

Theme: Powerful Words – Powerful Passion – "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Text: Matthew 27:50-56 (NKJV)

⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

⁵¹ Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, ⁵² and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; ⁵³ and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

⁵⁴ So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

⁵⁵ And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, ⁵⁶ among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

Today we come to the sixth set of **"Powerful Words"** from Christ's **"Powerful Passion."** Words which were spoken by the very men that were in charge of crucifying Jesus: **"Truly this was the Son of God!" (v. 54).**

Now, for those of us who live a couple of thousand years removed from this scene and have read and heard a number of times the Gospels' accounts of Jesus life and ministry, as well as the accounts of His suffering and crucifixion, we might be tempted to respond to this Centurion's words with thoughts like this, "Really? You just figured this out now, 'Sherlock'? What was your first clue? Of COURSE He was the Son of God!" After reading about the words Jesus said from the cross, what He did, the manner in which He died, and finally all the miraculous signs that occurred at the time of His death we might wonder whether this Roman commander also went by the nickname, "Captain Obvious!" How on earth could anyone—especially the men who were right there at the cross closely watching, listening, and observing everything surrounding Jesus' death—miss the fact that this man who was being crucified IS the Son of God?

What we need to remember and realize is that, while this centurion and his soldiers had the benefit of being eyewitnesses to these astonishing events, we have the benefit of having the complete story written down for us—both Old and New Testament—including all the accounts and letters God inspired His men to write after Jesus had died, risen again, and ascended back into heaven.

The other thing we need to remember is that even with all the further "proof" of the astonishing events and miraculous signs at the moment of Christ's death the greatest miracle of all at that moment was the response of this centurion and his soldiers: **"Truly this was the Son of God!" (v. 54).** [This is, of course, assuming that the words of this centurion and his soldiers indicate a Spirit-worked conversion in their hearts (which seems to be what is indicated in this text, and from what Luke's Gospel says: That **"he glorified God" (Luke 23:47)** with his words.]

If that is the case, then lets take a closer look at these astonishing events that led up to the **"Powerful Words"** we are considering today:

We need to keep in mind, first of all, when considering the miraculous events that took place at Jesus' death, that these miracles from God had the same purpose as the miracles Jesus performed during His ministry. They were never done only for the purpose of proving Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah and Savior of the world. That was one of their purposes, yes, but just like every one of Jesus' miracles these miracles were not just done to "amaze" and astonish people—after all, God is not a divine

“magician” performing for an audience. No, just like all of Jesus’ miracles, the miracles that God caused to occur at His death had a specific purpose and significance and they show, not just His almighty power, but His unconditional *love* and *mercy* as well. What’s also incredible to note from our text is the fact that the way Matthew describes it indicates that these miraculous events all happened **“At that moment” (v. 51 NIV)** of Christ’s death. Coincidence? Or could it be that God was now speaking very loudly and clearly in a language of His own at the death of His Son?

1. The Tearing of the Curtain in the Temple Sanctuary

The first miraculous event that is described by Matthew needs some explanation in order to understand just how significant and how miraculous it was. First of all, this temple curtain that was **“torn in two from top to bottom” (v. 51)** was the curtain that separated the two rooms of the temple Sanctuary: The Holy Place (where only the priests were allowed) and the Holy of Holies (or “Most Holy Place,” where only the high priest was allowed to enter—and even he could only go in there on once a year to sprinkle a blood sacrifice for his sins and the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The other thing we need to know about this curtain was that we shouldn’t think of it being like the curtains that cover the windows in our homes. This was a huge, very thick, and impressively woven curtain—it was more like a “woven wall!” It has been described as being between 60 and 80 feet wide and between 20 and 30 feet high and was reportedly as thick as a man’s hand (roughly 3-4 inches thick)! This “woven wall” was **“torn in two from top to bottom” (v. 51)**! That is a miracle, people! There is no earthly or natural explanation for how or why this happened.

Well, what was the significance of this miracle? By tearing in two this “woven wall” God was declaring that the barrier between man and God (sin) had been completely removed by Jesus’ death. It also signified that God’s Old Testament (Covenant) system of priests and high priests needing to intercede with prayers and sacrifices for the people and their sins was now brought to an end (It’s also significant that many priests would have been in the temple at the time of Jesus’ death—3pm—preparing the evening sacrifices and would have no doubt witnessed this miracle for themselves). Jesus, the “Great High Priest” had now made the ultimate sacrifice once and for all. We can all now come before God since we are cleansed by the shed blood of Christ! The Bible even now describes us as being made **“kings and priests to God” (Revelation 1:6; 5:10)** because of the shed blood of the Lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice for all sins! We don’t have to guess about God’s meaning behind this miracle either, so don’t just take my word for it! God explains it for us Himself in the book of Hebrews: **“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, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:19-23 NIV)**

2. The Earthquake

This is actually the first of two miraculous earthquakes God would cause to happen during this weekend. Remember that a miraculous earthquake not only occurs here at Jesus’ death, but also at His resurrection **(Matthew 28:2 - And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it.)**. Here, on Good Friday, Matthew tells us, **“The earth shook and the rocks split” (Matt. 27:51b)**. A few verses before our text Matthew tells us that there **“was darkness over all the land” (Matthew 27:45)** for three hours (between the 6th and 9th hour, that is, from 12noon until 3pm). This means the darkness ended at the moment—or at least around the moment of Jesus’ death at 3pm—which would also have been the same time this miraculous earthquake occurred.

Can you imagine the effect this must have had on the centurion and his soldiers and all who were standing by witnessing these events? As Jesus cries out in a loud voice and gives up His spirit (**v. 50**) suddenly the sun appears once again and at the same time there is a great earthquake! Do you think God the Father was sending a message?! Of course He was! Through these astounding miracles, and with all of nature God was sending a message loud and clear: **“This is My beloved Son!”**

Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures God used earthquakes, in part, as a way to convey a “message.” There are many references in the Bible to earthquakes being a sign of God’s presence and intervention in human history. These earthquakes were used by God to especially show two things about Himself and His character:

- 1) To show His might and greatness as the God of the covenant promises He made to His people (esp. His promise to send the world a Savior, His Son, the Messiah!) (see **Psalm 68:8** and **Haggai 2:7** which even contains a reference to the coming Christ, and compare with other miraculous earthquakes in the New Testament: **Acts 4:31** and **Acts 16:26**)

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- 2) To reveal Himself as the Righteous Judge in His wrath against sin. (see **Exodus 19:18**; **2 Samuel 22:8**; and **Joel 2:10**. Compare with other earthquake references in the New Testament: **Revelation 6:12** and **8:5**)

The Jewish people who were gathered that day near Jesus’ cross and knew their Old Testament Scriptures should have especially realized God’s message in this sign. In fact, we are told in the Gospel of Luke that after Jesus had died and the earthquake and miraculous signs had occurred, **“When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.” (Luke 23:48 - NIV).**

3. The Opening of the Tombs and Resurrection of Many “Saints” (Believers)

The third and final miracle Matthew records at Jesus’ death is the most astonishing: **“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” (Matthew 27:52-53 NIV).**

What would have been the reason for this incredible miracle? Well, there are actually several reasons we can state for sure:

- † Matthew points to one of the reasons at the end of **v. 53** of our text: **“after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.”** God raised them to be very powerful and—one would assume, very convincing!—witnesses for the resurrection of Jesus. After all, it would be hard to argue with the testimony of your neighbor, for example, if you knew they had been dead for five years, but was now miraculously raised back to life at Jesus death!
- † The resurrection of these saints (believers, who are “holy ones” in God’s sight) is also a miraculous sign from God that Jesus death on the cross has conquered death! These risen saints confirm Jesus’ great victory. But notice what Matthew says in our text: Their testimony would “confirm” Jesus’ own resurrection because they did not go into Jerusalem (**“the holy city”**) until **“after Jesus’ resurrection” (v. 53)**. Jesus’ own resurrection and appearances to His people was the proof He had conquered death. The resurrection and appearances of these saints in Jerusalem would have been further confirmation of that proof.

- ✠ Finally, these resurrections at Jesus' death are meant to be miraculous confirmations of the Bible's teaching that on the Last Day, when Jesus comes again, we too will be resurrected—body and soul—from our graves and He will give to us and all believers in Christ eternal life!

These were some pretty astounding miracles and some pretty hard-to-argue-with signs from God at the moment of Jesus' death. So why then did I say earlier that the greatest miracle by far was the response of this centurion and his soldiers: "**Truly this was the Son of God!**" (v. 54)?

Well, for one, not everyone who was an eyewitness to Jesus' trial, suffering, and death came to confess and believe the very same thing as the centurion and his soldiers. In fact, for many of them the events of Good Friday (and even Easter Sunday!) only hardened them in their unbelief and made them even more bloodthirsty and blasphemous!

Secondly, think about who this centurion and these soldiers were. They were Romans, Gentiles. They were men who most likely cared nothing about the Jewish religion or the Old Testament Scriptures. They most likely looked down upon the Jewish people they had to help keep in line for the Roman government. These were hardened veterans, men of war, who were used to violence—and probably enjoyed it! They wouldn't have thought twice about abusing, whipping, and crucifying this Jesus who had claimed to be "King of the Jews." What a joke He turned out to be, they must have thought. They probably gladly joined in with the rest of the soldiers—and maybe even were the ones who started—insulting and mocking Jesus. These were the very men in charge of nailing Jesus to the cross and making sure He was put to death! Just let that fact sink in for a minute...and think of how things changed for these men over the three hours Jesus hung there on the cross!

Think of what this centurion and his soldiers would have seen and heard during those three hours on that Good Friday:

- ✠ They would have heard every one of the seven times Jesus spoke from the cross, including the words He prayed for them, His executioners! "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.**" (Luke 23:34)
- ✠ They would have seen Jesus care and concern for His mother as He placed her in the care of His beloved disciple, John (John 19:26-27).
- ✠ They would have heard Jesus promise eternal life in the paradise of heaven to the condemned criminal who was being crucified next to Him (Luke 23:43)
- ✠ They would have seen and heard Jesus' terrible anguish as He was forsaken by God the Father while He suffered the very torments of hell itself in the darkness that enveloped this scene (Matthew 27:46).
- ✠ They would have heard His final loud cries from the cross, "**Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit'**" (Luke 23:46-47) and "**It is finished!**" (John 19:30).
- ✠ They would have witnessed exactly what the Gospel writers describe at Jesus' death: Death did not overcome Jesus, He willingly "**gave up His spirit**" (Matthew 27:50). These men had, no doubt, seen many men die, but no one ever died a death like Jesus did!

Now, add all of that to the miracles Matthew records and we can see that God's message was heard loud and clear by the centurion and these men: "**This is My beloved Son!**" It's no surprise then that the Gospel writers point to both the words and actions of Jesus at His death, as well as to the miraculous signs, as the things God used to get His message into the hearts and minds of these "unlikely" converts.

The Gospel of Mark points especially to Jesus' death and the words He said and the way He died, **So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).** Matthew and Luke point to the miracles and all that had transpired that day. Luke includes the fact that this centurion also **"glorified God, saying, 'Certainly this was a righteous Man!'" (Luke 23:46-47)** What a miracle!

Well, let's not forget that the miraculous conversion God worked in our hearts is no less miraculous than the one He worked in the hearts of the centurion and his soldiers. Whether God rescued us through the miracle of the Word and Water at our Baptism, or through His Gospel message at some later time in our lives, our conversion was no less miraculous than the one He performed through His Holy Spirit in the hearts of these men who nailed Jesus to the cross. Our hearts were no "less" dead by nature than theirs. Our sins were no "less" horrible than theirs (for our sins too caused Jesus to go to that cross). Our souls needed no "less" saving than theirs either!

Therefore, God doesn't want us to miss this message today either: Through His Word and the miraculous events surrounding His Son's death He is sending us a message, loud and clear: **"This is My beloved Son!"** As we approach Holy Week and the commemoration of Jesus' suffering and death, as well as the celebration of His victory over death at His resurrection, may we always be led to proclaim with hearts of faith, **"Truly this was the Son of God!"** Amen.