

Calvary, Especially the Invisible Aspects

Sunday Evangelistic Message

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We're turning now to the gospel of Luke 23:44.

“And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.”

Our subject is “Things Unseen At Calvary.” The things that are not seen, that are not visible. Calvary, otherwise in our King James version: Golgotha, the place of the skull where Christ was crucified. Calvary, the heart of the gospel. This is the center of everything. There would be no good news from God without Calvary. There would be no way of salvation without Calvary, without the eternal Son of God suffering and dying on Calvary's cross. This is the center, Calvary, of all revelation. It's promised from the very first book of the Bible, it's mentioned repeatedly and all the way through the prophets, that the Savior would come and that there would be redemption through him for all the nations, all the people of the world. Here it is, it's the heart of God himself. Calvary is a picture of his mercy and his great love.

Calvary was essential. It last for six hours. Six terrible hours where Christ, who was God, the Incarnate Son of God, suffered and died on the cross. Half that time, three hours of it, were in total darkness where the light of the Son was withdrawn. Calvary was essential for us because God is holy. How often we try to rehearse these things. The perfection and the holiness of God and his great justice means that he could have nothing to do with us because of our sin. And how is sin and its guilt going to be banished? Dealt with? Taken away? Only by God himself in the person of Christ, the eternal Son, coming and taking the punishment on behalf of all who would be saved. The kindness of God is here. The unfathomable love of God. The more we think about it, the less we can take it in that God would pay such a price and come himself, the Second Person of the Godhead, to die for us.

Events leading up to the cross of Calvary are bad enough. I look at the 22nd chapter and verse 39, “And he came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him. And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation. And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed.” And he prayed and we find this curious until we understand

the meaning, "Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." In other words, Christ who took upon himself human nature, recoiled because from his divine being, he could see the price he was going to pay for our sin, what it would cost him to redeem us and he shrinks from it but is determined to go through with it.

"And being in an agony," this is before Calvary's cross in the Garden of Gethsemane, "he prayed more earnestly and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground." Even the anticipation of what he would go through on Calvary's cross, the insight that he had into it was crushing and led to this agonizing experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is even before Calvary.

Then there's the betrayal down there in chapter 22 and verse 47, a multitude, the betrayal by Judas, the arrest in verse 52 and there he was taken to the high priest's house, his mansion. There he would be tried initially and then beaten and then put before Pilate and then scourged and beaten again until the blood ran and then before Herod and then back to Pilate and scourged we think, a third time on the judgment pavement so that he was wounded and bleeding. The Roman scourging was a terrible, terrible thing. Even before he went to Calvary. Then the journey to the cross. It's all laid down and the nailing to the cross and yet his compassion for the people throughout all this, the crucifixion, the three hours of barrage as the wrath of the Father was poured out upon him so that we may never taste it and know it.

The agonies for sin and yet, this three hours of darkness. What a mystery this is. "And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour." If the punishment on Calvary began at 9 o'clock in the morning, then the darkness runs from noon to 3 pm. Three hours of total darkness cannot be explained in natural terms, there was no eclipse, the Passover was held at full moon. There is no plausible natural explanation although some have been attempted. This was an act of God and this was an act that struck fear into the vast crowd. There they had been screaming and yelling at him in derision as he died upon the cross but this silence hit them. Evidently they do not disperse, they do not leave the place, they are transfixed there somehow. They remain there. They fear, one must assume, because the prophets of old had said that there would be terrible judgments for Jerusalem at times of great darkness. Perhaps, this is a judgment. They were afraid but there was no deserting of the site.

In a way, when we look back, it's not surprising to us that even nature, even the sun as it were, bowed its head when the Creator of the world, the Son of man, was crucified. As the hymn writer put it:

"Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut its glories in,
When Christ, the mighty maker, died,
For man the creature's sin."

What an amazing and astonishing thing it was that God's eternal Son should give himself for us.

Why three hours of darkness? Let me try to explain it as briefly as I can: why darkness? First of all, I think there is no doubt that Christ's outstanding dignity was being marked. He was God; he was the Creator of the world. He'd suffered visible torment on that cross for three hours, a death far worse than simply being executed on a Roman cross. For him, he was bearing the punishment of our sin. Three hours of visible torment so the event is attested. It was public; everybody knew he was suffering on that cross at Calvary. Then, as if to mark his great dignity and being, the veil is drawn across and the last three hours, nobody can see, nobody must see. Surely it's a tribute to his Godhead and his divine being. Defiled eyes are no longer going to be allowed to stare at him as he suffers and writhes and jeer and shout for his humiliation from them is ended.

But, dear friends, what an event this is. They are silenced. They can't scream and shout now. "What's happening? What's going to happen to us? What is the meaning of this? We can see nothing." The crowd is silent for three hours. The second portion of the suffering of Christ on Calvary and their jeering has turned to awe. I'm sure that's one of the reasons for the three hours of darkness. But there's another reason and I give you this second reason: it indicates his extreme pain and humiliation. It indicates that something is going on here on this cross that cannot be seen. It's deeper than anything that's visible. You could see the tortured face. You could see his frame wracked by pain. You could see the hideous degree of the punishment. Far, far worse was his pain than that which is due to nails through hands and feet and the open wounds from the repeated scourgings that he'd received and the hanging in the heat of the sun. Something far deeper, far worse, was going on and as though God is saying, "This is so profound. This is so extreme. This is so deep. This is beyond anything you can see."

They can make films of the passion of Christ, they can get an actor to writhe and wince, they can show you whippings and lashings and nails being driven through flesh or the illusion of it but what was happening on Calvary was far worse than any physical pain or physical affliction. What was happening was invisible to the human eye. It was Christ, the Mighty Maker and the Savior of the world, suffering the sum total punishment for all the sin of those who would be forgiven and saved. He took our punishment. That which we should have suffered forever, he took it all for billions compressed into the space of six hours and that is a pain and a punishment that the human eye cannot register and see.

As if to tell us that this event is infinitely deeper than that which can be witnessed with human eyes, the darkness comes and half of it is under total darkness. This is not a spectacle, God seems to be saying, this is a transaction. This is not a spectacle to be seen, it's a transaction: Christ is paying the price of our sin for us so that his righteousness can be credited to us, the greatest transaction in the history of the universe.

You can't see those agonies. You can't see the price he paid for us, our punishment. You can't see the incomprehensible pain that he had to suffer so the total blackness, darkness, comes down. Nothing can depict it. A film can show you physical torture at most, it

cannot tell you the spiritual pain of Christ and all that he suffered. Here's the just and holy one who will one day be the judge of all the earth, suffering the stroke of justice in our place. The darkness says, "This is all far too great to be seen. Far too significant for that."

Then, the darkness shows us something else: it shows us a particular aspect of Christ's suffering. Let me mention just one aspect: his desolation, friends. "My God," he cries out for our benefit, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It's a quotation from a Messianic psalm in the Old Testament. Why does he say that? It is to indicate to us the forsakenness he feels. You see, we die at the end of life's journey, we've never repented of our sin let's say, we've been against God, we've scorned him, we've put him to one side so now we've got to suffer for our sin and be punished. What happens to us? We're banished from God just to begin with. We're banished. We're sent away from him into punishment. How desperate we would feel. How forsaken. How abandoned. What despair will come down upon us. Now, if Christ is going to save me from that, if Christ is going to bear that for me, he must feel this desperate despair and forsakenness right into his being on my behalf. That's why he cries, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It's a terrible experience he must have along with all the pain.

The three hours of darkness remind us of this. Darkness is despair. Darkness signifies to all of us hopelessness, despair, loneliness. In total darkness, no communication. Banishment, it's his sense of eternal banishment suffered for us. Don't you see that darkness is so important? It's telling us something about what happened, the nature of the agonies to which he went, his sense of separation from the Almighty Father.

Then, here's a fourth reason for the darkness: it vindicates Christ because he ended it, you know. He no doubt began it himself. We're not told that in the Scripture, that's just an assumption but he certainly ended it. He utters those words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And then he says this, "It is finished. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." And the darkness is ended. It's at his cry. He terminates it. What a vindication of him. He's suffering and dying for us on Calvary's cross. Is he who he claims to be? Is he the Son of God? Is he the divine Savior for lost men and women? Even in the midst of this, at a word, he can restore the light and he does so in those words as he proclaims the end of his own work and his death for the time being on earth. That terminated the darkness and signaled that he was indeed the Messiah. His agonies are over. The atonement for men and women has been completed and achieved and the final miracle seals it all. So, that's another reason for the darkness, so that Christ can give that final demonstration of his power.

But here's another reason for the darkness, let me suggest this to you: it is a kind of call to see that our sin was there. One moment you can think of Christ suffering and dying on the cross, visibly seen, and then the darkness. I hope you don't find this fanciful but I think this is the truth: it is as if God is saying to us, "Don't see him. He had no sin. See you on that cross. You were there. If you believe in him, if you trust in him and repent of your sin, he took your sin. It was as if you were there. That's where your sin was dealt

with, your forgiveness was secured. Don't see him. See you. 'For he hath made him to be sin for us,'" says the Scripture.

My pride was there, that would have taken me to hell. My greed was there. I see my sins through the darkness on Calvary's cross. The darkness takes, as it were, the spotlight off him and makes me think what was happening there. My sin was there because I've repented of my sin and so he took it for me and it was there on him, on Calvary's cross. All my lies were there. All my deceits. All my self-seeking. All my rejection of God. All my unbelief. Everything I've ever been and done. All my sin if I repent, was there on him and when God punished him, he was taking the punishment for my sin. It was all there and he suffered and died in my place.

“What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered, was all for sinner's gain;
Mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain.”

That's an old Latin hymn. My sin was there.

Then there is yet another reason for the darkness I think I can suggest to you and it was this: it's to show us that salvation and what Christ did, will be hidden from scornful people because that's what happened there. They were screaming at him, “If you're the Christ, come down from the cross! Save yourself!” From the senior clergy down to the ordinary people and the rough Roman soldiers, they were all yelling insults. But the darkness silenced them and their eyes were not able to see what he was doing from that point onward.

Dear friends, that's what happens today. When I was scornful of the Lord and filled with slanders for him as a youngster, when I was above all that and had contempt for religion, I couldn't understand what was going on on Calvary's cross. It didn't mean anything to me. It never registered with me. That's what happens to us when we're scornful: we don't see it, we don't understand it. We may have some outlined technical understanding, but it's not deep and it doesn't move us and it doesn't affect us.

That's what happened at the time of Calvary's cross. They were afraid, they thought, I think, some judgment had come upon them. When they heard mention of Elijah, they said, “What's happening? Is he being stolen away from the cross? Taken him down.” But they couldn't see. Everything was hidden from them. Dear friends, if you have no time for God and no time for Christ, you won't see Calvary. The depth of what was happening, the love of Christ, it will never mean anything to you. That's part of the meaning of the three hours of darkness.

But there's even more. O friends, it's a sign that what Christ did on Calvary must be received by faith. You have to trust in him. Some people, they say, “How can I get a benefit from Christ? He died on the cross, O, I've got to stare at a crucifix, stare at some symbol. Perhaps that helps. Perhaps that achieves something.” O no, half of Calvary was in darkness, you couldn't see. And so it is with us: we don't see it today. It happened 2,000 years. It's not available for us to view. It's by faith we believe that the Son of the

Living God, the Savior of the world, suffered and died on Calvary to take away sin for all who believe in him and trust in him and come to him. The gospel must be received by faith, not by sight, by trusting in Christ.

Here's how you trust in him: you go to him, you repent of your sin, you believe in him and what he's done for sinners, you're amazed at his great love and you give him your life. You hand it over to him and you say, "Lord, forgive me," and you mean it. You don't say it lightly. You think, "Look what I've done. Think of my sins." God doesn't demand a detailed list from you but he does demand genuineness. You think, "This is the kind of person I've been," or "those are the kind of things which I've done and I've sinned away my years and I've had contempt for God and I've rebelled against him and I've seized my life for myself. O, the things that I've done and to think Christ came from heaven to earth to suffer and to die in such inexpressible agony for a person like me. Lord, I repent of my life and my sin and my rebellion and I give my life to thee. O Lord, take me. Cleanse me. Make me new. Make thyself known to me and I obey him and I repent."

What will you say in the last day of life? If you've never repented of your sin? And you've never yielded to Christ? When he did so much for sinners? He was not a distant Savior. He was not an unfeeling Savior. He was a Savior who came and took the punishment due to those who repent. He came for his people and he died for them. He is such a Savior. What amazing love! "O Lord, whatever induced thee to come from the glorious courts of heaven for someone like me and to take my eternal punishment, let alone so many others. What love is this? I have never had such love toward me on earth even from those who have loved me deeply, you can say. Even from those who've cared for me. Even from those who've watched over me." There is no love like his. The price he pays for people who come to himself. What will you say in the last day? To reject such love, such an act as the cross of Calvary, such mercy, such kindness.

These things are astonishing. We'd have nothing to say. What could we say? That God was unkind? That God was unreasonable? That God didn't care? When Christ has done so much for us. O, come to him. Repent of sin. Are you an elderly person like me? Are you middle-aged? Still in vigor? In your prime? Are you in early adulthood? Or in youth? What do you think of Jesus Christ? What do you think of the Son of God who came from heaven to suffer and to die in such agony it had to be concealed from human view at least half of it? What do you think of the glorious mercy and love of God?

Dear friends, come to him. Come to him while you can. Come to him while there is any movement in your heart. Yield to him. If he did this for you, just imagine what he will do for you in changing your life and being your guardian and your friend and taking you through life to eternal glory. Just think: here is all that mighty love of God, the heart of the gospel, the heart of God. Calvary's cross: there is nothing in history to equal this, the price paid for needy souls, needy sinners.

Let's pray together.

O God, our gracious heavenly Father, look upon us in this place. O Lord, we pray that thou would so help us that we may grasp as never before thy great love in redemption and the great cost of salvation. O Lord, we pray that thou would move us and help us. Show us the emptiness of life without him, the Savior of the world, without a hold on eternal things. O Lord, move in our hearts in thy great love and draw men, women, young people to the cross of Calvary, the meeting place with the Savior. Bless us. Draw near to us. Receive us and help us. We ask it in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ for his sake. Amen.