God has never been unable to look at sin

► 0:58:58

The idea has one address in scripture, and it is a complaint:

“You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?”

HABAKKUK 1:13 ↗

Notice that the sentence collides with itself. You cannot look at wrong — so why are you looking? Habakkuk is working through his own confusion about a God who presides over a dark moment

without, as it seems to him, being angry enough about it. “Is this one half of his confusion a good foundation to build a belief about God?” Matt asked. Especially when other texts say the reverse:

“For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.”

2 CHRONICLES 16:9 ↗

Those roaming eyes are not avoiding people. “Is it like a desktop screensaver? He’s just looking at dolphins?” No — he is looking at cities, at population centers, at us. In [Jeremiah 7:11](#) God says of people who live however they like and then put their church clothes on, “Behold, I myself have seen it.” Seeing is not the problem.

► 1:03:40

And it goes further than seeing. The stated aim of the Exodus was proximity — “that I might dwell among them” — among a people who were emphatically not free of sin, and God was not caught off guard by that. He converses with Satan in [Job 1](#). Every interaction Jesus ever had with Peter, or James, or either Judas, was an interaction with a sinner.

The temptation, Matt said, is to solve this by demoting Jesus: “We’re tempted to think of Jesus as a rubber glove that the Father uses to touch gross humanity — and Jesus can do that because he’s something different, something lesser. But that’s so wrong.” He is God from God, of one being with the Father, including in his earthly ministry — the Christ, “who is God over all, blessed forever”. And that matters at Calvary specifically: “If we don’t have God on the cross, then we’re not saved.”

2. Psalm 22 does not end at verse one

► 1:06:29

The second idea rests entirely on “[My God, my God, why have you forsaken me](#)” — which is a quotation. So the honest question is what David meant by it. This is one of those places, Matt said, where somebody quotes the Old Testament and going back to read it looks like a chore, so we skip it and assume we know.

Read it, and David is being hunted by men with swords. He rehearses God’s past faithfulness ([verses 4–5](#)). He is scorned and mocked — by people, not by God. And then the psalm turns prophetic in a way that is hard to read past:

“They have pierced my hands and feet — I can count all my bones — they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.”

PSALM 22:16–18 ↗

► 1:09:40

Which is a remarkably good psalm to quote while dying by crucifixion, with soldiers gambling for your clothes and a crowd saying let God rescue him if he wants him. But the same psalm settles the question the popular theology gets wrong:

“For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.”

PSALM 22:24 ↗

David was not relationally abandoned and he knew it. He was physically unrescued, which is a different grief. Jesus, quoting him, is saying the same thing — and in his case the failure to rescue had a purpose David could not have seen. The psalm turns outward where the purpose lands: the afflicted shall eat and be satisfied, and all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord.

► 1:11:35

And the song does not stop at vindication. It keeps going, out past David’s lifetime entirely:

“All the prosperous of the earth shall 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.”

PSALM 22:29–31 ↗

“Does this have anything to do with people trying to kill David?” Matt asked. “Is there something prophetic happening?” A man who could not keep himself alive; every family of the nations bowing; his righteousness announced to people not yet born; and the whole thing signed off with *he has done it*. “I wonder if that has anything to do with what Jesus is doing right now. That might have been a real head-scratcher for those watching — or it made perfect sense.”

► 1:12:31

The crowd at the cross knew this song far better than we do. “This was their catechism at church. This was probably devotional family stuff at home. It’s in the top 40 station.” In that culture, quoting the opening of a text points at the whole text — and, as Matt noted drily, a man suffocating to death is not going to recite all thirty-one verses.

3. Where the Spirit and the Father actually were

► 1:13:59

If there is a separation in the Trinity that afternoon, we have to say where each person was. Start with the Spirit:

“...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”

HEBREWS 9:13–14 ↗

The Spirit is not a bystander; he is inside the offering. “It looks like the Spirit is an accomplice with Jesus, a co-conspirator on this salvation thing.” Which produces an absurdity: if there is a rift, the Father is the odd man out, cut off from both the Son and the Spirit. Jesus never qualified “I and the Father are one” with *usually*, or *most of the time*. And in John 8:28–29, lifted up is precisely the moment he says the one who sent him is with him.

► 1:15:36

You could call that poetic — except John hands us a passage where the disciples themselves say he has stopped speaking figuratively, and this is what he says next:

“Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.”

JOHN 16:32 ↗

The window he is describing — struck shepherd, scattered sheep — is the betrayal, the arrest, the trial and the execution. That is the exact stretch of hours in which he says he will not be alone. “Now we’re being told explicitly, when Jesus is *not* being poetic: you’re all going to leave me alone, but I’m not going to be alone, because my Father is with me.”

► 1:17:10

And Paul names what the Father was doing in them: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). “The Father is not like *ew*. The Father’s not cut off — the Father is right there actively participating.” What you get, Matt said, is the whole Trinity in a unity of power, purpose and love. Not recoiling. Participating.

4. What actually atoned

► 1:17:49

So if the punishment was not separation, what was it? Peter is specific:

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”

1 PETER 3:18 ↗

Death in the flesh. And the reason blood is the currency is stated in the law itself: “the life of the flesh is in the blood... it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.” Shed the blood and you have poured out the life. Matt’s phrase for it: Jesus was a divine blood donor. Isaiah says the same — “he poured out his soul to death” — and Paul closes it: “the wages of sin is death.” It was painful, and by his stripes we are healed, but we are not saved by the quantity of his pain, and we are certainly not saved by God giving him the cold shoulder on our behalf. As Matt put it: the wages of sin is not passive aggression.

The one time the Father did not step in

► 1:18:59

There is a real abandonment here, and Matt was careful about what kind. Was Jesus abandoned? “Yes, in a sense — because God the Father let him die.”

► 1:19:30

Then he ran the near-misses, one after another, and the refrain never changed. The crowd at Nazareth who tried to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:28–30) — but they couldn’t, because the Father protected him. The withered hand healed on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9–14). The lame man at the pool (John 5:16–18). The argument in the temple over whether he was the Christ, where they wanted to arrest him and no one laid a hand on him (John 7:25–30). “In John 8 — I know this is getting boring”: he claims equality with God and they pick up stones (John 8:58–59). In John 10 he equates himself with God and they pick

up stones again (John 10:31–39). After Lazarus, when it is getting totally out of hand, the men in charge formally decide to kill him (John 11:45–53) — and they still can’t, because the Father protected him. The boredom *is* the argument. Seven times, the same ending. This time the Father does not intervene. Why?

► 1:20:01

“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

JOHN 10:17–18 ↗

Not withdrawal of protection as an insult, then, but as honor — the very thing the Father says he loves about the Son. “When the time was right, when Jesus laid down his own life on his own terms, the Father says: good. I won’t intervene.” And so: “We shouldn’t think for one moment the Roman centurions had him in their control,” Matt said. Jesus laid his life down when he was good and ready, and the Father let him.

► 1:21:46

He gathered it up before landing it. God clearly does look at sin, and Habakkuk’s confusion should not be treated as a great foundation for belief. Christ is God; the Father and the Spirit are God; all of them are able to look at sinners, be with them, talk to them and hang around them — “otherwise we’re all doomed.” David, who wrote the psalm Jesus quoted, knew the Father was not abandoning him relationally; he was scared of dying, “but maybe not even all that scared,” because he was still rallying the assembly to worship while expecting to die. And then the sentence that holds the whole message: “Jesus was experiencing scorn like David was, but it was the scorn of man. Jesus was experiencing a punishment on our behalf, but it wasn’t being cut off from God — it was death, the death we deserve. No one took his life. He gave it, and when he gave it, the Father let that happen.”

Why any of this matters on a Monday

► 1:24:16

This is where Matt said the bad theology does its damage. If you believe the wages of sin is the silent treatment, and that God cannot stand to be near you while you are sinning, then at the exact moment you are breaking down — in the addiction, in the fear, in whatever has you — you have no reason to reach for him. He would not answer. It would be weird. He would have to get his rubber glove out.

► 1:24:52

Underneath that sits a rage fantasy we assume the Father is running, and a picture of the family most of us recognize: one parent enraged, the other smoothing it over. “Jesus is definitely trying to smooth things over, the Father definitely wants to smash you — that’s the kind of weird stuff we believe deep down.” And it only holds together if Jesus is somehow lesser, which is the nonsense from point one. “Jesus doesn’t coerce the Father into loving us,” Matt said. “He demonstrates the Father’s love.” We are not watching the Son talk the Father into a relationship with us — *okay, I’ll come around, if you and the Spirit are going to gang up on me*. “If you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen the Father” (John 14:9) — “you see how he acts toward sinners. Jesus giving himself up completely, that’s how committed the Father is to you too.”

► 1:26:20

Which means you can go to him with a half-finished repentance — “ad hoc, almost done, half-baked,” in Matt’s words — because he is already coming. The prodigal’s father runs while the son is still a long way off, before the speech is out of his mouth. Tying it back to what the room had sung an hour earlier: “His goodness is running after us — not running away from us.” Picture the alternative, he said: the goodness and mercy of the Lord trying not to touch you, actively avoiding you. Nobody reaches for that. But if you know his character, you go back eagerly, with joy, on the prodigal’s own arithmetic — even the servants in his father’s house eat better than this.

► 1:26:51

And the commitment is not provisional. “He’s all in. He’s fully committed. All the chips are on the table — because he’s not gonna undie for us. He’s not going to unincarnate. When he did that, he was saying: I am fully committed. I’m not going back.”

► 1:27:32

He closed by praying it rather than arguing it one more time: “Father, I ask that your Holy Spirit would reveal the love of God for us, and help us by the power of the Spirit to really believe it.” That is the assignment coming out of this message. Not to hold a tidier diagram of the atonement — to actually believe that the Father standing on the other side of it is the one running toward you.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Habakkuk 1:13
- 2 Chronicles 16:9
- Jeremiah 7:11
- Exodus 29:46
- Job 1:6–12
- Romans 9:5
- Psalm 22:1
- Psalm 22:4–5
- Psalm 22:16–18
- Psalm 22:24
- Psalm 22:26–27
- Psalm 22:29–31
- Hebrews 9:13–14
- John 10:30
- John 8:28–29
- John 16:32
- Matthew 26:31
- 2 Corinthians 5:18–19
- 1 Peter 3:18
- Leviticus 17:11
- Isaiah 53:12
- Romans 6:23
- Isaiah 53:5
- Luke 4:28–30
- Matthew 12:9–14
- John 5:16–18
- John 7:25–30
- John 8:58–59
- John 10:31–39
- John 11:45–53
- John 10:17–18
- John 14:9
- Luke 15:17
- Luke 15:20

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Which of the four ideas Matt took apart had you absorbed without examining it — and where did you first hear it?
2. Matt said Habakkuk's confusion is a poor foundation for a doctrine. Where else might you be building on one verse pulled out of a complaint or a question?
3. Reading Psalm 22 whole changes what Jesus' cry from the cross means. What is the difference, in your own life, between feeling physically unrescued and being relationally abandoned?
4. Matt described the good-cop, bad-cop picture of the Father and the Son that many of us carry underneath our theology. Where do you catch yourself assuming the Father merely tolerates you for Jesus' sake?
5. If God's goodness is running after you rather than away from you, what is the first thing that changes this week about how you pray when you have just failed?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzbCZcbMwil&t=3231s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.