

Light in the Midst of Darkness

Mark 15:33–41
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Commotion and turmoil seemed to rule the day when Jesus was crucified. The high priest rounded up the Sanhedrin to condemn him before leading him to Pontius Pilate. Pilate sent him to Herod, and Herod sent him back. Meanwhile, the chief priests busily stirred up even more opposition against him. The Roman soldiers flogged and beat and mocked him before leading him to the place of execution. There, everyone mocked him — the priests, those who passed by, and even the two thieves, though one of them eventually repented and received eternal life.

It's hard to imagine what it must have been like when the whole world raged against the Son of God. But those who were there that day saw with their own eyes. As Psalm 2 predicted, the heathen raged and the people imagine the vain thing, as the kings of the earth and their rulers took counsel against the Messiah.

But the commotion paused dramatically in today's text. As darkness covered the land, everyone was silent.

The Darkness

Our text says, *And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.* Although the phrase *the whole land* could mean that the entire earth went dark, I think the KJV has it right: the darkness in our text was confined to Judea, revealing God's judgment against it for turning against the Messiah. Thus Amos wrote in his basket of summer fruit prophecy: *And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord GOD, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day (Amos 8:9).* The darkness came in the middle of the day, the least likely time for such a thing to happen. It came suddenly and without warning. And it lasted longer than an eclipse — three full hours — from the sixth hour (noon) to the ninth hour (3 PM).

This reminds us of the ninth plague that the Lord inflicted on Egypt just before freeing his people from slavery — three days of darkness. This darkness was so bad that Exodus 10:21 says it could *be felt*. How often can you actually feel darkness? Later, Moses noted that the Egyptians couldn't see each other or anything else, and therefore dared not move from where they were when it hit. Yet, God's people had plenty of light in their land.

Is it possible that the three hours of darkness at the cross resembled the darkness of Egypt? I think so. One very interesting detail makes it likely. This detail is that none of the four gospels say even one word about what happened during it. They report nothing about what the Romans said or did. Nothing about the priests or the two thieves. Even Jesus said nothing during this time. It was as though the whole land was locked up in solitary confinement and couldn't move.

Although the darkness was a manifestation of God's judgment against the Jews for crucifying Jesus, this isn't its main significance. The most important part of it is that God turned his back on his own Son. When the world went dark, Jesus was *made to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him* (2 Cor. 5:21). He suffered the curse in our place, as Paul wrote, *Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree* (Gal. 3:13). For three hours, our Savior felt nothing but separation from his Father's favor and fellowship. No one else in human history had ever experienced this, not even Job, no matter how much misery they might have experienced. Not even Nero and Hitler were so entirely separated from God's mercy while they lived. The only ones who have a sense of what Jesus endured are now in hell because that's what this is about — Jesus enduring an eternity of hell, an eternity of separation from his Father's favor, for us on the cross.

We can't even begin to understand how this was possible. How could a man, even though upheld by his divine nature, bear such cruel agony? How could the second person of the Trinity be separated from fellowship with the Father and Holy Spirit without destroying the eternal felicity they had always enjoyed? And yet it happened: Jesus himself cried out, *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* He felt forsakenness, and yet his trust in his Father never failed. Even in his worst suffering, he still called out, *My God, my God.* Perhaps this is when the darkness ended.

This is the atonement. Two thousand years earlier, the Lord led Abraham to the same place where Jesus was crucified and commanded him to offer Isaac, the son of promise, as a sacrifice. But in that case, an angel intervened and God provided a ram as a substitute. But there was no substitute for Jesus because he was our substitute. Our heavenly Father delivered his only begotten Son to death to pay for our sins. He even forsook him so that we, being covered by his blood, might never feel that same forsakenness in hell.

Just before Jesus died, men resumed their cruel taunts. When they heard Jesus speak the words of Psalm 22, they claimed he was calling Elijah. They knew better, but they did it anyway. One of them showed a little mercy by offering Jesus a refreshing drink from a sponge. Others tried to stop him, but he did it anyway.

When the darkness ended, Jesus' work on the cross was done. The other gospels tell us that he said, *I thirst*, and announced that his work was done once and for all. *Tetelesthai* — It is finished! We need nothing more. What Jesus did will stand forever.

Verse 37 says that Jesus *cried with a loud voice* and died. Unlike other victims of crucifixion, who slowly faded into death, our Lord maintained his strength to the very end. He yelled victory. And then he voluntarily surrendered his life as a satisfaction to God's justice. He said, *No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again* (John 10:18).

Two Results

Two things happened after this. The first is in verse 38: *And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom*. This veil was the curtain that separated the outer sanctuary of the temple from its inner sanctuary, which we often call the Holy of holies. No one was allowed into the inner sanctuary except the high priest, and even he could go in only once a year on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. Hebrews 9:8 explains the significance of this: *The Holy Ghost thus signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing*. The inner sanctuary remained closed because Jesus hadn't come yet to give his people free access to the Father. The curtain protected the special holiness of God and our salvation.

But as soon as Jesus finished his work, God himself tore that barrier down. We know God did this because Mark wrote that it *was rent in twain from the top to the bottom*. Only God could have ripped this 75-foot-high curtain starting at the top.

The writer of Hebrews further explains the importance of this in the 10th chapter of his letter, where he wrote, *Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works* (vv. 19–24). Our redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ not only gives us direct access to God through his Son, but also restores fellowship with God, gives us assurance of his love and favor, sanctifies us, emboldens our confession of the gospel, and equips us to love one another and serve within the body of Christ.

The saints of the Old Testament could only dream of such things, but we have them now because Jesus endured the full weight of God’s wrath in our place.

The second result of Jesus’ death, according to Mark, is this: *And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God.* The Romans usually stationed four guards, including a centurion, to secure places of crucifixion until the victims’ dead bodies were removed. This sounds like what we read in our text. And when Jesus died, the centurion declared that he was something special and unique about him.

Now, we might wonder what the centurion meant when he said that Jesus was the Son of God. Did he mean that Jesus was like one of the gods of Rome? Or, having seen all that had happened — the scourging, the taunting, Jesus transferring the care of his mother to John, his compassion toward his fellow victim, as well as the extensive darkness that covered the whole land — had he come to believe that Jesus is the true and living God? An early tradition claims he did. The grammar of our text also supports this. How? Mark used exactly the same construction that we find in John 1:1. It’s called a ‘pre-verbal anarthrous predicate.’ It doesn’t allow the verse in John to be translated ‘the Word was a god,’ as Jehovah’s Witnesses want to do, or the centurion’s declaration to mean ‘This man was a son of God.’ Both make definitive statements about the essential nature of Jesus Christ.

And just as important, the words the centurion spoke were not just his own. Listen to what Matthew wrote: *Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God* (Matt. 27:54). All four of the Roman guards came to the same conclusion. They knew that the Jews had accused Jesus of claiming to be God’s Son. John 19:7 says, *The Jews answered [Pilate], We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God.* After Jesus died, the guards came to believe this for themselves.

But why would this surprise us? Last week, we talked about the conversion of one of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus. According to Luke, at least a few Jews who witnessed the crucifixion regretted their part in it. He wrote, *And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned* (Luke 23:48). Had they also come to believe in Jesus? And we know that even some of the priests eventually believed. Acts 6:7 says, *And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.* Didn’t Jesus come into the world to save sinners? Wasn’t his mission to seek and to save the lost? The fact that men nailed him to a cross wasn’t a roadblock that got in his way. It was the means by which he accomplished his wondrous work of salvation.

The centurion's confession, made while Jesus' lifeless body hung on the cross, shows that our Savior was making his work effective in the hearts of men even then. He didn't have to wait until his resurrection or his ascension or the outpouring of his Spirit on Pentecost, as important as these things are. The King reigned even in death. He gave his life to others while his dead body hung in disgrace.

Now, before we wrap things up this morning, I want to say a little about the women mentioned in verses 40 and 41. According to John, they were right there at the cross before Jesus died (John 19:25), but Mark wrote that later they stood *afar off*. Obviously, they had moved. But the important thing is that they were there. Jesus' disciples fled, and only John came back. But the women never left. They followed him from Galilee and ministered to him. They were there when he died. They were even the first to visit his empty grave on Easter morning. And later, they were also present in the upper room when the church chose Judas' successor.

Of all those who witnessed the crucifixion, the women were the only ones who remained faithful from beginning to end. It was their privilege to teach the rest of us the right response to the crucifixion, viz., to follow Jesus at all costs, to cling to him no matter what.

Who were these women? One was Mary Magdalene. We'll have more to say about her in the coming weeks. Another was Mary the mother of James and Joses, about whom we know nothing else. And the third was Salome, probably Jesus' aunt and the mother of James and John. They weren't especially remarkable, except that Jesus died for them and gave them the strength to commit themselves entirely to him. The light of the gospel shined in them, even when the darkness of God's judgment ruled the day. And so it must shine in us. May the death of Jesus bring forth the same light and life in each and every one of us, as we look only to Jesus Christ to lead us to his Father's kingdom of joy and peace. Amen.