

August 25th 2013: Matt 27:45-54 The Jesus The World Sees #11
The Crucifixion

Last Tuesday night many thousands of people around Australia would have seen in vivid colour on their television sets a portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus. And despite what we might consider as omissions from or additions to the Biblical account, it still showed in some detail what the Scriptures record about the death of our Saviour and Lord.

The incredible thing to me, is that many of those who watched through that presentation would not have been church going believers, and yet they would have recognized what they saw as a reasonably accurate record of an historic event that still affects our world. For despite refusing to accept the eternal significance of it, the vast majority of secular historians accept the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth as something that actually happened, and the guy in the street is on the whole happy to go along with that view.

John Dickson writes (p100) *"Overwhelmingly, modern scholars accept as secure the broad outline of the passion narratives, from Last Supper to final breath. Few believe the entire narrative is straightforwardly accurate (as most Christians do), and a number of interesting debates continue over the details. Nevertheless, there is a strong consensus....that affirms the following few facts; Jesus shared a final meal with the twelve during Passover week of AD 30; he was betrayed by one of the twelve; he was arrested by the Temple guards; he was interrogated by the Jewish authorities and then 'officially' tried by Pontius Pilate; after scourging, he was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem under the charge, 'King of the Jews'."*

So it would seem from reports I have read that people have not been adverse to watching the Bible series including the crucifixion even if they have little or no belief in Jesus. But the thing that I asked myself as I sat and watched the gruesome death of Jesus was, what would the normal everyday person take away from what they saw and what would they miss?

They would definitely take away a strong sense of the agony that Jesus endured, and maybe also His acceptance of all the pain and suffering as His destiny or mission. I myself found it difficult at times to watch the brutality that was poured out on Him because I knew that it was no doubt much worse than what was depicted.

But what they would miss, I reckon, although it was there to be seen, would be the reaction of God the Father to the death of His Son shown in the darkness that covered the land; the curtain split in two; the bodies of holy people raised to life; and the terrified response of the soldiers who crucified Him.

The darkness came first. From what Matthew tells us we can see that by the sixth hour or 9.00am, they had already crucified Jesus and mocked Him while He hung there. Then the terrible darkness fell upon the land. Luke tells us in his account that the sun stopped shining. It reminded me that God had once before brought great darkness upon

a land when He had seen the oppression of His people by the Egyptians. It was the ninth plague and it came with no warning and lasted three days. And the Bible tells us that it was a darkness that could be felt.

Somehow I sense that the darkness over Jerusalem when Jesus hung on that cross was also a darkness that could be felt. And it was again the darkness of God's displeasure against evil, wickedness, sin, and the act of crucifying His Son. We must not underestimate the fearfulness and dread of that darkness. William Hendriksen writes:-

"The darkness meant judgment, the judgment of God upon our sins, his wrath as it were burning itself out in the very heart of Jesus, so that he, as our Substitute, suffered most intense agony, indescribable woe, terrible isolation or forsakenness. Hell came to Calvary that day, and the Saviour descended into it and bore its horrors in our stead."

The darkness ended after three hours when Jesus spoke those words from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He knew the full power of that darkness, yet at His lowest He could still address His Father as 'My God'. And then, a little while after we know from Luke's account that He cried out for a final time and said, "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit", and then He died.

After that had happened, God ripped the curtain from top to bottom. This mighty curtain that hung in the Temple and signified the separation between God and His people because of their sin. It was 60 foot high and 30 foot wide. And God ripped it in two. An act of great passion. God Himself abolished the separation and opened a new and living way for people to enter His presence. Hebrews 10:19 declares this act as a call for us to persevere in our faith when it says:

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings

Back in the Old Testament there was one miracle that God's people always looked back upon with immense awe. It was the time that God ripped the red sea into two so that His people could flee through it away from judgment and towards the land of promise. And to gain that freedom they had to enter through that narrow way that was opened before them that led to life and stay on it until they gained their freedom.

The curtain is open. Our face is firmly set towards the life that is now ours in Christ Jesus. And the call is still for us to persevere in going forward.

Then God broke open the tombs. And He did so with an earthquake! It's only Matthew who mentions this, and in doing so he presents us with a newspaper style headline but neglects to give us the article that explains it. All we have are a couple of

sentences that leave us with many unanswered questions. Look at Matt 27:51 through to v53:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

That God used an earthquake at this time shouldn't surprise us. Something major had just happened and God declares it with a burst of power. That He should target tombs is again, not surprising. What has just happened would change the nature of tombs and grave stones forever.

The sticking point for many however, is what happens next. ***The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.***

I was reading a blog on the internet from someone who saw this as a fable made up by Matthew because it seems so impossible that it could happen. Yet God delights to do the impossible. Especially when He has a powerful point that He wants to get across.

There's a story tucked away in second kings about an Israelite who was being buried by his friends when they saw a bunch of Moabite raiders in the distance. So they quickly dragged away whatever was blocking the entrance to Elisha's tomb and threw the man's body in there. And the Scripture tells us that when his body touched the bones of Elisha the man came to life. God was making a point.

And here again God is making a powerful point about the life that is found in the resurrection of Jesus for those who follow Him. For it seems that the earthquake may well have been God's celebration of the victory won on the cross, yet it was not till after the resurrection of Jesus that holy men broke free from the tombs, appeared to many in Jerusalem, like Moses and Elijah had appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, to confirm that through His resurrection the Kingdom and power of God had clearly come upon the earth.

Finally God sent terror into the hearts of the soldiers: The Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus were just doing their job, yet the film pictured them doing it with a great degree of cruelty. Inflicting as much pain as they could and doing so in a very deliberate way. Historians would support this, because the Roman soldiers had grown to hate these stubborn and arrogant Jews and delighted in any opportunity to hurt them.

They would have also made a particular example of Jesus because of the way that the Jewish leaders had turned Him over to them, and the things they had said about Him. We know they mocked him as king and saw the sign on the cross as part of that mockery. They heard from the people at the cross that He had claimed to be the Son of

God, and they had laughed with them at the spectacle of a God allowing Himself to be humiliated and crucified.

Then the darkness had come and with it a fear that God caused to creep into their hearts. Suddenly the things they had said about Him being the Son of God did not seem funny anymore. And though it was the Jews who had handed Him over, they were the ones who had whipped Him, put the crown of thorns on His head, and nailed Him to the cross. I shivered when I wrote that. And Matthew 27:54 says:

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!'

I have no idea what happened to those men in the years that followed, but somehow I believe that God filled their hearts with terror at what they had done to His son, so that they might turn to Him in their great fear and find salvation.

God the Father was present at the cross and He made His presence known.

We as believers in Jesus must never take the cross lightly or seek to lessen the continuing impact it needs to have on our lives.

There's a novel written about the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus called *The Shadow of the Galilean*, and in it the author includes an imagined letter written by Barabbas to the main character in the story after the death of Jesus. Barabbas says in his letter, and with this I will finish:-

"I'm writing above all to thank you. I've heard how much you did for me. I barely escaped death. The price was high. Another died in my place. Two of my friends were crucified with him. Since then I've been asking myself: Why the other? Why Jesus? Why not me? I know that Jesus is close to your heart. You defended his gentle way of rebellion and rejected my way of resisting. Now I'm indissolubly bound up with him. I keep thinking what that means for me. If he has died in my place, then I am obliged to live for him.."