

## Three Signs of the Cross – Part 1

### Darkness at Noonday

Mark 15:33

David Sunday

April 2, 2017

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It was seven years ago this weekend that New Covenant Bible Church had our first service, and God has been very kind to us. In these seven years we've gone through much together. We've experienced some profound losses, including this weekend, as we remember the life of Phil Bloom. We've also experienced some wonderful victories and seen a lot of new families come. If you've come in these past seven years, know that you're very, very important and vital to the life and future of this church. We're so glad you're here. In case you wonder if I still love you, I want to let you know I'm very glad to be your pastor and very thankful for the opportunity to serve here. I'm eager to see what God is going to continue to do in the life of our church as we move forward.

We just finished a series in Genesis on the lives of Isaac and Jacob, and the next big book on the docket to which I want to return is Romans. We had gone through Romans 1-8, and I want to preach 9-16 fairly soon. But I'm not ready yet. I need some more time to marinate in that text. So we'll take these weeks leading up to Easter—and perhaps some weeks after—to focus on some key texts of Scripture that are central to our faith. I am praying that the Lord will revive us around the central realities of the gospel, as we celebrate our Savior's death, resurrection, exaltation to the right hand of the Father and the gift of His Holy Spirit.

There were three miracles that took place around the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ:

- First of all, there was darkness at noonday.
- Second, the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom.
- Third, Matthew tells us that the graves of many righteous saints were opened that day when Jesus died on the cross.

We're going to meditate on these three signs of the cross this week, next week on Palm Sunday and then on Good Friday.

Today we'll look at that first sign, the darkness at noonday. Please turn to Mark 15 as we read from the narrative of our Savior's death, beginning at verse 16:

Come, behold the wondrous mystery  
Christ the Lord upon the tree

In the stead of ruined sinners  
Hangs the Lamb in victory

(Come, Behold the Wondrous Mystery by Papa, Boswell & Bleecker)

Let's read this passage that takes us into the Holy of Holies and let us stand in awe of  
Jesus:

*<sup>16</sup> And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. <sup>17</sup> And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. <sup>18</sup> And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" <sup>19</sup> And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. <sup>20</sup> And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.*

*<sup>21</sup> And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. <sup>22</sup> And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). <sup>23</sup> And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. <sup>24</sup> And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. <sup>25</sup> And it was the third hour when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup> And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."*

*<sup>27</sup> And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>29</sup> And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, <sup>30</sup> save yourself, and come down from the cross!" <sup>31</sup> So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. <sup>32</sup> Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.*

*<sup>33</sup> And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. <sup>34</sup> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>35</sup> And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." <sup>36</sup> And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." <sup>37</sup> And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup> And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup> And when the centurion, who stood facing*

*him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"*

Thanks be to God for His living Word!

Heavenly Father, we pray that as Your Word is opened to us today, You would grant miracles of self-forgetfulness to me the preacher and to us the hearers, that we would be caught up in the glories of Christ, that we would be given insight by Your Spirit to understand a little better what Jesus did for us. Take us deeper into the mysteries of the cross today, we pray, that we may live more worshipfully, obediently and adoringly of our great Savior. We ask this in His name. Amen.

I direct your attention to verse 33, where it has been said that “the darkest of all cries is matched by the darkest of all skies.” *“When the sixth hour had come,”* that is, noontime, *“there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour...”*—3:00 p.m. There is much the Bible has revealed to us about the profound meaning of our Lord’s death upon His cross. We know for instance that He hangs there as a substitute for sinners. Upon the cross He’s bearing the wrath of God that our sins deserve. We know that He is disarming the evil one and crushing Satan’s serpentine head (Genesis 3:15). We know that God is making Him Who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We know that He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, and that by His wounds we are healed (1 Peter 2:24). We know that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19). And we know that there on the cross, God was combining holiness, justice and love in all the perfections of deity, and together these attributes of God were working in perfect harmony to fully accomplish all that was required to ransom us, rescue us, return us to fellowship with our God. We know that all this and much more was happening when Jesus died on the cross.

But how much, really, do we know about the cross of Jesus? How much really do we understand? It is said of God in Psalm 18:11, *“He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him, thick clouds dark with water.”* And by that we should understand that there are mysteries in God’s being that are far beyond what our puny little minds can comprehend. And is not the same true of the cross?

An older and wiser saint asks, “Is not Calvary a place of darkness, a place so holy and awful that the wisest thing to do is remove one’s shoes and bow in penitent, grateful adoration?”

We should take the shoes off our feet, for we're standing on holy ground when we come beneath the shadow of Calvary.

Whatever we do know about the cross, whatever we do see in the cross, it's never all there is to see in the cross. Spurgeon said it well:

God only knows the love of God. Christ only knows all that He accomplished when He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit. God veiled the cross in darkness, and in darkness much of its deeper meaning lies—not because God would not reveal it, but because we have not capacity enough to discern it all.

We can't take it in. It's beyond us. Yet God calls us again and again to return, probe, ponder and marvel. Let us do so, ever realizing that these are things into which angels long to look (1 Peter 1:12). These are things that boggle the imagination of the saints on high. Forever we will never get beyond the cross. We will forever worship Him as the worthy Lamb Who was slain (Revelation 5:12). We will ever praise Him for what He did on that cross for us.

So imagine the scene that's before us. As our Savior is lifted high upon that cross, His wrists and ankles are fixed with cruel, merciless iron nails. As they lift Him up on that instrument of torture, they brutally drop it into a hole in the ground as Jesus' helpless, crucified body lurches in agony. The onlookers are deriding Him. They're taunting Him. They're mocking Him. They're reviling Him. They're spitting on Him. This is the utter desolation of shame.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suffering and shame...  
In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,  
A wondrous beauty I see,  
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,  
To pardon and sanctify me.

(The Old Rugged Cross by George Bennard, 1913)

There He hangs, exposed in broad daylight, from 9:00 a.m. until noon. *“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger”* (Lamentations 1:12). Those words rightly belong to the lips of our Savior.

Then suddenly, at noontime, the finger of God turns off the lights. It's a supernatural event. It happens at high noon, the brightest time of day. It's during Passover, the time of the full moon, when there was no possibility of a solar eclipse. It wasn't just a brief, momentary cloud. It lasted for three hours as utter darkness came upon the face of the earth. It wasn't just an isolated event. The Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark and Luke—tell us that there was darkness

over the whole land. And whether that means the whole northern hemisphere or the whole land of Judea we cannot be sure. But this was something that affected many, many people. Many suddenly realized that something awe-inspiring and very fearful was happening in Jerusalem. Luke tells us that *“the sun’s light failed...”* (in Luke 23:45). The poet Robert Browning writes, *“But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can.”* God, Who created the sun, can turn it off for a while, can hide it in darkness.

Remember when Jesus was born in Bethlehem that the shepherds were out in their fields at night, watching o’er their flocks, *“And the glory of the Lord shone around them”* (Luke 2:9). There was bright light at midnight announcing the birth of our Savior. But now as our Savior dies on Calvary, there is darkness at noonday.

We are meditating and pondering today on what this darkness signifies. There are at least three things that ought to command our attention and call us to worship today.

### **This darkness signifies that creation itself is going into mourning for its Maker.**

The creation mourns when the Creator dies. Remember in the beginning when there was nothing, back in Genesis 1:1? Before God created the world, the earth was formless and void; darkness covered everything. But God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:15). And the light that lights up this world is not the product of mere chance and atoms. The light that lights our world came from God, when He said, *“Let there be light”* (Genesis 1:3).

John tells us that Jesus is that light. John 1:4-5 say, *“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* Jesus is the true light which gives light to everyone, and He Himself says in John 8:12, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*

So as Jesus was gasping for air upon that cross, the light of the world was dimming and burning out—creation had a profound sympathy with its Creator. Creation rejoiced at His coming into the world and creation mourns at His dying. Now creation is groaning until He returns—and when He does, the trees of the field will clap their hands and the mountains and the hills will break forth in joy together as He comes to judge the earth (Psalm 96:11-13). Creation may be in greater sympathy with Christ its Maker than we who are created in His image are.

Creation knows and feels the gravity, the profundity, of what is taking place on this cross. The Puritan Samuel Rutherford imagines it like this:

Darkness was all in Judea when our Lord suffered—and why?  
Because the candle that lighted the sun and the moon was blown  
out. The Godhead was eclipsed, and the world’s eye was put out.

He took away the sun with Him, as it were, to another world when  
He Who was the world's Sun was put out. When He went out of the  
earth, the sun would not stay behind Him.

Then he pictures this little dialog with the sun: "Sun, sun, what ails thee?" And the sun  
responds, "I have no will to shine when my Lord is going to another world." As if the sun had  
said to Jesus, "Lord, if Thou be going to another world, take me with you."

The question is: do we share the sympathy of creation with its Maker? If we do, the only  
appropriate response is what the hymn says:

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

Thus might I hide my blushing face  
While His dear cross appears,  
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,  
And melt my eyes to tears.

(Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed? by Isaac Watts)

It's the first thing we see—creation sympathizing with its Creator.

### **God Himself is pronouncing judgment upon the wickedness of this world. \***

The prophets in the Old Testament spoke of the day of the Lord, when He would come to  
bring judgment on all sin and evil, pouring out His wrath once and for all. They spoke of this as a  
day of darkness. Listen to Isaiah 13:9-10:

*Behold, the day of the Lord comes,  
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,  
to make the land a desolation  
and to destroy its sinners from it.  
For the stars of the heavens and their constellations  
will not give their light;  
the sun will be dark at its rising,  
and the moon will not shed its light.*

That's what it's going to be like on the day God's judgment falls, says Isaiah. "*The sun will  
be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.*" Or listen to Jeremiah 15:7-9 (NIV):  
"*I will bring bereavement and destruction on my people, for they have not changed their  
ways... At midday I will bring a destroyer... Her sun will set while it is still day.*" That's what's

happening here. It's the day of the Lord, the day of God's judgment upon human sin and evil. The prophet Amos similarly says (Amos 5:18-20; 8:9-10):

*Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!  
Why would you have the day of the Lord?  
It is darkness, and not light,  
as if a man fled from a lion,  
and a bear met him,  
or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,  
and a serpent bit him.  
Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light,  
and gloom with no brightness in it?...  
"And on that day," declares the Lord God,  
"I will make the sun go down at noon  
and darken the earth in broad daylight...I will make it like the  
mourning for an only son."*

So the darkness signifies God's judgment being meted out on human sin. It's a reminder to us that we cannot run from God's judgment. Sometimes we think we can flee and escape, but Amos tells us, "You're fleeing from a lion, but you're just going to meet a bear. You're leaning against the wall of your house thinking you can relax there, but there's a serpent coming out to bite you." Friend, you cannot escape God's judgment. There's only one refuge from the judgment of God—that is where the judgment of God was poured out on the head of His Son on Calvary. There is a refuge from the storm of God's wrath that will surely envelope all those who remain unrepentant in their sins. Only in Christ is there refuge.

Think of the plagues of Egypt, when God brought His judgment down on the Egyptians for their oppressiveness, injustice and cruelty. He sent those plagues as warnings and reminders. One of the last plagues, in Exodus 10:21-23, was darkness:

*Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived.*

After that came the Passover, when all whose doorposts were covered by the blood of the lamb were delivered from the destruction of their firstborn children. Now here in Mark 15 we are fast-forwarding to another Passover, to the day our Savior died in Jerusalem. And now there is

darkness in Israel, not Egypt. I love how Thabiti Anyabwile compares the Passover in Egypt with the Passover at Calvary:

Egypt lay in darkness for three days; Jerusalem for three hours.  
After the darkness, Egypt's firstborn sons were killed; in Jerusalem,  
the only begotten Son of God was slain. In Egypt, the lamb's blood  
covered the doorposts of homes; in Jerusalem, the Lamb of God's  
blood covered the sins of the whole world.

That's what's happening, friends, as the soul and body of Jesus are enveloped in the darkness that can be felt. There in the darkness, Jesus is experiencing in His soul a real felt darkness, as every bitter thought and every evil deed we've ever done crowns His blood-stained brow. Jesus becomes sin for us. He becomes a curse for us, as He hangs on the tree (Galatians 3:13). He's hanging on that tree to bear God's judgment for you and for me, so that as He cries out, "My God, My God! Why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46) we can be sure we're never going to have to cry that out ourselves. He will never forsake us, when we put our trust in Jesus.

Because Jesus bore God's judgment on the cross, all who trust in Him will never hear these words from God's lips: "Cast this worthless servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:14-30). That's Jesus' description of hell. It's a place of utter darkness. Listen to how Revelation 16:10-11 describes hell: "*The beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.*" Oh, how awful.

But there on the cross, our Savior descended into the horrors of hell for us, so that we would never have to face that awful fate. Because Jesus died there, and because Jesus bore the wrath your sins deserved, God is now calling you out of darkness into His marvelous light. God is saying, "Come to the cross of Jesus. There you will find a refuge—because darkness could not hold Jesus on that cross. "Bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave He rose again." The darkness could not hold Him.

Now His cross stands like a lighthouse, like a beacon, to all who are lost in the darkness of sin in this world and He's calling you home. Charles Spurgeon said, "The cross is the lighthouse which guides poor, weather-beaten humanity into the harbor of peace." Hear the Savior calling you to find refuge from God's judgment in His mighty cross. Don't think of sin as a light thing. Realize that the darkness that enveloped Jesus on that cross is what your sin deserves, and let it—in the words of John Calvin—"excite in you deeper horror at your sins," and make you realize how much you need this refuge.

Come to Jesus. Hear His urgent call. He says, *“Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going”* (John 12:35). While you have the light, believe in the Light, that you may become sons of light. Friends, you have the light right now. Light is shining forth from God’s Word. Light is shining forth in the gospel, leading you away from the dark paths of sin, from the ways of judgment, from the ways of damnation and death and destruction, leading you to a safe refuge, to a place where you can know that you are eternally secure and accepted by God. Hear the call of the Savior and embrace the light while it is with us, lest the darkness overtake you.

### **The powers of evil are let loose to do their very worst.**

That’s what Jesus understood. He knew that in this darkness, Satan and his minions were having their field day. When Jesus was betrayed and arrested, He said to the leading priests, the captains of the temple guard and the elders who had come for Him, “This is your moment—the time when the power of darkness reigns” (Luke 22:53).

So friends, the very worst the devil could ever do, he did on the cross. Here’s what you need to understand. Satan spent his most heavy ammunition there. He unleashed his worst artillery there on the cross. Satan thought, “I’ve got my ‘Most Wanted’ here.” Jesus was number one on hell’s “Most Wanted” list. Satan thought, “I have Him captive here.” The Prince of Glory suspended, bound hand and foot to the wood, in apparent weakness. And as Jesus hung in that darkness, the rulers and authorities, the principalities and powers flung their very worst at Him. They gave Him the very, very worst. Hell cannot do worse than what it did on Calvary.

But little did the devil know that Jesus was gaining the upper hand. He was disarming the rulers and authorities as His blood was being shed, poured out for our guilt and shame. Jesus was engaging in mortal combat with the enemy of our souls. He was taking on Satan on Satan’s turf. He was grappling with Satan—and Jesus mastered him. He overpowered him. And when He cried out, “It is finished,” it was His victory cry over all the powers of darkness.

So friend, when the darkness closes in on you, you can say, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.” When you’re overwhelmed with a sense of fear and dread—fear of the future, fear of death, fear of guilt and condemnation—you can look to that mighty Refuge and you can say, “Jesus took on all my greatest enemies. He did for me all that I ever needed to have done to give me everlasting hope and peace.” Or as we heard yesterday, what Phil would say, “The big ‘C’ has already been taken care of. The Cancer of sin has been defeated on the cross. I don’t need to be afraid of the little ‘c’.”

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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