

Matthew 27:50 After Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

Force Majeure. That didn't take too long. Force majeure is attorney talk and insurance people talk. For insurance companies whom some would cynically say only have two jobs: collecting premiums and contesting claims. And attorneys, whom some would say are just out to make themselves money while making it look like they are helping someone else. Well, they are feverishly working to see if Covid-19 could be considered a *force majeure*. It's a kind of technical term, literally meaning a superior force or greater force. Something not reasonably foreseen that takes away responsibility or ability for fulfilling some kind of contractual obligations. You and I probably know them better as "acts of God." So, for example, if a tornado or flood or earthquake is what caused the damage, then the insurance company might not have to pay for it. So would this pandemic fit under that category? When some big catastrophe occurs, is it an "act of God"? Can we really say that God caused it? Hurricanes, famines, pandemics that take many lives: how much of it is the will of God? And how much of it is just nature and physics? When there is a big catastrophe, some take it as a wake-up call from God. A jarring pronouncement that people weren't supposed to keep on living their same sinful lives. Now when Jesus talked about two disasters that killed a bunch of people – one of them accidental, the other intentional – he taught that the victims were not more guilty than everyone else, but that everyone should take stock of his own sinfulness before God and repent. So, when disaster, natural or otherwise, strikes is it the people's fault for being so sinful, for forgetting about God? Is it God personally shaking things up? Or is it just another thing wrong in a sin-ruined world; another sign of the impending end.

We can't always tell. The Bible clearly presents God as all-knowing and all-powerful. And the Psalmist tells us, "Our God is in the heavens. He does everything that pleases Him." But then it just as clearly tells us sin and its results don't please God at all. So which is it? When terrible things happen, is God responsible? He's so angry and harsh that He's causing all of it. Or if it happens against His will, is He that powerless? But either of those questions is invalid. Like the old attorney trick: "So, have you stopped beating your wife?" It's begging the question, only leaving a bad answer. And with God, it's sinful. Maybe we can't always answer the question as to how involved God is when bad things happen. But we can go as far as He has revealed in His Word. And actually this single verse of our text tonight does give the answer. As we see the Wondrous Love of Jesus... In giving up His life.

Now certainly that couldn't have been according to God's will, could it? Certainly His Word tells us He is not the author of evil. His ways are always just and right and holy. It's not His will that any should sin. And yet look at all the sin and evil involved in this crucifixion. The man on the middle cross was suffering the greatest injustice ever. He was being tortured and executed as an innocent man. In fact more than a man, as Peter would later tell some of these spectators, "You disowned the Holy and Righteous One... You killed the Author of life." At a time when the sun had stopped shining for three hours, the greatest darkness was the evil Jesus had pointed out to His captors: "But this is your hour – when darkness rules." It sure seemed as if God and His will had no say throughout this ugly event. That sin held the upper hand on that first Good Friday.

Just look at the spiteful crowd. Disappointed that the Jesus they had sung "Hosanna" to a few days earlier turned out not to be the military Messiah or politician Messiah or entertainer Messiah or social reformer Messiah they were hoping for. And now they are so cruel as they add their taunts and insults to Jesus' suffering. And the Roman soldiers who so callously crucified this innocent One after they had had their fun at His expense, mocking Him and beating Him. Pontius Pilate, whose charge to uphold justice fell by the wayside as he washed his hands with water and tried to shrug off his part in going against God. Or the ringleaders, the Jewish religious leaders who had hated Jesus

so much from the time His ministry had begun: jealous of His ability to expound the Scriptures instead of the personal ramblings on opinions and traditions that their preaching was made up of. They hated Him for exposing their sinfulness and proving how powerless they were to do anything to remedy their broken relationship with God.

It was all sin. Sin against God. That was the reason for Jesus being on the cross. And not just Pilate's or the soldiers' or the high priest's or the mob's sins. As God had St. Paul write to the Romans, "He was handed over to death because of OUR trespasses, OUR SINS..." Like that hymn verse, "If you think of sin by lightly Nor suppose the evil great, Here you see its nature rightly, Here its guilt may estimate." Those little white lies that we say *everyone* tells. Those lustful thoughts that we rationalize *everyone* has. The selfishness. Those spiteful, hurtful things we say. The opportunities to help or serve others that we'd do if "we just weren't so busy." The jumping to conclusions that doesn't take each other's words and actions in the kindest possible way. And every other one of those violations of God's holy will that we seem to be so skillful in making excuses for or brushing off as no big deal. It's all against God's will. It's all sin.

Of course this was against the will of God who can't stand evil or injustice or sin. And this was His beloved Son, as He had stated before, the Son with whom He was well pleased. And yet what happened to His beloved Son was the worst thing that could possibly happen to anyone. As much as people in the middle of hardship or suffering, and probably we included, have thought, "Oh, this is the worst thing that could ever happen to me." They or we must not know all the alternatives then. Because no one could really, honestly say that. Well, except Jesus. He did face something so awful that it could truthfully be said nothing worse could possibly have happened to Him. Far worse than the hatred of His enemies, the betrayal and denial, the taunting and whipping and rigged trials, far worse than even the torture of the crucifixion itself. Here our text tells us, "when Jesus cried out AGAIN with a loud voice..." He had already yelled out before. And what Jesus had screamed out before, were those frightful, haunting words of Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" An agony beyond understanding. For the Son of God who had never done anything wrong, to not only feel the weight of all people's guilt, but to suffer the literal hell of everyone's punishment from God. Because what Jesus was doing up there on the cross was all about sin and its consequences – all against God's will. But what Jesus was doing up there on the cross was also all about love. The love that caused God the Son to put Himself in our shoes, becoming man to offer the Almighty a perfect life with no sinful thoughts or words, no actions against the Almighty's will, no opportunities for love or service missed. And then to offer for all of us who have sinned and do sin against the will of God, to offer Himself as the sacrifice that settled all accounts.

Which means this worst thing to happen to Jesus, it's the best thing to happen to us. Because, even though it was sin, sin that is completely against the will of God, that brought about the death of Jesus that day. Yet in the most wondrous love of all, Jesus gave up His life in accordance with God's will. Remember in the garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed for any other way to accomplish this, but ended with, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to pass from me unless I drink it, may your will be done." And since there was no other way for sin to be paid for, no other way for sinners to be saved. Jesus went through with it, according to God's will. As the prophet Isaiah had foretold 700 years before the fact, "Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and to allow him to suffer... the LORD made his life a guilt offering..." Even though it was sinful men with sinful intentions accusing and convicting and crucifying the Lord, it was all in accordance with God's will to save us. So as the familiar saying goes, it wasn't the nails that held Jesus to the cross, it was love. The love that followed through on His plan of salvation.

No wonder those mobs were never able to kill Jesus before when they had wanted to stone Him or push Him off the cliff. No wonder Jesus was sentenced and crucified during the Passover celebrations even though the religious leaders wanted to wait for a better time. And no wonder God's holy Word tells us here, "after Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, He gave up His spirit." As He had said of His life in John 10, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own." After shouting out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me," as He was enduring the actual hell of separation from God. After shouting out, "It is finished!" for all the world to hear. Christ's statement of statements proclaiming that He had looked from the first sinner to the last and everyone in between and had seen that there was no one for whom He had not completely settled accounts with the Almighty. No one for whom He had not provided full and free forgiveness. Which, by the way, is the answer for those who tell you they want to "get saved" or to do something to make sure they have salvation. You can tell them, "Sorry, you're too late. Your salvation was completed a long time ago by Jesus. It is a finished work. You can't do anything to be saved. It's a free gift."

For what Jesus called out so loud and clear, not in the feeble whisper of a man getting weaker and weaker until the last ounce of life oozes out of him. But in a strong victorious shout, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." Payment has been made in full. No longer is He forsaken. Now, it's back to "Father." Things are all right between Jesus and the Father. Which of course is vital for us. Because Jesus was taking our place. That was our punishment, our hell, He suffered. And it was our reconciliation He enjoyed. If things were fine between the Father and our Substitute, they are also fine between God and us. All according to the plan and will of God. And Jesus "gave up his spirit." He willingly gave up His life.

And that is what answers all the questions. It puts to rest the protests and arguments, that we have no place starting in the first place. See, first of all, when we are questioning God, we are in over our heads. We are out of our league, as God pointed out for Jeremiah, saying, "If you have raced men on foot and they have tired you out, how will you compete against horses?" But more importantly, what Jesus was doing up there on the cross puts all the questions to rest. All those questions about the will of God and His grace and love versus His justice and holiness; here's where it all comes together. In Jesus giving up His life. In the cross of Christ, and only in the cross of Christ are justice and mercy, law and gospel brought together and reconciled. Only there in Christ giving up His life on the cross. And that means nothing is as ridiculous as wondering whether God loves us or not, whether a difficulty or disaster in our lives is Him getting back at us for something. We might not understand fully how that fits into God's plan and will. But we know we have forgiveness and eternal life. And a God who always does what is right for us. Whether we can understand all His will and involvement or not. Because in Jesus, He has proven His love for us beyond any doubt. In fact, 1 John 3:16 tells us, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us." We know the Savior who gave His life for us in wondrous love. And we know for sure that is an "act of God." Thank God. Amen.