

The Darkest Hour

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Bible Text: Matthew 27:45-46
Preached on: Friday, March 25, 2016

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Well, as we come in preparation for celebration of the Lord's Table tonight, I'm so delighted to see so many of you out here this evening and I hope that as you sung the songs you've realized that we're walking on holy ground here this evening as we approach the cross, as it were, and contemplate our Lord this evening, remembering that we're contemplating his suffering tonight. Good Friday is a statement that Christ suffered on our behalf to save us from our sins and so as we come, we are mindful of the suffering of Christ. Here's the thing: it's a little too easy for us to say that and to let those words roll out off our lips; we're kind of familiar with the concept that Christ suffered for us, that he died for us, and I don't want that to become so familiar with us that we lose our sense of awe and reverence and even fear as we contemplate that, especially in coming to the Lord's Table here in just a moment. It's not just that Christ suffered for us, he suffered, oh did he suffer and when we sing of the agony of Gethsemane, we sing of the agony of what he went through, oh beloved, it was agony of the deepest sort. There has never been agony in the course of human history like the agony that Christ suffered on the cross.

So we need to bring that to bear in our thinking and in our minds if we're going to receive communion in a worthy way here this evening and I'm going to focus on a small portion of the passage that our elder chairman, Dan Jackson, read just a few moments ago. Look at Matthew 27:45-46. We're hopefully going to have a brief meditation here before we take the elements, but enough for us to be able to prepare our hearts and be able to approach this with a proper attitude and mindset. Beloved, just one thing that I would say to you: as you're here tonight as we're contemplating God's word here this evening, I would just ask you to be mindful that tonight it's not about us. It's not about you and me at all. It's about our Lord Jesus. It's about remembering him. It's about contemplating what he did for us and the way that he suffered in order to save our souls. Christ here is preeminent in the center of our thoughts; nothing else matters by comparison.

So with that in mind, Matthew 27:45-46,

45 Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. 46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Notice two things about the passage and we'll go into it in a little bit more detail. Notice the supernatural darkness, for three hours the sun ceased to shine in some way or another, the Scriptures say that its light was hidden elsewhere in the Scriptures; and notice the cry of Jesus centered on the word "forsaken." Speaking to his Father saying, "God, I am forsaken here!" You know, we might speak in casual terms, you know, maybe you're driving through a desert and you say, "This is a God-forsaken place," and we say it pretty casually. For Christ, he felt the weight of what was happening here on the cross and it was a profound sense of abandonment that he felt. That's what we want to look at here. We want to see the crucifixion tonight from the perspective of Christ and we're just going to look at two very simple matters as we contemplate it.

First of all, we want to consider the purpose of Christ's suffering. Why was he suffering like this on the cross? Why this event? Why this darkness? Why the sinless Son of God crying out in agony? Why the abandonment? What was this about? Why is a sinless man, why is the sinless Son of God suffering? This makes no sense. If viewed only from the perspective of did he deserve this? No. He did not. So why is this happening? Well, when we contemplate his suffering, we sense his suffering, we sense the magnitude of what is happening from the supernatural darkness that surrounded it.

Look at verse 45 with me again, "Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour." This is from about noon to three p.m. by our reckoning of time and somehow great darkness fell upon the land of Israel while Christ was hanging on the cross. Now, in the middle of this passage and the parallel passages in Mark and Luke, Scripture doesn't say why this darkness fell. It notices it, it records it, but it doesn't explain and interpret it right here in the middle of this narrative. That's a little bit strange if you only looked at one passage and knew nothing else about it, but the broader Gospel of Matthew tells us precisely what was happening at this time. We can use the broader context of Matthew to interpret this darkness for us. What was it that was happening here? We'll go all the way back to the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 1. You see, the Gospel, the entire Gospel of Matthew prepares us, it leads us up to this climactic moment of darkness. Matthew 1:21, the angel told Joseph that his betrothed would "bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." There was an act of redemption that was taking place.

Look at what Jesus' words were in Matthew 20:28, and actually we'll look at verse 26 to set the stage because these first two verses here give us a sense of the mindset with which Christ approached this darkness. He said in verse 26 to his disciples, he said actually in verse 25, he said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave." He says, "Your whole perspective on authority needs to be turned upside down. You need to completely reverse the order of existence in your thinking. You're used to authority meaning that someone rules over you. For you in the kingdom of God, understand that authority means that you serve." He says in verse 28, he goes on and explains, he says, "just as the Son of Man," a self-reference, he refers to himself in the third person saying the Son of Man, "Just as the Son of Man did not come

to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." He says, "I am here in your midst as a servant. And why am I here? I'm here to give my life as a ransom for many. I'm here to give my life, my life blood, my very human existence will be handed over soon enough in an act of sacrificial service that will act as the spiritual ransom payment for many." Wow.

As you continue on reading in the Gospel of Matthew, look over at Matthew 26 now. Matthew 26:26. You see how there's this thread, there's this crimson thread that runs through the whole Gospel and ties all of the narratives together in the discourses of Jesus together. We're moving toward the cross here in Matthew 26 and when the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper that we're going to partake in a moment, verse 26 says, "While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.'" So, again, we see Christ preparing the way, leading a groundwork to help us interpret what was happening at the cross. This would be for the forgiveness of sins. This would be a ransom given for many. Getting ever increasingly more specific about it, he says, "My blood is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

So we read that and we understand as we go into the crucifixion narrative in Matthew 27 that the crucifixion was the ransom payment for sin. It was the Son of God voluntarily offering himself up; voluntarily, as it were, opening his veins for blood to flow so that the sins of everyone who would ever believe in him could be wiped away, no longer be held against them. This was the means by which Jesus would save those who would believe. So what was the darkness then? It was a sign of judgment. The darkness was symbolic that the face of God had turned away. Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

So putting these things together from the Gospel, from other parts of Scripture and doing it very briefly admittedly, it was in this time of darkness that our Lord Jesus felt the brunt, carried the force of the divine curse against sin and three hours of supernatural darkness marked it out so that everyone would understand and could not miss it. A dark, black blanket came upon the land, a suffocating darkness in which, in a manner of speaking, not literally, in a manner of speaking, time stood still as the hours rolled along. Earthly existence came to a halt. The sun stopped its shining in light of what was happening in the great exchange on the cross at that time. It was then in that time of darkness that the sinless Son of God particularly, peculiarly, bore the weight of your sin.

God, and understand this, there are those who carelessly or foolishly will say that Christ became a sinner on the cross and then was punished. That's not true. Christ was holy. Christ was the beloved Son of God who was always pleasing to his Father. What happened was not that Christ in his person became a sinner, but rather the liability for the punishment of sin, the guilt of sin from you and me and everyone who ever believed in Christ was assigned to him in the judgment court of God. It was placed upon his account

though he, himself, was innocent. He came as a substitute. He bore it in our place. The guilt that was on you was picked up and transferred to his shoulders though he, himself, was sinless in the midst of it. And when that imputation took place, when that guilt was assigned to Christ in a unique way in that darkness, God treated Christ as if he had committed the sins that you committed and punished Christ for them in that time of supernatural darkness. In other words, Christ was punished for crimes that he had not committed.

It was no casual matter and we know that because supernatural darkness attended it. Why did Christ suffer like this in these hours of darkness? He was giving his life for our sins. And what was the nature of his suffering? This is our second point. You see, the purpose of his suffering, it was to bear the punishment for our sins as a sacrifice on our behalf. What was the nature of his suffering? And here we get into things that are deeply shrouded in mystery in the intimacy of the Godhead but this next verse, verse 46 of Matthew 27 hints at how Christ suffered for our redemption. In other words, the question is this, beloved: what was the suffering like for Christ? Forget about what it did for you. We have a Savior who identified with us in our guilt so that we could be saved, let's forget about ourselves for a few moments here and just do the best that we can in our human limitations and weakness and with a limited amount that Scripture tells us about it and try our best to identify with Christ in his suffering and say, "Do you know what? It doesn't matter about me right now. Let me just sympathize with my Savior based on what I see in Scripture." Wouldn't that be appropriate to just honor Christ enough to let him be at the center of it and not try to inject ourselves into what it means for us right now? You know, when you love someone, when you love your spouse or you love a child, you often will enter into their sufferings. You hear and you listen to them and you try to feel along with them the pain that they're going through. It's appropriate for us to stop thinking about ourselves for a time and ask ourselves, "Lord, what was it like for you in those dark hours on the cross?"

There was some reading that I did earlier that gave a little bit of a helpful illustration. It's pale, it's weak, but it's a little bit helpful and I'll use it here to kind of bring you into, kind of lay the groundwork for it. First of all, remember that there is no human comparison. There is no way that we can by analogy or by rational thought fully understand and completely know what Christ went through in those three hours of darkness. This was a unique supernatural event, in a sense, between God the Father and God the Son and nothing in our experience is like that and nothing ever will be and so we approach this with a sense of reverence and restraint and realize that human analogies are very, very weak. But here's something that can get you started on the right track to understand something. Most of you know what it's like to have somebody that you love and maybe you've done something that has offended them and you know that they are upset with you and there is that fracture in the relationship that takes place and you say, "Man, this is my fault. He's upset with me now, she's upset with me now." And for some of us, maybe for most of us, that just kind of grinds at you and you just have that uncomfortable sense of alienation that goes on in your mind and if it's a person that you really love, you're not comfortable until you are reconciled with that. Maybe you kids, knowing something about what it's like to incur the righteous indignation of your parents against your

disobedience and you feel the weight of that, you know what that's like and just the whole universe seems to be in disorder. Keep that in mind as we move into this now. I'll come back to it maybe in a moment if I don't forget.

This next verse hints at how Christ suffered for our redemption. Matthew 27:46 again, just to keep the text fresh in our mind. "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" You know, Jesus had always known, eternally known nothing but the most perfect eternal communion with his Father. There is an ineffable inexpressible love that is shared between the three persons of the Trinity as they share and have the divine essence together as one and yet they are three persons sharing that single essence. And when we remember that Scripture says God is love, in his perfect infinite love, what must it be like for the members of the Trinity to share that love for one another in an infinite eternal way? We can't even, I mean, there are no words. This is ineffable, inexplorable glory and this is how Christ had always known his Father and the love and the closeness and the glory that they shared. In fact, look at John 15:9. So close was their identification that Jesus could say in verse 9, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love." "The Father has loved me," he says. In John 17:5 as he's praying to the Father the high priestly prayer, Jesus says, "Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was."

So Jesus says he is describing his eternal relationship with the Father and describes this eternal love that they share together, this ineffable glory that Jesus shared with the Father and we cannot understand that. This glory, this mutual love, this shared communion which had no beginning because God had no beginning, this was always the case for them but now in that darkness, it's different. In this darkest hour, God the Father was pouring out his intense hatred of sin on his own Son. A song that we'll sing in a little bit says, "The Father turned his face away." It's a metaphor. God doesn't literally have a face but somehow what Jesus was experiencing in that time in those three hours was appropriately expressed in the words of Psalm 22:1, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" It is a cry of abandonment, a cry of desertion, a cry of separation. This eternal love, the outflowing of divine affection from the Father to the Son was somehow interrupted and it was no longer like that.

What could that have been like? Well, first of all, our Lord Jesus had to bear it alone. Somehow the intimate communion that he had always cherished with his Father was exchanged for abandonment, isolation, and punishment, beloved, of incalculable severity. Now he was oppressed and afflicted. Now he was crushed and put to grief, in the words of Isaiah 53. And let's try to pull a couple of things here together that we've said. Remember that we said that he was suffering as a ransom for many, that the curse against sinners was placed on him and we tend to think of that in such a mechanical cold way. Shame on us for talking about the Lord's substitutionary sacrifice in a cold, calculated, mathematical way that isn't somehow mindful of what he actually went through in that time. Here's the thing, beloved: we don't know the number of people that ultimately believe in the Lord Jesus but let's say it's millions and millions and millions. We sing that in one of our hymns, "I'll shout with the millions on high." Millions and millions of

people who committed millions and millions of sins, all of a sudden the weight and severity of divine punishment, the eternal punishment for each of those sins is suddenly being borne by our blessed Savior on the cross in that time. His cry of abandonment reflects his humanity as he suffered inexpressibly to bear God's wrath on our behalf.

What was that like? Well, look, I don't even like using an analogy but I've got to do something to help us approximate some kind of remote idea that would help us appreciate him as we come to this table to remember him in a moment. Go back to what I said about when you have a fractured relationship in your own life with someone that you love and you are to blame and you feel the isolation of that in a moment of time and that's one event with one person with a human consequence that is temporal. Well, let's take that and geometrically exponentially multiply it as we contemplate our Lord Jesus. Now for Christ, he is experiencing much greater alienation from his Father as he bears the weight and punishment and accepts the responsibility for all of that weight of sin and hour flows into hour flows into another hour, and instead of the intimate inexpressible joyful union that he has felt with this Father throughout all of eternity, now that's exchanged for that awful sense of isolation and desertion and abandonment and broken relationship. And he's not feeling that one time, he's drinking the cup to the full for all of those billions and trillions of sins of those that he was hanging there to save. So somehow in that darkness, somehow he was feeling the abandonment, he was feeling the pain of eternal judgment on every sin that those who believed in him ever committed and ever would commit. This is bigger than a billion universes. That's how big it is. That's how severe it was. And instead of the shared love and mutual communion now he is feeling what it would have been like for you to have spent eternity in hell and it was dreadful.

You say, "Why did he say, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" Well, you know, Jesus knew that he was ultimately going back to the Father as he approached the cross. Perhaps in his humanity, he didn't know the length of the time of suffering that he would experience on the cross, we're speculating there, but imagine it, if you will, the weight, the incalculable severity, a moment of that, five seconds of it, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, 1005, an eternal weight being felt in those five seconds and the seconds give way to minutes, 10 minutes becomes 30, 30 become 60, an hour becomes two hours. And it is prolonged and it is of incalculable severity and his suffering is overwhelming and it seems like it's never going to end. From the depths of that, he cries out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Notice something in the midst of that: even under the weight of that divine wrath, he is still trusting in God just like David in Psalm 22 was, "My God, My God." His trust was so perfect in his Father that even in the midst of that abandonment he could still address him as "My God." How wonderful is Jesus? That he would lovingly undertake that for us and that in the midst of that divine sense of abandonment, he's still trusting his Father as he groans on the tree on our behalf? The Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, says, "There he was and felt forsaken by God so that in precisely that fashion he might be able to taste it death for everyone." What was the nature of Christ's suffering? We can only hint at it with faint analogies and horribly inadequate human words. We, as it were, are staring into the depths of the abyss of what hell must look like and we realize that Christ came with his hand, as it were, and saved us

from that miserable fate and did so by experiencing in his infinite being the infinite punishment that we would have otherwise experienced ourselves.

How should that affect the way we receive communion in just a few minutes? I'm going to give you four little points of application that are going to be very, very brief. You should be thinking, you should be feeling a mixture of things right now, all of them sanctified by the word of God and by his Spirit. First of all, we should bow in fear at what Scripture tells us about this. The agony of Christ was real and it is beyond our comprehension. We are remembering something that was supernatural, an exchange, if you will, that took place between the members of the Trinity and we're glimpsing into a divine transaction between the Father and the Son where angels should fear to tread. We bow in fear.

Secondly, we should bow in humility. Humility, denying ourselves because do you know what that horrible suffering of Christ on the cross, do you know what those three hours of darkness represent? Do you know what it manifests? Do you know what it puts on display? That awful suffering that we were just contemplating, that awful suffering is the measure of the evil and the guilt of your sin. It's no inconsequential matter. It's no superficial little thing that you can just kind of flick off like it's a fly on the pulpit. "I sinned. Ah, Jesus died for me." Are you kidding? The cross displays your guilt. The supernatural darkness shows the darkness of your own being and your own heart before Christ. The depth of his suffering displays the depth of your guilt. You bet you should be humble as you come to the table here tonight. And let me just say that if you are not humbled by the cross when we pass the elements in a few moments, please just let them pass. Don't take communion with a sense of self-righteousness that congratulates yourself on your goodness. The communion table is for those who have repented of their sins and know that they are unworthy of Christ and take it only in grateful remembrance of what he did, knowing that salvation was a gift that we never could have earned on our own. If you take communion that way, know that as you take that element out of the tray, you're making a profound confession of sin as you do, even as you make a profound remembrance of Christ. We should bow in humility before the cross as well as in fear.

There is a positive dimension to it. There is a joyful dimension to how we bow as well. We should bow in gratitude, not just fear, not just humility. We should bow in gratitude in a profound sense of thankfulness. Do you know what? Jesus did this voluntarily. He said in John 10:18, "No one takes My life away from Me. I lay it down on Mine own accord." Jesus did this voluntarily so that you could be saved. Do you know anyone that is that selfless? Do you know anyone that is that powerful? That is that great? That would lay himself down like that? Scripture says, "Greater love has no one than this than a man would lay down his life for his friends," and Jesus calls us his friends. We have a brother in heaven who did this for us. We're grateful. We are grateful. With, as it were, tears streaming down our cheeks we say, "Lord Jesus, thank you for doing this for me." And as you contemplate the depth, the nature of his suffering, understand this, you measure, oh beloved, please hear me, please listen carefully to this, that you would never question the love of God in your life again: you measure the height of the love of Christ for your soul by the depth of the grief that he suffered in order to save you. The cost measures the love.

The cost was infinite, the love for you was also. So we bow in gratitude for undeserved love, undeserved grace, undeserved favor, undeserved mercy.

Finally, we bow in fear, in humility, in gratitude, finally, you should bow in confidence. In confidence. Christ later after the darkness cried out, "It is finished!" A triumphant proclamation that the work of salvation was done. The divine favor was now restored. He knew and was aware that the punishment was over, the price had been paid, in fact, that term was used in the marketplace to say, "Paid in full." When Christ died on the cross for you, he paid it all and mark this, there's a lot of theology wrapped up in what I'm about to say. We've expressed it in the past but, beloved, here's what you need to know, talking about confidence: our Lord Jesus Christ, hear me on this, our Lord Jesus Christ didn't go through that three hours of incalculable darkness and suffering and severity bearing the brunt of the wrath of God to the full, he did not go through that suffering simply to make your salvation possible and then sit back and, as it were, cross his fingers hoping that you would make a right decision down the road. No. No, our sovereign Lord did this to achieve your salvation. That's why he could say, "It is finished." The work was done. And he did not groan on the tree, he did not groan on the tree to give you a salvation that could perish, that you could lose. He saved you in order to keep you. He saved you to make certain that you would come to Christ in time and that he would keep you throughout all of eternity, otherwise he would have squandered all of that suffering on the cross if it was simply a matter of trusting to the so-called free will of man for the outcome or counting on you in all of your weakness to somehow keep the job up after you had come to faith. None of that is true. He did this in order to achieve salvation for us. He died to save you, beloved, so that you would most certainly be saved.

If you're here tonight and you do not know Christ, you shouldn't take that for granted. The call to you is, "Come to this all sufficient Savior. Come to this one who is perfect. He saves every sinner who comes to him and so come if you don't know him." For those of us that are in him, we look back and see this was the result that he appointed before the foundation of time. This is what he died to secure. If you are in Christ, you can never be lost and so come to this table with confidence. Now, here in communion we gratefully remember what he has done for us.

Let's bow together in prayer as Nancy comes.

Father, we thank you for sending your Son to be the propitiation for our sins. We express our prayers in this moment with fear realizing that this is holy ground we tread upon right now. We approach it with humility, Lord, knowing that we did not prompt you, we did not deserve this. This was a free act of unmerited sovereign grace on our behalf. Thank you. And we express our confidence, we have come to Christ, we have believed in him and now we rest in him. We know that a Savior of this great magnitude could never fail to achieve his purpose with us. You will keep us. Just as you initially saved us, just as you initially died for us, our Lord, just as we were chosen in Christ before the beginning of time, O God, you will carry that through to completion and we will most certainly see our Lord face-to-face. But tonight, our Lord, on this day we call Good Friday, good

because it was the source of our salvation, we remember your suffering. We quiet our hearts before it and before you and offer our praise.

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