

**“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”**

**Matthew 27:45-50**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

Smoke Rise Baptist Church

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8:30 Service

After twenty-four hours of being trapped, he realized two things. He was going to die and die alone. In his book, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, Aron Ralston describes one of the most extraordinary survival stories ever told. For six days, he was trapped in a remote canyon in Utah. What started out as a simple hike on a warm Saturday afternoon ended up being six days of brutal torture.

Aron Ralston, a twenty-seven year old outdoorsman and mechanical engineer was hiking the Blue John Canyon when an eight hundred pound boulder became dislodged, pinning his right hand and wrist against the canyon wall. He had twenty-two ounces of water, little food and no jacket for the painfully cold nights.

For six days, he tried chipping away or moving the rock while hoping someone would come along to rescue him. Exhausted and near death, Aron realized on the sixth day of captivity that the only way he was going to survive was to cut his arm off. He did and lived to tell the story.

Throughout his ordeal, I was struck by his sense of loneliness. Let me read an excerpt from his book.

“I am irreversibly trapped, standing in the dimly lit bottom of a canyon, unable to move more than a few inches up or down, side to side. Compounding my physical circumstances, no one who will suspect I am missing knows where I am. I violated the prime directive of wilderness travel in failing to leave a detailed trip plan with a responsible person. Still eight miles from my truck, I am alone in an infrequently visited place with no means to contact anyone outside the fifty-yard throw of my voice. I am alone in a situation that could very shortly prove to be fatal.”

Do you think Jesus had similar feelings of abandonment? I do. While he was surrounded by people, he died alone. No one was there to help him, even God, and his feelings erupted like a volcano when he said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This has to be the most staggering question in the Bible. How can anyone read it and not be touched? How can anyone study it and not be awed? There is enough mystery in this heartfelt question to fuel endless hours of speculation. What can I add to the discussion today?

Let me begin by saying that I am aware that the simplest explanation of what Jesus was doing was quoting the beginning of Psalm 22, a Psalm of complaint that ends on a note of triumph. Many devout Jews quoted this Psalm in a time of despair to find comfort and hope. It did the same thing for them that “Amazing Grace” or “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” does for us at a funeral. It connected them to a larger family of faith that would help them bear their burdens. Perhaps this was Jesus’ purpose in voicing this question. He was letting the Psalmist voice his feelings and faith.

Others have suggested that in that moment on the cross, the weight of the world’s sin fell upon him and he who knew no sin had to be completely separated from God. Who would not cry out under this enormous load?

Allow me to add some personal thoughts for us to consider that may give additional insight. At least it has helped me to walk away from this question with some sense of hope and peace.

**I have observed that dying people usually ask questions, especially if they are suffering.** Jesus did. Aron Ralston did. Others have. I have known very few people that walked through the valley of the shadow of death without questions.

Why is this happening to me? Do I deserve to suffer? What did I do to cause it? Where is God? Why won’t He come and help me? Why won’t He heal me?

**I don't think these questions indicate a lack of faith or commitment, but to the contrary, point to people that take faith seriously.** Jesus certainly did. Nothing was more important to him than his relationship with his Father. So important was it, that moments away from dying he was still asking questions trying to understand the heart and mind of God. Someone lacking faith or a commitment to God's call upon his life would not have been seeking God in this dark hour. He would have been thinking only about himself and cursing God.

When analyzing this question of Jesus on the cross, do not overlook the fact that it was a prayer. He was talking to God and he felt comfortable asking a tough question in the toughest time of his life. A deep level of trust and respect had to exist for Jesus to voice this harsh question. These were not the words of someone who was indifferent or preoccupied with lesser matters. This was the question of an honest believer on a serious quest to know God at the deepest level.

Furthermore, do not overlook when our Lord asked this question. It was voiced moments before he died. I think this is significant for it reveals that Jesus was a life-long learner and never lost his inquisitive nature. What a wonderful model this is for you and me. I hope I am still probing the mysteries of God and the universe on my death bed and beyond.

On a personal note, I must tell you that I am especially grateful for this question by Jesus on the cross because it shows me that it is all right to ask God questions, tough questions. I don't think God is offended by questions born out of broken hearts anymore than a loving and responsible parent is. As a matter of fact, I believe it pleases Him to know we value His presence and counsel that much. God knows that candid and honest discussions about life develop close relationships. This has been true in my own family.

I love being with my adult children. Of course I loved them as toddlers and adolescents, but our relationship as adults has moved to a new level, more substantive and meaningful. Why? We talk about things that matter. We face reality head on. We ask the tough questions and dialogue about serious issues. We no longer live in that fantasy world where children think parents know everything and will satisfy every expectation. In this honest and healthy environment, growth takes place, especially in our relationship. I think the same is true of our relationship with God.

This is why I think that probing questions do not indicate a lack of faith but a serious faith. They reveal the heart of someone grappling with life and death issues that is crying out for God's input.

**Having said this, we must realize that not all our questions will be answered in this life.** We are going to die with some of our questions unanswered. Jesus did. The only voices heard after Jesus uttered this question came from those at the foot of the cross that were trying to figure out what he said. From God, there was total silence.

Last week I was invited by Tucker High School Principal Scott Butler to speak at the ceremony honoring Coach Billy Venable. The gymnasium was named in his memory. You recall that Coach Venable and his seventeen-year-old son were killed by an intruder into their home. It has been over a year since this tragedy occurred, but tears still flow easily.

On the program that evening was Ben Lewis, Director of Young Life for Tucker High. He wrote and sang the song "Why?" One line from the refrain was, "Why, oh why, did such an awful day come here? God, where are you? How we need to know you are here."

"God, where are you?" What do we do with our unanswered questions? Do what Jesus did and give them to God. I believe that's one reason he gave this question voice. He was giving it to God before he died, knowing the answer would come, if not on this side of the tomb, on the other.

This was not all he gave to God, though. For you see these were not his final words. They would come moments later and stand in stark contrast to these. His last words would reveal a faith that was stronger than his doubts, a faith his questions could not smother.

“Into your hands I commit my spirit,” he would say, “It is finished!” Deep down in his heart, he knew God would come and be merciful and compassionate. He knew he could trust God to be a loving and responsible parent. And so he died with confidence and hope, giving God his questions and his life, just the way I hope all of us leave this world.