

Transcript:

Actions that Speak Louder than Words - Almost by Dr. Sinclair B Ferguson

March 29, 2013, Matthew 27:45-54

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INTRODUCTION:

Scripture text is Matthew chapter 27 and we are going to read from verse 45 through verse 54.

The whole event of the crucifixion of Jesus, obviously, began during the course of the morning. And the passage that we now read is denoted as beginning at the sixth hour, or at the noon hour as we would say.

SCRIPTURE READING:

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? That is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.” And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion, and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus saw the earthquake and what took place they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (2:39)

PRAYER:

Now as we turn to this word of God let us turn first to the God of the word, and seek his face in prayer that we may find his face in scripture. (2:54)

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for this day. Thank you for gathering us together in this place to meditate on the self-giving of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for the reminder of it. That you so loved the world that you gave your only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. We thank you that you did not send your son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. And we pray this Good Friday as we meditate together on the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ, we may belong to that world in which your salvation is marvelously enjoyed. And we pray as we come into this place that is, in its own sense, a world apart; as we come as a community of believers, that Jesus Christ has formed into a new humanity and the beginning of a new world, we pray that as we leave here and go out into the old world none of us may leave as one who belongs to that old world — but who belongs to the new humanity — the new race of men and women. And by your power, through your word, and in the grace of your Holy Spirit is enabled to live as a new person in Christ, living in an old world that is so manifestly without him. So lead us by your Spirit to your word and through your word we pray you will lead us to the Lord of the word. The living word. The dying savior. The risen Christ. And this we pray, in his name. Amen. (5:44)

SERMON:

It's quite often said that what distinguishes the gospels from biographies of Jesus, which they are not, is that when you read through them you come to realize that they are actually passion narratives with extended introductions. And you simply need to do the arithmetic to realize that this is so; that the gospel writers never intended to give us biographies of Jesus - but gospels, good news about Jesus.

And the fact that in three of the gospels about a third of the gospel is devoted to one single week in Jesus' life. And in the fourth gospel virtually half of the gospel is devoted to the last week of Jesus life and most of that to the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. There is a sense in which you only need to do the arithmetic of the gospels to realize that the heart of the story lies not in the teaching that precedes it, nor even the marvelous miracles that accomplished and expressed the power of that teaching, but the real thrust of the narrative, the real message of the gospel to which everything else has been leading must therefore lie in the area of concentration. That is in the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. And within those 24 hours, particularly these closing hours, that each of the gospel writers describes from a slightly different perspective and with in many senses very definite intentions in what they write so that in each gospel we should see something about Jesus that will enable us to have the whole picture of what the significance of what this good Friday is. (7:54)

And what Matthew does here in his gospel, as he brings us to the heart of the gospel message, is to provide us with a description of three very dramatic events that come with no explanation. And three very significant statements that then provide us with the explanation for the dramatic events if we had not yet grasped their significance. And Matthew is unique in the way in which he does this. You will see the three dramatic events.

The first is his description of the darkness that covers the whole land from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. From the noon hour to three o'clock in the afternoon. And the gospel writers record this because they are conscious that whatever secondary causes God may have used to create this darkness, it is the timing of the darkness that they see as so significant. They understand that this is by no means accidental. It is preternatural. It is, indeed, a supernatural event that is taking place here as though God's purpose is that nature itself should in some way uncover the significance of what is taking place here at the cross of calvary. And of course because so many readers of the new testament, the first hearers of the story of the gospel were well instructed in the pages of Old Testament scripture. I suspect that Matthew, who very evidently writes to show believers how the scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus, expects that his first readers may know more of the Old Testament scriptures than contemporary men and women tend to know. That they would immediately recognize that here was the fulfillment of a prophecy that recurred in the pages of the Old Testament. That the great day of the Lord would not in the first instance be a day of blazing light; but, a day of deep darkness. The day when God worked for the salvation of his people would not be signaled by the brightness of his coming but by the darkness that would cover the event. (10:33)

And so we discover in scripture that there are very important days of Lord. Days of God's special activity that are shrouded in darkness. That was true of the first of the Lord's great days in the creation of the world — before He brought order out of the disordered and empty cosmos. We are told that darkness covered the earth. And that's a recurring theme in scripture. You remember again a number of chapters later on in the Old Testament when God comes and binds himself to Abraham in his covenant promise that in Abraham's seed a Savior would come. The seed who would bring blessing to the nations and salvation to the lost. But, an awesome darkness came upon Abraham and in that darkness God gave him a sign. Having commanded him to dismember animals and to arrange them in parallel lines. And as that awesome darkness came upon Abraham he saw a light. A symbol of God passing through between the dismembered animals as a symbol. He clearly understood with which he was presumably familiar that God was saying, "At the cost of my own life I will be faithful to this covenant!" (12:25)

Then of course there were other occasions of darkness in the Old Testament scriptures. And perhaps the most significance was the plague of darkness, that came you remember, in Moses day on Egypt. In the context of which God was purposing and planning the redemption, the salvation, the deliverance of His people. No wonder William Cooper teaches us to sing, "Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut its glories in, when God the mighty maker died for man the creatures sin." And if you knew anything about Old Testament scripture you would immediately recognize this darkness, that covers the land, was a real sign that the great day of the Lord was just about to begin. (12:32)

But then there was a second dramatic event and its described in verse 51, isn't it? When the great temple curtain was torn in two. And Matthew makes a point, insists on it, that it was torn in two from the top to the bottom. It's a little indication — very obvious indication — that he believed that was yet another divine sign. Another dramatic divine act. It wasn't man who had done this from below. Or anything in creation that had don it from below. It was God who had done it from above. And what was the sign? Well perhaps part of the sign was that God was making a new way through Christ into His very presence, but, part of it surely was that God was desecrating His own temple. That this was the day when everything that took place in the temple that was merely symbolic of what was now happening outside of Jerusalem on the cross of Calvary, everything that was taking place there, now had its purpose fulfilled and God had no more use for the temple. Except as we find, strikingly in the Acts of the Apostle, as a large space in the middle of Jerusalem for Christians to gather, not for sacrifice but for praise and exclusively for prayer. Ignoring the sacrifices! Because they had discovered that outside of Jerusalem on Golgotha, Christ had offered one sacrifice that was sufficient for the sins of all of His people for all time. And therefore God had no further use for the temple, just as if we can use an analogy the day will come when God will have no further use for this building, that has been so vital and precious too so many of us. Because the day will come when we will worship in a temple that makes all the man made temples of the cosmos shrink into insignificance by comparison with the glory of His presence. That would be a shock, wouldn't it? You're from this church or some other church. What a shocking thing to think that God would have no further use for this. That's a small illustration of the shock that it must have been for the people in Jesus' day that God was deconsecrating the one holy space on the face of the earth in order that for his people every space in which they came to know Jesus Christ as savior and Lord could be truly holy. (17:07)

Well there's a third dramatic event that takes place here. And it's the one we talk about least frequently. It's in verses 51 through 53. The darkness covers the land. The temple curtain is torn in two. And the tombs open. And the dead appear. Notice verse 51. "The earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs

also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” Now if the first event, the darkness, was supernaturally contrived and the second event, the tearing of the temple curtain was heavenly created, this third event is the most striking event of all, isn’t it? The dead being raised. Aren’t the dead raised only when the day of the Lord comes? Well, of course that is precisely the point, isn’t it? But why are not all the dead raised? Because of the day of the Lord has not finally been consummated.

That leads to a third question if you are an awkward reader of scripture, as sometimes I am, “Why were these dead raised? Why were these dead raised?” Well of course to demonstrate to those who had any eyes to see that this death upon the cross was actually the death of death. That would guarantee the death of death — and its final destruction. You understand that the death of death does not begin, according to the new testament, at the resurrection, the death of death begins at the cross where by his death Jesus draws the sting and curse of death. And by drawing the sting and curse of death, death begins to die. And it’s as almost as though God is saying in these extraordinary events with the dead being raised — so strange — so mysterious — where souls and bodies were momentarily rejoined together as though God were simply switching on the light in the midst of this darkness only to switch off the light again to give his own people a glimpse of what it was that Jesus Christ would finally accomplish on the last day. He had done it before. He had done it at the tomb of Lazarus. “Lazarus come forth”. As some of the older writers used to say, somewhat amusingly, had he not used Lazarus’s name all of the dead would have been raised by the power of his voice. And here is a little indication that we are moving forward through his death to the final death of death. What a glorious thing this is. To think that one day when this building will be no more necessary. God grant it may stand and in His presence there may be much praise in this building. Until that day there will be no room for this building. And those who slumber physically in the grounds around this building be gloriously raised from the dead! United with one another. United over the centuries of the churches history. And united, because, as the gospel tells us, by Christ’s death. Death is defeated. The grave is destroyed. And for any who had ears to hear as this gospel was first read; for Matthew who had eyes to see as he first wrote this gospel, these dramatic events although they were events without a single word being spoken to interpret them, believers with any sense of God’s purpose interpreted with their own words what God had done without words. But Matthew is not wanting to write a wordless gospel. And so as often happens in scripture, there are many events in scriptures in which God reveals himself and yet the events themselves are wordless. And we are able to interpret them because we know something from scripture about what God is doing. But characteristically when God reveals himself in wordless events he also provides us, in the text of scripture, with words that help us truly to understand the

events. And this is what we see here. Three dramatic events accompanied by three significant statements. (22:55)

The first, of course, is in verse 46. Around three o'clock in the afternoon the Savior who is, incidentally, in the process of being asphyxiated — you didn't die by the wounds of crucifixion, you died by the asphyxiation which your position hanging on the cross inevitably brought upon you. And here is this striking statement of a man in the process of asphyxiation, as he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Of course these are the words of the 22nd Psalm at the beginning. And it's a Psalm that you should read right through to the end because it ends in triumph. This is not a cry of Jesus abandoning trust in God. This is a cry of Jesus expressing the fact that he is going through an experience of God forsakenness that will be an experience from which he emerges in triumph. This is not a cry of doubt. This is a cry of desolation. Issuing from a heart of faith. Otherwise why turn to the 22nd Psalm? But in many ways it's the explanation of the darkness. Isn't it? That the light of the world is now in unapproachable darkness. That the light of the world is now in what he himself had called in a striking expression — the outer darkness. And we understand, I think, don't we, particularly if we have lived in any rural place, that there is darkness and there is outer darkness. There is a darkness that falls on Columbia, but it's not really dark. You drive into Columbia when Columbia is shrouded in darkness and you will see as in every city that strange aura of light which means that the darkness cannot really and finally and fully penetrate into this city. But if you come from some rural place, far from a city, you know there is a darkness in which you cannot see your hand when it is placed up against your eyes. There is a deep darkness. And this is what's happening to Jesus. He is actually going into deep darkness where he can see absolutely nothing. He is going, as I sometimes say, into that one sphere in which the 23rd Psalm ceases to function. He is not able to say here, "I will fear no evil for you are with me and your rod and your staff they comfort me." He is not able to say, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I know I will never feel utterly alone." And perhaps more significantly he is going to the place where the benediction doesn't work. That great benediction of Aaron and the priests. As they came forth and raised their hands and blessed the people. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." How many times within the temple had Jesus heard that benediction pronounced and now the benediction wasn't working. Because the peace had gone. The light of the countenance of God was not to be seen. And so there's something very striking here because, in fact, this is the deep darkness that became penetrable to Abraham only because he saw the light of God's presence passing through the darkness, and saying, "If it takes this curse to fall upon me, I will keep my promise of salvation." Or as the New Testament itself rather puts it, "Even if it means that

curse falling upon the Son of my love, I will keep my saving promise.” That’s why he cries out, “My God, why am I forsaken?” Or as Paul puts it, alluding to both this event and the experience of Abraham, “he became accursed for us in order that the blessing that was promised through Abraham might come.” (30:00)

But then there is a second significant statement. It’s the loud shout of verse 50 as Jesus dies on the cross — he issues a loud shout. He cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And Matthew doesn’t tell us what that loud cry was. Was it the loud cry of which John speaks in chapter 19 in his gospel that Jesus cried out, “It is finished.” Whether it is precisely that or not, this is a cry apparently not of defeat but of triumph. A recognition that he has finished his work. There is something very striking about the language that is used here. “Jesus cried out again with a loud voice.” — now notice the language, “and he yielded up his spirit.” Perhaps I can put it like this. There is nobody in this room...there is nobody in this room — unless they take their own life, who will decide the moment of their death. But Jesus sovereignly decided the moment of his own death. And when you read the testimony of the gospel writers you get this amazing sense that this immolated figure upon the cross is actually the only person in history who dies as an active verb. Now we use the word to die as an active verb but we don’t die we are died, aren’t we? We don’t choose the moment. We are not sovereign in the moment. We have no power in the moment. Alas in our own time, for many of us, we will be comatose in the moment. And alas for those that love us most, if we are, that we are not conscious together as angels carry believers into the very presence of God. But Jesus is somebody who actively dies. Remember how he put it in John’s gospel. Or rather do you remember how John reminds us how he put it — “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down for myself.” That’s actually the reason why your death could never save anybody. Because your death isn’t that kind of royal voluntary action. It’s something that happens to you. Yes, by acts of enormous heroism, a man dying may bring physical protection and even physical salvation to another. But only one who sovereignly chose the moment and the significance of his death could ever save sinners. And that’s what’s taking place here. In the midst of the sense of God forsakenness our Lord Jesus never loses his kingly poise; and, his saving purpose. (32:25)

And that I think is the reason for the third word that we hear from around the cross. The cry of God-forsakenness. The loud shout of triumph and this remarkable statement that we find in verse 54 when the centurion and those who were with him keeping watch over Jesus saw the earth quake and what took place and were filled with awe said, “Truly this was the Son of God.” I said a few minutes ago that the gospel writers for all the story is the same. If you read the gospel writers with some care. If you put down beside each other two

copies of the Bible with Matthew and Mark open. Or, four copies with Matthew, and Mark, or Luke or John. If you're really intelligent you bought a book that look like that. You'll notice they focus on different details. For example one of the things that stands out in Luke's account of the whole trial and crucifixion of Jesus, what stands out for Luke is the number of times Jesus is verbally declared to be innocent by the very people who condemn him to crucifixion. Again and again and again and again and again. And there's a message there, isn't there? It forces on the intelligent reader, and here we are all intelligent readers, it forces on us the intelligent reader, the question why should this innocent man be declared to be innocent and therefore crucified? What's going on here? (34:18)

And Matthew who is not ignorant of that, however, focuses on something slightly different. Not so much the fact that he is declared again and again and again to be innocent. That note is not struck in quite the same way or with quite the same force by Matthew as it is by Luke. But what he focuses is the reason by he is condemned. He bears down on this. If Luke wants us to see it's in my place condemned he stood then Matthew wants us to see why it was he was condemned. And for what reason he stands in my place; and, so Matthew has a focus on the charges that were brought against Jesus. The charges that came from among the Jews that he committed blasphemy and therefore should die according to God's law. And in the Roman tribunal that he had committed treason against Ceasar because he declared himself to be a king and therefore should be executed under Roman law. And we find in the court of religion that the charge will not stick and we find in the court of Pontius Pilate, that Pilate himself with all the might of Rome and all Rome's interest in law and order and justice, Jesus stands innocent of all charges. But, the reason Matthew places his emphasis on the nature of the charges is because Matthew comes to us right out of the pages of scripture. Matthew is the one, whom more than the others, keeps saying don't you see that all the hints you need to understand what's happening here are found in the scriptures. So, why the emphasis on blasphemy and treason? My dear friends, for this very simple reason. These are the charges on the charge sheet with your name on it before the judgment seat of God. These are your crimes — and mine — before God. Blasphemy — that you have made yourself the center of the universe and have worshipped the creature rather than the Creator. It's blasphemy according to scripture. And yes treason — that you have made your will rather than his will, the will that governs your life. And so you see different emphasis but at the end of the day the same emphasis. Christ declared innocent; executed as guilty. Why? Christ charged with treason and blasphemy. Why? In my place condemned he stood and sealed my pardon with his blood, Hallelujah, what a Savior. (38:33)

You know these words of the hymn writer, Christopher Idle:

He stood before the court, on trial instead of us.
He met its power to hurt, condemned to face the cross.
Our King accused of treachery, our God accused of blasphemy.
These are the crimes that tell the tale of human guilt.
Our sins, our death, our hell — on these the case is built.
To this worlds power the Lord stays dumb.
The guilt is ours. No answer comes.
The sentence must be passed. This unknown prisoner killed.
The price is paid at last. The law of God fulfilled.
He takes our blame and from that day the accusers claim is wiped away.
Shall we be judged and tried? In Christ our trial is done.
We live for He has died. Our condemnation gone.
In Christ are we both dead and raised.
Alive and free His name be praised.”(39:40)

I think today, it's probably been on websites what happens in Good Friday in some parts of the Philippines. That men voluntarily, often having excoriated themselves violently, as Jesus was before the crucifixion, are led to a literal cross and raised up. And somewhere wearing the garb of a Roman soldier will literally hammer, stainless steal nails into their hands. And they will hang there, briefly for a matter of minutes, and then be released and of course taken to the emergency room for help. But if you visited those emergency rooms and said why on earth do you go through such pains. You know what they would say. I go through such pains in order that I may atone for my sins. Are they worse sinners than you? Are their crimes greater than mine? Would you do that to atone for your sins? Why on this Good Friday are we sitting here and not reenacting the crucifixion in order that somehow or another we might persuade God to pardon our sins and that we might make atonement for them. My dear friend it could be that you have happened into this service today and you think that the little things that you do will atone for your sins. Perhaps the little things you have given up for lent. Perhaps the good things that you feel outweighs the bad things. But you wouldn't be prepared for five minutes crucifixion, would you? You wouldn't really go, you wouldn't really go to the final degree to make sure that God would forgive your sins and atone for your sins. You are not really there yet, are you? Not the labors of your hands can fulfill the laws demands. But listen, could your zeal no respite know, could your tears forever flow. Could you be a Pilipino crucified for five or ten minutes — all for sin could not atone. He must save, and He alone. And the glorious good news of a day like this is, you don't need to be crucified for your sins because He has been crucified for them. What you need to do is to abandon everything you imagine can atone for your sins and take hold of Jesus of Christ who has atoned for our sins, by faith.
(43:25)

Was wonderful to hear Dan Cole singing that great spiritual. Just as we were coming into the service today. Wasn't it? "Were you there when they crucified my Lord." Some of you would be thinking, "They must have spent a long time planning that." No, that was almost a last minute thought today. But you know for me it was immensely significant for this simple reason, I wouldn't be here today, humanly speaking, were it not for the fact that at the end of the second world war a Scotsman happened into a service on Easter weekend in an American chapel in France and heard an African American soldier sing the very words that Dan Cole sang here today. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord." That was what brought him to faith in Christ. And it was through his preaching that I came to faith in Christ. And I think the only reason I would have ever had come to Columbia is because I came to faith in Christ. Scotland is a lovely place to live. But what if you were like that Scottish soldier. Happened into this place and in five years time were able to save to me, "I was there that last Good Friday when you were minister in First Presbyterian Church in Columbia." And then you would say with a smile, "I actually can't remember very much what you said but when he sang, "We you there when they crucified my Lord' for the first time in my life I realized that I actually was there. And that it was because of my sins that he was crucified. But because He was crucified for my sins through faith in him I can go free. That would make this Good Friday a great Good Friday. And you know another thing it would enable you to live for all eternity in the presence of the savior who this day so long ago died for our sins. (46:08)

Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Today? Do ya? And if you've never before — do it now. Trust him — all for sin cannot atone. But He will save and He alone.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for all that you've done for us in your grace to us. We pray that we may be more than moved by the reflections that we have upon the suffering that you endured. And see to the heart of what you have done for us; and, come to a living and glorious and joyful faith in you. And this we pray, in your name. Amen.