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Rick Myatt

TAKE A RIDE INTO THE DANGER ZONE Matthew 27

Nabeel Qureshi is a former Muslim who is now a follower of Jesus. She wrote a book titled *No God But One* that tells her story. In it she relates what happened with her Muslim friend named Sahar. She liked some parts of Christianity, but she couldn't accept the idea of Allah, the one true God, becoming a man. She asked how anyone could believe Jesus was God if he was given birth through the birth canal of a woman and had to use the bathroom. Such things are beneath holy God.

Nabeel acknowledged these were valid concerns, but then said this: "Sahar, let's say that you are on your way to a very important ceremony and are dressed in your finest clothes. But then you see your daughter drowning in a pool of mud. What would you do? Let her drown so you could arrive looking dignified, or rescue her even though it meant you arrive at the ceremony covered in mud?" Sahar said, "Of course I would jump in the mud and save her." So Qureshi pressed on. "Let's say there were others with you. Would you send one of them to save your daughter, or would you save her yourself?" Sahar answered, "How could I send anyone else. They would not care for her like I do. I would go myself, definitely."

Nabeel then said, "If you, being human, love your daughter so much that you are willing to lay aside your dignity to save her, how much more can we expect God, if he is our loving Father, to lay aside his majesty to save us?" Sahar finally yielded and put her faith in Jesus. Nabeel wrote, "The message of God's selfless love had overpowered her...and she accepted Jesus as her Savior."

The life of Jesus is the embodiment of selfless love. Today we will see the climax of the selfless love of God. It is a message that should overpower us as well. Let's look at Matthew 27.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW JUDAS KILLED HIMSELF

The story of Judas is tragic from beginning to end. He was chosen by Jesus to be one of his 12 closest disciples. He had the opportunity to obey God and to be one of history's great heroes. Instead, he became one of the worst villains of all time. We really don't know what his motivation was, other than he was driven by money. Perhaps he was disillusioned by Jesus' attacks against the religious leaders

or by his refusal to become a political leader. It seems apparent that he had concluded that Jesus was not the Messiah he had hoped for. It appears that he didn't take seriously Jesus' warnings that he would be killed. When he heard that the religious leaders' plan was to make sure Jesus was killed by the Romans he was shocked and dismayed. But it was too late, the deed was done. When he realized what he had done he could not deal with the guilt, so he took his own life.

JESUS WAS TRIED BY PILATE

Jesus was hustled off to appear before the local Roman ruler, a man named Pontius Pilate. Despite their attempts to curry his favor in this story, the ancient Jews hated this man. Not only did he represent a foreign oppressing power, but he had already proven to be brutal and cruel. They despised him because of the violence he had already inflicted on Jewish people. But they hated Jesus more than they hated Pilate, so if they had to manipulate and use the Roman in order to get rid of Jesus, then so be it.

Pilate wasn't interested in what he considered trivial theological debates between Jews. He was astounded that Jesus refused to defend himself. Jesus could have mounted a vigorous defense and quite possibly even won Pilate over, but if he did so he would not have accomplished what he was on earth to do. So he let it happen without saying a word. Had Jesus insisted on avoiding being executed he had ways to do that. In Matthew 26:53 after one of his disciples pulled out a sword in a feeble attempt to protect the Master, Jesus told him to put it away and said, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legion of angels?" A Roman legion at that time numbered 5000, so 12 legions would be 60,000 angels. Yeah, pretty sure if 60,000 angels showed up court would have adjourned immediately. Jesus had the opportunity and the ability to stop the madness, but he deliberately did not. That's because this was what he was on earth to do. The focal point of his entire life was dying for the human race.

Pilate may have been cruel, but he wasn't stupid. He saw right through the religious leaders. He knew that Jesus was innocent, and that the leaders were prosecuting him because of their own agenda. Pilate's wife sent word to him saying, "Don't have anything to do that innocent man." She had a dream in which she said she suffered terribly because of him.

However, Pilate was not primarily about justice. He was mostly concerned about power. He wanted the influential leaders of Israel to not cause him difficulty. He knew if he freed Jesus those men would and could create great grief for him. So in

order to get what he wanted, which was to protect his position and keep the locals at bay, he agreed to have Jesus crucified. He Jesus didn't deserve that fate, but he was all about the bottom line. Pilate needed to have things go smoothly in Judea, and if that required executing a random Jew, then that was what he would do.

JESUS WAS EXECUTED ON A CROSS

Jesus was brutally beaten and was mocked by the Roman soldiers. It was common custom to torture a man condemned to be crucified. In Jesus' case he was so severely beaten that it was highly likely he would have died even without the cross. But Roman soldiers had a job to do and they were good at it. They had to make sure Jesus was executed in the most public and appalling way possible. He was strapped and nailed to the familiar wooden cross. That was raised to a vertical position, and he hung on that terrible thing for 6 hours, from 9 in the morning until he finally died at 3 PM. Throughout his time on the cross he was subjected to taunting and mocking. Hey he doesn't look much like a king to me. Hey, he's supposed to be so powerful, but he can't save himself. Roman executioners verified that Jesus was dead.

JESUS DIED AND WAS BURIED

Jesus' body was taken down from that cross and claimed by one of Jesus' followers, a wealthy man named Joseph. It's interesting to note that Matthew mentions that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there when Jesus' body was put into the tomb. No mention of Peter, James, John, Andrew or any of the other disciples.

Jesus' opponents went to Pilate and asked him to post a guard on the tomb where they put Jesus' body. Verse 63 says they told Pilate, "We remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.'" Jesus' disciples somehow seemed to never get what he was saying, but his opponents were very clear about it, so they made sure the tomb was sealed and guarded against any shenanigans. They weren't worried that he would actually do it, they were worried that his followers would take his body and claim that he was risen.

There are some things we need to pay particular attention to.

CRUCIFIXION WAS HORRIFYING

You no doubt know this, but putting someone on a cross was brutal, ugly and inhumanly cruel. Just think of how it felt to have nails driven through hands and feet. These were not finely machined sharp nails. They were crude iron spikes

whose tips only vaguely approximated a point. They had to be driven through flesh and bone by blunt force.

I'm not as squeamish as some, but I admit I'm not a big fan of needles. Last year after our nocturnal encounter with a bat Laurie and I learned that we had to get rabies shots. All my life I've heard horror stories about rabies shots, but all the medical people assured us they have a new protocol and it is way better. You have the shots in your arm and they are like any other shot. What they didn't tell us at first was that we had to get a series of 8 of them. They also didn't tell us we had to have 5 at one time on the first day. Surprisingly they weren't bad at all, except for one of them. Included in that 5 was a gamma globulin shot. As soon as I saw that one I thought it might be different. It was. Man that one hurt. A lot. But here's the thing: those were all done with very small, very sharp needles. I can't imagine the horror of having blunt iron spikes not just driven into you, but all the way through hands and feet.

That was just the beginning. A victim of crucifixion usually died by asphyxiation, although shock and blood loss could also kill them. Hanging with arms out like that squeezes the lungs so victims couldn't breathe. So they would push up with their legs and pull with their arms to open their lungs and get a breath. But quickly in their weakened state their muscles would spasm painfully and they would have to drop back down to relieve the pain and the spasms. This entire process was intensely painful, but it could go on for many hours and in some cases for days.

The Romans had several methods of executing prisoners. Crucifixion was the worst. It was created by some twisted minds as a deterrent. I'm pretty sure it was the brainchild of the kind of people who tortured little animals when they were young. It was used on people the Romans considered terrorists. The idea was it was so horrifying that it would keep anyone from even contemplating rebellion against Rome. Dr. Donald Carson, the noted scholar, professor and author, says, "Crucifixion was so associated with...all that is despicable that children were told they shouldn't talk about these things, and parents were exhorted never to mention these things in front of their children."

We hang crosses on our church walls and wear them on necklaces. We have some sense that the cross was a frightening, cruel and brutal thing, but we tend to not think very much about it. But we need to grasp that the real thing was repulsive, terrifying and insanely cruel.

What is even more important to notice is that the shame and physical pain of that day was not even the worst part for Jesus. The worst part shows up in verse 46 where Jesus screamed the Aramaic words, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” which meant, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Being ridiculed, mocked and despised would have been extremely difficult. Notice that the Roman soldiers spit on Jesus. Is there anything more insulting than that? But that wasn’t what finally hurt Jesus the most. What hurt the most was that it felt to him like his own heavenly Father, who had loved him eternally, had turned his back on him.

Theologians have debated the exact significance of those words from Jesus for centuries. Did Jesus lose faith? Was he angry at the Father because he let him experience such unimaginable pain? There is a sense in which we can never truly understand those words, for they come right out of the mystery of the character of God existing as a triune being, and out of the mysteries of his divine plan and will. But there is a sense in which the words do ring true for us.

Jesus did not lose faith. Psalm 22 is a messianic Psalm. Listen to how it begins. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” Jesus was quoting Scripture while dying. He was essentially laying claim to those verses, saying he was fulfilling prophetic Scripture!

In John 12:23-24 Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” What was he saying? He was saying it was time for him to be glorified, but he would do it by dying! That was the plan all along.

But he knew how awful it would be. In verse 27 he said, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.” Observe that his soul was troubled. For Jesus not to be troubled would mean he was not human. And on the cross he felt every ounce of the pain, distress, shame and horror of that moment. It indeed felt like the Father had totally hung him out to dry. Jesus was pouring out his emotion, but doing so in a way that fulfilled prophecy!

Jesus was experiencing having all of the horror and ugliness of all the sin, all the wrong, all the evil of the entire human race for all time, placed on him as though it were his fault. It was as though he was being told, “You deserve this, because all of

this horror is yours.” Recently we were caring for our little granddaughters. Anna told us that the 2 days prior to the day we took care of them Ella had foregone taking her midday nap. Not good news for Mom and Dad. But on our day Ella went to nap time willingly and with no complaint. However, a few minutes later she was out of her room and she called to Laurie, “Nana, I have a stinky butt.” That’s her descriptive term for a dirty diaper. And man was it dirty. Stinky indeed. Doing all she could to suppress her gag reflex Laurie took the diaper off, then handed it to me and said, “Go dump the contents of this into the toilet then put the diaper in the trash.” My gag reflex was in full deployment. That was one disgusting, gross chore. The smell, the sight of that stuff was almost more than I could take. Now, imagine someone coming along and dumping out the contents of a million cesspools including the contents of millions of dirty diapers, and adult...uh...stuff too, on your head. That would be pleasant compared to what Jesus felt that day.

None of us likes rejection, but we’ve all experienced it. It certainly is a part of serving in ministry. It always feels bad when someone says they don’t like what you do or who you are. But imagine what it would feel like if Laurie did that. That would be in a completely different league. A rejection from her would be painful beyond words. Jesus was feeling like his loving Father, who cherished him from eternity to eternity, was rejecting him. And that hurt more deeply and powerfully than anything we can ever understand.

This atrocity, this horror begs the question, why? Why did this have to happen to Jesus? Was God, in fact, powerless to stop it? Or is the idea that God can act in history, or maybe even that he exists at all, simply not true? The biographies of Jesus tell us that these terrifying events were no accident, that in fact it was the whole point of Jesus’ life. It was the plan all along. So why was it the plan? Why did this have to happen?

JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION OPENED THE WAY FOR US

There is an easy to overlook incident that is recorded in Matthew 27. In verses 50-51 it says, “When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom.” Doesn’t that seem like an odd thing to record? Momentous things were happening. Jesus had just died. The passage goes on to say that a massive earthquake hit right at that moment, and that tombs broke open, and dead people came out of some of them. That’s huge stuff. And Matthew leads with, “A curtain tore apart.” Wow, that’s a big deal. I know how expensive window coverings are,

and what a pain they can be to put up. But still, curtains are kind of in a different league than earthquakes aren't they?

This was not just any curtain. The curtain in question screened off the Most Holy Place in the temple. This was where the ark of the covenant was kept before Indiana Jones found it. It contained Israel's holiest objects, the 10 Commandments, as well as a jar of manna. It represented the very presence of God. God had ordained that no one was allowed to enter into the Most Holy Place, the Inner Sanctum. Once a year the high priest was allowed to enter to make atonement for the people. No one else was permitted to enter.

The curtain that screened off that holiest of places was, according to ancient Jewish sources, huge and as thick as a person's hand. It was so heavy that it required 300 men to lift it into place. Somehow, the moment Jesus died, with no apparent external force acting upon it, that massive curtain ripped apart from top to bottom. A few months ago before Laurie and I went on a trip that involved a several hour long flight we bought some new headphones. Trying to open the packaging that contained them involved a frustration that I know you are familiar with. They package things like that these days in plastic that is indestructible. Have you noticed this? Why do they do that? These were not some highly valuable, expensive items. They cost about \$40. But the way they were protected you'd have thought they were the British crown jewels. As I tried to open them it occurred to me that the Army should forget about Kevlar and start making body armor for soldiers out of that plastic. Nothing can even dent it. It requires a small nuclear device to blow open those packages.

What would you think if you bought something that was enclosed in that undefeatable plastic and as you looked at the package your heart sank as you contemplated how to open it, but before your eyes the plastic suddenly, with no provocation, just broke open? All by itself! You would think it a miracle, wouldn't you? The moment Jesus died that massive curtain in the temple at Jerusalem, seemingly all by itself, just ripped apart from top to bottom. No person could have torn that massive, thick curtain apart. You would have had to hack away at that thing with a sword to rip it apart. But all on its own it just tore wide open. That was an amazing thing, a miracle, but it is what that symbolized that is of much more importance. Suddenly there was nothing more in place to block entry to the holy place. The way into the very presence of God was now wide open.

To grasp the importance of this we need to ask why that curtain had existed in the first place. Why was no one allowed into the presence of God to begin with? Doesn't God want people to come to him? The Bible says that God is seeking people, trying to bring them to him, so why would he then say, "but you can't actually come to my presence"?

It is common for people to sort of picture God as a kindly old gentleman who is delighted to have anyone drop by and visit him. His door is always open. He's just glad anyone wants to see him. The Bible says that nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, God seeks to have his people be near him, but there is a huge problem. It is that God is holy. 1 Samuel 2:2 says, "There is no one holy like the Lord." He is uniquely holy. He is the holiest being that exists. Psalm 22:3 says to him, "You are enthroned as the Holy One." As that verse shows holiness is so ingrained in God's character that it became a nickname for him.

In fact, the Bible claims that God is almost scary holy. In Isaiah 6 the prophet tells us he was given a glimpse of God in his holiness and his reaction was, "Oh waffles, I'm screwed." Okay, that's not exactly what our translation says. The NIV quotes Isaiah as claiming that he said, "Woe is me, I am ruined." I bet that's not what he really said. I'm pretty sure he cleaned that up and what he really said was more than a bit stronger than that. He just wanted to communicate to the entire family, you know what I mean?

All right, but why is holiness scary? To be holy is to be separate, apart. In the case of God it is because he is separate in the sense of being unlike anyone else, but also because he is completely apart from evil. Psalm 92:15 says, "The Lord is upright. He is my rock, and there is no wickedness in him." 1 John 1:5 says, "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all." Hear those words. There is no darkness at all. There is zero evil. There is not even the slightest taint of it. He is 100% pure, unadulterated good. He is absolute good.

That creates a problem for us. Here's the question. Can God be truly good and accept evil? Laurie and I were at the beach when I noticed a family arrive. Mom and Dad led the way trailed by their two boys. Dad was serving as a pack mule, but everyone was laden with the necessary paraphernalia for a visit to the beach. As they got there it was obvious a disagreement had arisen between big brother and little brother over a certain beach toy. Big brother had simply yanked it away from little brother. Little brother had it, big brother wanted, so he took it. Little brother tried to reclaim what he felt was rightfully his, but instead big brother, employing

his greater size and strength not only fended him off, but actually shoved him down onto the sand. Maybe it's because I grew up as the little brother, but I personally found this offensive. I watched, hoping that Mom and Dad would intervene. Fortunately they did. Big brother was properly scolded and the toy was returned to little brother. Here's my question: would you have considered Mom and Dad good if they had observed that evil action and done nothing?

Absolutely not. True goodness demanded that they deal with evil. True good cannot compromise even slightly with evil. If true good permits even a hint of evil, then it is no longer truly good. So now we begin to see the problem. The question is, do we have any evil in us? Is there in you even the tiniest hint of evil? Maybe you are 99.99% good, although I dare say none of us would probably claim that. But if we did we are left with .01% evil in us. How much evil can holy God, a truly pure good God, tolerate? The answer must be zero!

Imagine some hideous chemical weapon, perhaps a nerve gas so powerful that even a drop of it could wipe out an entire city. How much of that nerve gas would you be willing to expose your family to? I'm pretty sure that you would do everything in your power to make sure that not even a hundredth of a gram comes within miles of anyone in your family. The Bible says that evil is like that nerve gas. It is so potent, so powerfully destructive that even the tiniest hint of it in us will eventually cause unimaginable pain, suffering and destruction for us and for others. We like to sort of dismiss that, to think our evil is a small peccadillo, not a big deal, that it won't hurt anyone. But the truth is, evil is inherently ruinous, and at some point, somewhere, maybe years down the road, in ways we can't even imagine maybe in a future generation, that evil will do great harm.

You don't believe me? Do you remember the garden of Eden? Adam and Eve lived in a perfect environment. It was gorgeous. It was peaceful. It was abundant. I am certain it was tropical, minus some of the bugs. They had fruit in abundance. God said, "All of this is yours. Help yourself. Enjoy yourself. Indulge in all of it. Oh, except there is this one tree. Just don't eat that tree's fruit. Everything else is yours, just leave that one alone." You know the story. Eve didn't leave that tree alone. She just had to try that fruit. Here's my question: how horrible was that? Hey, it was one piece of fruit. It wasn't that big of a deal. She didn't kill anyone. She didn't lie to anyone. She didn't cheat on her husband. She didn't do anything bad to anybody. It was a really small evil, not worth noting at all. But here's what irks me. I am getting old. I hurt when I get up in the morning. My eyes don't work nearly as well as they used to. Stuff is breaking in my body. I can't believe what I

look like in pictures. I see pictures of myself from 30 years ago and wonder what happened to that guy. And all of these things are telling me I'm going to die some day. And all of that, all the aging, all the pain, all the death, happens because of that little tiny evil choice that one woman made so long ago.

So now we understand why there was a barrier that kept people from entering into the presence of God. God wanted them to come to him. They wanted to be in his presence. But for us humans to come into the presence of the Holy One was deadly. Isaiah was right. Woe to us, in God's presence. We would be ruined. It would be worse than walking up to a functioning nuclear reactor and giving it a big hug. In today's world God would have put up barriers even more rigorous than those at a level 4 biological weapons laboratory.

I read an article this week about the sequel that is being made to the classic movie, Top Gun. Tom Cruise will be back in the role of Maverick. I think the opening scene of that movie was one of the best ever. It showed flight operations on the deck of a carrier, then as one of the planes launched the soundtrack played Kenny Loggins' song Danger Zone. Take a ride into the danger zone. It could have been the theme song for the Holy One, for trying to come into his presence was stepping into the danger zone. Actually it was stepping into the lethal zone. God, to be good, had to protect his creation from your deadly evil.

When Jesus died suddenly the way was clear. The doors to the lab are opened, the way into the very presence of God is completely unobstructed, because for the first time in history, it was safe for anyone and everyone to come right into the presence of God. We can take a ride into the danger zone. How can that be? Don't we still have evil in us? We do, but for God to be good he must deal with the evil. He did when Jesus died on that cross. Our evil was assigned to him. Have you ever wondered why Jesus had to be crucified? Why couldn't God have waited until maybe the 1800's and have him just be executed by a firing squad if he had to die? This is just my speculation, but I think it's because we needed to see the horror of our evil. The point is God punished our evil and made it possible for it to someday be totally eradicated from us. We will be completely free of it.

IMPLICATIONS

There are so many implications of the cross that I could spend the rest of my life discussing them. The cross impacts everything we are and do. But I will limit myself to highlighting a few today as a way of applying this passage to us.

ENTER JOYFULLY INTO GOD'S PRESENCE

Hebrews 10:19 says, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus." We have confidence to boldly go where no one has gone before Jesus. We are invited to happily, confidently walk right into God's presence. Verse 22 says, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."

Christians often struggle with feeling undeserving. But our best day what we *deserve* from God is condemnation, rejection and obliteration. Can we remove every single hint of evil from us? No, we can't. The only reason we can come before God is that Jesus Christ died on a cross for us. That's it. We can add nothing to that, and nothing can ever subtract from it.

There are two options for coming into the presence of holy God. Either you must be pure good, utterly free from even a hint of evil, or you must come in Christ, relying 100% on what he did for us and nothing else. If you are in Christ, God wants you to come freely and joyfully to him, to live with him every moment of every day, to revel in his presence, and the reason you can has nothing to do with how good or faithful you are. It is because of Jesus. That's it.

LET GO OF PRIDE

I have known Christians who have been offended by what others have done to them or said about them. Maybe they have been hurt or feel they have been treated unfairly. Then they hold on to that hurt. They feel justified and resentful. How does that look in light of the cross? You're offended? Somebody hurt you? You were treated unfairly? Well waaa. Have you noticed that Jesus was tortured and crucified because of you? Was that fair? Do you think that hurt him?

We try so hard to prove we are something important, something good. Here's the truth about us: we are such a mess that the Son of God had to live in the squalor of this slum of a world, be beaten, spit upon, tortured and executed in the most horrifying way to save us. I'd say in light of that pretty much anything we do, anything we think we are, is a joke. So we need to let go of all of that and rejoice in God's love for us.

DON'T MESS WITH EVIL

The cross shouts to us, “This is what evil produces.” Evil is potent beyond our ability to imagine. Even the tiniest bit of it is massively destructive to us and others. So we need to fear it the way we might fear something highly radioactive. Don’t even get close to it. Stay as far from it as we possibly can.

TRUST GOD ALWAYS

When you remember the cross you should always remember that this is the length God went to in order to rescue you. He cares about you that much. Nothing would stop him from saving you from a horror that is of your own making. If he was willing to go to that extreme, do you really think that in some much lesser thing he’s going to say, “Sorry, that’s a bridge too far. I helped you with that sin and condemnation thing, but now you’re asking too much. I can’t help you.”

Years ago before Carissa and Michael were married Carissa went to Japan to visit him when he was deployed there as Marine aviator. But things didn’t work very smoothly for her. It turned out that she needed to move from one apartment to another and the date of the move was while she was going to be in Japan. But Laurie and I love her dearly. So we agreed to move her stuff for her while she was gone. I hate moving. I can’t tell you how much I hate moving. But we did it. It was hard. Michael’s car was parked at her apartment while he was deployed and we had to move that, which wouldn’t be a problem except the battery died. Because the battery was dead the electric door locks wouldn’t work. It was a real headache. But we did the whole thing. Do you think after she got home she would have said, “I need some help hanging a couple of pictures in my house, but I can’t ask Mom and Dad. They’ll probably think that’s too much to ask.” Are you kidding? We moved all her stuff, when I hate moving! Hang a picture or two? That’s child’s play. Of course we would do that.

Jesus was crucified for you. Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” Exactly. In light of the cross we can trust God with anything and everything in our lives.

