

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 17: The Three Hours of Darkness

Brian Schwertley

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" That is to say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, "This man calleth for Elias" And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. The rest said, "Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him." (Mt. 27:45-49)

And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is, being interpreted, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And some of them that stood by, when they heard it, said, "Behold, he calleth Elias." And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, "Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down." (Mk. 15:33-36)

And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. (Lk. 23:44-45)

When we come to the three hours of darkness on the cross we encounter the second phase and climax of Christ's suffering. From around nine in the morning until noon, Jesus endured the spikes in the hands and feet. As time passed His wounds became swollen and inflamed. The flies are feasting on His torn and bleeding flesh. His blood struggles to circulate in His hanging, artificially extended body. Fever, severe headache and exhaustion grip the Savior. He struggles to breathe properly and must pull on His inflamed wounds to catch a full breath of air. As he struggles on the cross, however, He is active. He opens paradise for the penitent criminal and He assigns His beloved mother to John the apostle. During this time He is assaulted by the Jewish people, the leaders of Israel and the satanic hosts. He is tempted, mocked, hated and abused. But all of this suffering in body and soul is nothing compared to what lies ahead. He must now enter the essence of the sacrifice itself. He must step into the outer darkness of the full eclipse of the Father's fellowship, friendship and love. The darkness indicates that this is a crucifixion like no other in history. In the three hours of blackness, the Savior suffers not merely at the hands of wicked men who are used of God to vicariously punish the innocent Redeemer, but now, as it were, the Father unsheathes His sword of judgment and plunges it into the heart of His dear Son. It is this aspect of the Mediator's suffering that is mysterious and in a sense is unfathomable to finite creatures. There are a number of things to note regarding this period of darkness.

The darkness which lasted from twelve noon to three o'clock was supernatural and caused by the immediate power of God. All attempts to explain this darkness by means of natural phenomena have failed. Some have argued that the darkness was caused by an eclipse. This thought is easily refuted by the fact that Passover occurs during a full moon. Therefore, the earth is closer to the sun than the moon, rendering an eclipse on the earth impossible. Others have attempted to explain this darkness by means of a severe dust storm referred to as a "black

sirocco.” Yet, we see nothing in the text referring to wind or dust. Still others have suggested that a thick cloud cover must have rolled in. The problem with this and other such explanations is that this darkness was clearly intended to be a *sign* from God. While “natural phenomena” may be explained as a strange coincidence, a sign from God is intended to cause shock and awe in those present precisely because it goes beyond ordinary providence. Further, Luke indicates how just dark and unusual this darkness was by the statement, “then the sun was darkened” (23:45) or literally in Greek, “the sun failing.” Between twelve noon and three o’clock, when the sun normally was at its strongest and brightest, it became as dark as night or perhaps even darker. Without question this darkness was intense, sobering and unforgettable.

This period of darkness raises a few pertinent questions. First, did the darkness cover only the land of Palestine or the whole lighted side of the earth? The Greek word used by all the synoptics (*ge*) can be translated as “ground, land” (thus referring to a region or country) or as the “earth” (i.e. the whole earth). Most commentators believe that, like the supernatural darkness that covered Egypt (Ex. 10:22), this darkness was probably limited to the land of Judea. Other scholars believe that the whole earth was darkened because Luke says the sun’s light failed. If this statement is not a figure of speech, then obviously the whole earth would be darkened. Whatever position one holds, one must not forget that all the evangelists emphasize that “all the land” (Mt. 27:45; Lk. 23:44) or the “whole land” (Mk. 15:33) was darkened. Some scholars who prefer the interpretation that the darkness was limited to the Middle East point out that there are no records in any nations outside of Israel of darkness during the day in the spring of A.D. 29. “There seems no necessity for supposing that the darkness extended beyond Palestine. Our Lord’s ministry was specially directed to Israel, and the land of Israel was the land to which all miracles connected with His life and death were confined.”¹

Second, did the darkness appear suddenly or was it a gradual occurrence? “Some think that the darkness set in gradually, then grew deeper up to a certain point, and slowly receded after that. The evangelists offer no support for this view.”² When it came time for Christ to enter the final stage of His sacrifice—the peak of His suffering and separation from the Father—God turned the light off over the nation of Israel.

This supernatural darkness was rich in meaning for the crucified Messiah as well as the people of Israel. Although the immediate context does not define the purpose or meaning of the darkness, the Scriptures use darkness to describe a number of things associated with judgment.

First, darkness was a common metaphor for God’s judgment against nations for sin. In Exodus 10:22-23 Jehovah literally darkened the land of Egypt to punish its leaders and people for refusing to obey God’s voice by letting the children of Israel go to serve Him. When God described the curses that accompany blatant disobedience to His commandments He said, “And you shall grope at noon day, as a blind man gropes in the darkness” (Dt. 28:29). When Jehovah spoke judgment to unfaithful Israel through Isaiah He declared, “In that day they will roar against them.... And if one looks to the land, behold darkness and sorrow; and the light is darkened by the clouds” (5:30). In Isaiah 13:9-10 God described His coming judgment against Babylon in terms of darkness, “Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine.” When Jeremiah prophesied regarding the destruction of Judah he said, “She [Judah] has breathed her last; her sun has gone down while it

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke*, 2:483.

² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, 714.

was yet day” (15:9). Amos prophesied that Jehovah will cause the sun to become darkened at noon, darkening the earth in broad daylight (8:9). This is a terrifying sign of God’s wrath against Israel. The day of the Lord will not be a day of light, but of darkness (Amos 5:18-20; cf. Ezek. 32:7-8; Isa. 34:4-5; Joel 2:28-32). Our Lord used the same darkness terminology to describe the coming destruction of Israel by the Romans in A.D. 70 (Mt. 24:29; Mk. 13:24; Lk. 21:25).

This familiar Old Testament motif demonstrates that darkness, whether literal or figurative, represents God’s displeasure and judgment against sin. To those who are guilty of unrepentant sin, darkness means the wrath of God. It means terror, despair, fear, sorrow, pain and death. Even the heathen understood that darkness was a sign of impending disaster. “Philo spoke of a supernatural eclipse of the sun or moon as signifying ‘either the death of kings or the destruction of cities’ (De Providential II. 50).”³

When God imputed the sins of the elect upon the Savior on the cross, the land descended into darkness because the cup of God’s wrath was poured out onto the Messiah. The Redeemer was paying the ultimate price for the sins of His people. He was giving His life as “a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45; cf. Mt. 20:28; 26:28). The judgment, terror, suffering and punishment that we would have endured on the final, terrible great day of the Lord, the last day of history, was concentrated and placed on Jesus in the space of a few hours. That deep darkness accompanied the horror of great darkness which the blessed Surety experienced spiritually while He atoned for the sins of the world. “When earth denied him a drop of cold water, heaven denied him a beam of light; having to deliver us from *utter darkness*, he did himself, in the depth of His sufferings, walk in darkness, and had no light, Isa. 1. 10.”⁴

Second, darkness is often used to describe hell. Our Lord said, “Cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25:30; cf. Ps. 107:10-11). Jude says that the place reserved for the wicked is “the blackness of darkness forever” (1:13). The wicked suffer torment in the flames of hell, yet they do so in totally black, terrifying darkness. “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness, in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 22:13).

On that day almost two thousand years ago, Christ entered the darkness of hell. He took upon Himself the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13) and was enveloped by the passion of hell. On the cross there was no light of love, no light of comfort, no light of peace and no light of friendship and fellowship with God. He hung on the gibbet in darkness, judicially under the curse of God, abandoned to the darkness of hell. “The darkness in which Christ now hung suspended accrued to Him, impinged upon Him, in that second of time in which His sorrow became so aggravated that it finally had to give expression to the statement: ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ He was suffering the pains of hell.”⁵ “This darkness meant judgment, the judgment of God upon our sins. This punishment was borne by Jesus, so that he, as our Substitute, suffered most intense agony, indescribable woe, terrible isolation or forsakenness. Hell came to Calvary that day, and the Savior descended into it and bore its horrors in our stead.”⁶ “God thrust His only begotten Son into the dark. He must experience what is meant by the term ‘outer darkness.’ This was one of His own teachings: outer, extreme, darkness, a

³ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 571.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:428.

⁵ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 373.

⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1034.

darkness unknown on earth.... Today He must experience it, and the experience of darkness demands a medium of darkness.”⁷

Third, darkness refers to that which is opposed to Jehovah: “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5). Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil (Jn. 3:20). Those who continue in sin and do not submit to Christ are the children of darkness (1 Th. 5:5). They are full of darkness and dwell in darkness because they do not obey God’s Word (Ps. 82:5; 107:10-11). Our Lord said to the apostate leaders of Israel when they came to arrest Him, “[T]his is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Lk. 22:53). When Jesus hung on the cross, the day turned into night for the greatest evil ever committed on this earth was done. The demons and the enemies of God gained an apparent triumph and darkness appeared for a time to have victory over light. “Now the prince of this world, and his forces, the *rulers of the darkness of this world*, were to be cast out, to be spoiled and vanquished; and to make his victory the more illustrious, he fights them on their own ground; gives them all the advantage they could have against him by this darkness, lets them take the *wind* and *sun*, and yet baffles them, and so becomes more than a conqueror.”⁸ The Savior had to enter the outer darkness in order to vanquish the forces of darkness.

Fourth, this period of amazing darkness was also designed to shock the nation of Israel. When the darkness fell over the land, the nation of Israel became fearful and silent. For a time the blasphemers shut their mouths in horror. God attended the crucifixion and death of Jesus with special signs so the Jews would consider the meaning and importance of the death of Christ. As Ryle notes,

It was meet and right that the attention of all around Jerusalem should be arrested in a marked way, when the great sacrifice for sin was being offered and the Son of God was dying. There were signs and wonders wrought in the sight of all Israel, when the law was given on Sinai. There were signs and wonders in like manner when the atoning blood of Christ was shed on Calvary. There was a sign for an unbelieving world. The darkness at mid-day was a miracle which would compel men to think.—There was a sign for the professing Church and the ministers of the temple. The rending of the veil which hung between the holy place and the holy of holies, was a miracle which would strike awe into the heart of every priest and Levite in Jewry.

Signs like these, on special occasions, let us remember, are a part of God’s ways in dealing with man. He knows the desperate stupidity and unbelief of human nature. He sees it necessary to arouse our attention by miraculous works, when He brings in a new dispensation. He thus compels men to open their eyes whether they will or no, and to hear His voice for a little season. He has done so frequently in the days that are past. He did so when He gave the law. He did so in the passage before us when He brought in the Gospel. He will do so once more when Christ comes again the second time. He will show a sneering, unbelieving world that He can suspend the laws of nature at His pleasure, and alter the framework of creation as easily as He called the earth into being.⁹

Although it is clear that the darkness pointed men to the sacrificial death of Christ, it may also have had a secondary meaning for the hardened reprobates of Israel (i.e. those who rejected the Messiah and crucified the Son of God). God had sent a plague of darkness upon Egypt before

⁷ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 378.

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:428.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke*, 2:479.

the first Passover as a sign that a divine curse rested upon the land (cf. Ex. 10:21ff.). Perhaps this darkness was also a sign of God's displeasure and wrath with Israel for murdering the author of life. Jehovah was telling the leaders and apostate nation that He would utterly destroy Israel. He was going to turn off their lights.

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