

## Living Word Small Group Study Guide

July 12-18, 2020

### Sermon Series: Writing a Comeback Story

#### Week One: "It's Always Darkest Before the Dawn"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

#### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, pour out Your spirit upon Your church so that we may faithfully and constantly serve You and Your children. In the name of Christ, Amen.*

#### **Sermon Series Theme:**

As we return to worship in person, it's not a question of whether the church has survived these several months, but rather, how strong God has made us in our time apart.

#### **This Week's Sermon Theme:**

The crucifixion of Christ felt like the end of the line for the apostles. One committed suicide, most fled, and one faithful one was at the cross. They had no idea that God was about to work a wonder in their lives. Dark times are brought into the light when we have patience with God's grace.

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** Matthew 27:45-50 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

#### **For Group Discussion:**

##### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

For how long did darkness cover the land? (27:45)

What do the Aramaic words that Jesus cried out mean in English? (27:46)

What did those who heard Jesus cry out think He was doing? (27:47)

What did one of those who heard Jesus cry out offer to Him? (27:48)

What did the rest of the people present suggest watching for next? (27:49)

What did Jesus do just before dying? (27:50)

What words does Matthew use to describe the moment of Jesus' death? (27:50)

### ***What questions does the text raise for us?***

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.*

If we have a Bible that translates the actual words rather than putting it in a modern context, we might wonder what time of day the "sixth hour to the ninth hour" refers to.

We might wonder whether it literally got dark or if this is just figurative language for a time of sadness.

We probably wonder why Matthew includes the actual Aramaic words Jesus spoke at this time, when Jesus always spoke Aramaic, but they are not included in the story everywhere else.

We certainly wonder, did Jesus really feel forsaken by God? Did God actually forsake Jesus?

We probably wonder why the crowd didn't understand Jesus if He was speaking their own language – why did they think He was calling Elijah?

We could wonder why someone decided to offer Jesus wine vinegar, or why guards would allow them to do that.

We might wonder if any of the crowd actually did think Elijah might come to save Jesus.

Finally, we might wonder if Jesus' last breath was even more agonizingly painful than what He was already experiencing, since He cried out in a loud voice at that moment.

### **Commentary on the text:**

*The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.*

See also: Amos 8:9, Jeremiah 15:9; Joel 2:1-2; Zephaniah 1:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Psalm 22:5, Psalm 22:24; 2 Kings 2:11; Psalm 69:19-21; John 19:28-29; Luke 23:46

Christianity claims that Jesus' death on the cross provides salvation. In His death, Jesus, who was a perfectly righteous man, took onto Himself God's judgment against sin. Although the actual way Jesus' sacrifice accomplishes our salvation is shrouded in mystery, this is the central tenet of Christian faith, and has been the focal point of the church's worship and faith throughout its existence. Because Jesus willingly took on the sins of the world, those who accept the atoning benefit of His actions by faith are saved from suffering the natural consequences of their sin.

Matthew follows the basic outline of the story of Jesus' death given by Mark's Gospel, which was almost certainly written first. The Gospels uses the Roman system of reckoning time, which began at what we would call 6:00 a.m., so "the sixth hour" refers to noon. Beginning at that time, the land was covered in darkness. Darkness at midday was a common apocalyptic image for a time of mourning (see Amos 8:9 and Jeremiah 15:9), and darkness in general was expected to accompany the day of judgment

(see Joel 2:1-2 and Zephaniah 1:15). Here, just prior to Jesus' death, the darkness lasts for three hours, from noon to 3:00 in the afternoon. Matthew says the darkness covered "all the land," which probably means the "land of Judea," although the same word does often imply the entire earth. It cannot be determined for sure the extent of the darkness that "covered all the land" because of the various ways the word is used in the New Testament.

In the moments just before His death, Jesus calls out the devastating words that open Psalm 22 – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Matthew, the phrase is transliterated from Hebrew and Aramaic as "Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani," while in Mark's Gospel, the phrase is transliterated entirely from Aramaic – "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani," and some ancient manuscripts of Matthew have this translation as well. The difference is very slight – "Eli" instead of "Eloi," but reflects a change from the Aramaic "Eloi" to the Hebrew "Eli," both of which mean "my God." Since Jesus' everyday language was Aramaic, it would seem that Mark, the likely older of the two Gospels, records the Aramaic that Jesus actually cried out, while Matthew altered the word for "my God" to Hebrew, perhaps to make the confusion of the crowd, who thought Jesus was calling Elijah, more understandable. This would be an easy mistake for the crowd to make – Elijah's name in Greek was "Elia," and would sound very similar to a cry of "Eli" uttered with an exhalation at the end.

How exactly Jesus felt in this moment has been a topic of much theological debate. It is clear that there was a breach in the intimate relationship between God and Jesus in this moment – and that it was this breach that Jesus dreaded more than the pain of crucifixion itself. Jesus feels abandoned because the relationship *is* broken – however temporarily. Because God cannot coexist with sin, when Jesus took sin upon himself, it was necessary first for God to depart. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21 "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." For Jesus to *become* the sin-bearing sacrifice, He first had to endure the temporary abandonment of His Father. As difficult as it is for us to imagine such a separation from God, it is truly impossible for us to fathom how Jesus, the Son of God, must have felt. When we consider Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we often think of His bodily sacrifice, which is of course horrific. But Jesus' willingness to endure this separation from God is perhaps the greater sacrifice. It is perhaps important to note that Psalm 22, the beginning of which Jesus quotes in His despair, is also a psalm of trust in God in spite of despair (see Psalm 22:5), and ends on a note of vindication (see Psalm 22:24).

The bystanders also likely misunderstood Jesus' cry because there was a common expectation that Elijah, who had not died but been carried away in a whirlwind (see 2 Kings 2:11), would come to the rescue of a righteous person who was in need and cried out to Him. They thought they heard Jesus cry out Elijah's name, so they stood back and waited to see if Elijah would indeed come to His rescue. Most likely, in their worldview, for that to happen would serve as proof that Rome had crucified a righteous man, and it is possible that some of them viewed Jesus as such. One of them, out of pity, offers Jesus wine vinegar on a sponge at the end of a stick – an incident that is probably included in the narrative due to the parallel between the events that occurred and Psalm 69:19-21. In his Gospel, John specifically calls this occurrence the fulfillment of Scripture (see John 19:28-29).

Jesus' actual final moment is described very simply – "when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up His spirit." Some scholars equate this final cry with Jesus' words "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" from Luke 23:46, but this is not necessarily what Matthew implies. For Matthew, it is simply another loud cry, similar to His first, expressing His dying agony. Due to the difficulty of

translating the final phrase of our passage, which the NIV renders “He gave up His spirit,” and that the NRSV translates “He breathed His last,” the CEB says, very simply, “He died.” The difficulty of the passage lies in the fact that the Greek word “pneuma” can be translated either “spirit” or “breath.” It is clear that the passage is meant to convey the fact that at that moment, Jesus died. At the very least, the phrase means that Jesus stopped breathing. It is possible that the common Greek idea of the spirit departing the physical body is in view, but this is unlikely given the orthodox Jewish rejection of this concept. What is clear is that Jesus did, in fact, die on the cross.

At this moment, no one had the slightest notion of the miracle God was about to work. Historically, the church has found it meaningful to mourn in the darkness of Jesus’ death from Good Friday, through Holy Saturday, until sunrise on Easter morning. By living in the sadness of Jesus’ sacrificial death for those three days, the church attempts to experience, at some inadequate level, the forsakenness that our Savior experienced in the moments before His death.

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

When have you felt forsaken by God? How does the fact that Jesus, the very Son of God, felt forsaken by God impact you?

Recognize that Jesus felt forsaken because He bore your sins. You do not need to bear anyone’s sin, even your own, so there is no need for your relationship with God to ever be broken. Even though you might feel forsaken, God is present with you and for you. In fact, it is Christ’s willingness to endure separation from God that ensures your eternal relationship with God!

How does the gap in time between Jesus’ death and resurrection demonstrate our need to wait patiently for God’s grace? Are you able to do that?

The fact of Jesus’ resurrection is the demonstration of the validity of hope. What helps you to hold onto hope even in the darkest times?

What do you do when hope is hard to hold on to?

Are you able to mourn and lament and cry out to God when it feels like all is lost? When was the most recent time you did so? Did you come through that experience with more hope, or with more despair? What response from you do you think either of those reactions should entail?

### **Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy God, we cannot bear the darkness. We cannot begin to imagine the suffering that Jesus underwent for our salvation. In times of sadness, in times of difficulty, in times of doubt, help us to hold on to the hope we have in Jesus. Help us to remember that it is always darkest before the dawn, and that, most assuredly, dawn is coming! We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, Amen.*