

The Darkness at the Cross

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[0 : 0 0] chapter 15. I remember years ago standing on a beach in northern France and being really annoyed with one of my children. Standing on a beach in northern France and being annoyed with one of my kids. I don't really know where the rest of my family had gone. They were probably off hunting for ice cream, but at the time in question it was just me and my youngest daughter. And I was a little bit frustrated. You see, we had come all the way. I'd driven all the way to France and here we were standing at this most beautiful location. You can imagine the sort of vista before me, right? You know, beautiful sunny weather, lovely blue ocean, pebble beach. We're standing there and what was my daughter doing? Well, what I thought she was doing was playing in the dirt at my feet. You know, I've taken her all the way to France and there she is playing in the muck at my feet. Turns out, actually, to be honest with you, I was completely wrong. You see, in closer inspection I find that my daughter wasn't just playing in the dirt. What she was actually doing was inspecting one particular pebble that she had found on the beach. And you know as well as I do, right, how beautiful these can be.

And this one was lovely. It was multi-coloured. It was shiny and it was smooth. And so I felt rebuked. I couldn't be angry with her anymore, could I? Because essentially we were both doing the same thing, weren't we? We were both appreciating beauty. Okay, I was taking this wide-angled approach to the beauty, but my daughter was appreciating it as well. What was she doing? She had just zeroed in on one particular aspect of the scene, hadn't she? She had just zeroed in on one particular detail.

Well, I don't know you, but I guess you've been to church before, okay? And you know what ministers can do. So you know ministers can maybe preach on a whole sermon on the whole book of the Bible, or a preacher can preach on a big chunk of scripture. All of that's great. All of that's fine. Not today. This morning what I want us to do is to follow after my daughter. And I want you and I to zero in on one particular detail of the drama of redemption. Now, it is a detail that is so key and so critical that it is repeated by all three synoptic gospels. So you're all, I hope, at this point with me, wondering what's the detail, right? Well, this morning I want us to linger on this fact.

The fact that it was dark at Golgotha. Have you lingered on that before? The reality that as our Lord hung dying on a wooden beam, it wasn't misty and it wasn't cloudy and it certainly wasn't sunny, that it was pitch black at the cross. Now, the intention with that is not so much, well, it is to think about the spiritual meaning. It's not so much for you and I to think along the lines of what actually caused the darkness. No, I want us largely for the majority of the sermon to think about, well, why was it dark? You know, what does that tell us about the nature of Jesus' death? But I do think it would be leaving too many questions unanswered if we didn't at least for a moment think about some of the practicalities of that darkness there. So what I suggest is we do this before we get into the meat of the sermon. We kind of have a starter, if you like, that before we, you know how it is in a Presbyterian church, before we look at the three points of the sermon, that we just make a couple of introductory, very brief remarks. Okay, so here we go. First of all, I want you to consider that it was dark at the cross, first of all, when it should have been bright. So if you've got a copy of Scripture, have a look at verse 33 with me, verse 33. And do you notice what we've got here? So we are told, look at the time references if you would, we're told that it was dark from, now look at that, from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. Everyone got it? The sixth hour to the ninth hour. And what do we know about that? If you know the Jewish calendar at all, you know that means that darkness fell at the cross, bang on, midday, doesn't it? In fact, listen to what I'm saying for later on in the sermon.

[5 : 0 6] You're learning there that darkness fell at Golgotha at noon. That's the word, noon. Now, you think about that, think about what that means. It's amazing when you think about the Middle East, isn't it? That means that when the Middle Eastern sun was supposed to be at its highest point

in the sky, you know, when it's supposed to be just intense, you know, blistering in its heat and its intensity, it is that moment suddenly darkness falls, okay? So first introductory remark, it was dark when it should have been incredibly bright. The second introductory remark is that it was dark by supernatural means. See, the reality is, friends, that so many people get thoroughly distracted by this darkness. You know, if you have, some of you may have looked at some of the material on this. If you've done that, you'll see that actually very little is written about the meaning of the darkness, and nearly everything is written about what causes it. So you can imagine all these scholars, and they're all speculating, was it an eclipse? You know, was it a sandstorm? Was it some Sirocco winds? Well, again, not that it matters too much, but I want to suggest it was none of that stuff, and I'll tell you why.

If you look at the gospel of Luke and what he says about it, Luke there, he suggests that actually this darkness had a miraculous quality to it. It was a sort of immediate intensity, a miraculous intensity to the darkness. I'll read you what he says. Luke says that at Calvary, the sun's light, ready, failed. Like it immediately, completely, entirely failed. And I think you know as well as I do, that's not an eclipse, that's not a sandstorm. I think you know as well as I do, what does that indicate? The hand of Almighty God, right? The power. This was a supernatural working this darkness.

And if you hear that and realize it because of that, do you not agree with me? It must have been terrifying. Like imagine being a farmer outside Jerusalem midday, working on the fields, just about to take a break when all of a sudden darkness engulfs the land. Imagine, imagine Pilate, imagine Pilate walking, pacing back and forth, wrestling with his conscience. What has he done with Jesus of Nazareth when all of a sudden at noon, everything around Pilate goes dark? Or what about your Lord?

Now think about it. Our Lord not just being mocked on the cross, not just being ridiculed, now we understand that those voices of derision, they came at Jesus and they came at Jesus through the utter darkness. Terrifying. So, a couple of introductory remarks. Let's get to the real stuff, the real question we've got to ask and answer here. The question, why? You know, we understand that God caused the darkness, but Lord, why have you done this? What does it tell us about Jesus, the nature of Jesus' death, that it was dark? I want to just very briefly suggest three things, each beginning with S for what it's worth. But first of all, the darkness at Golgotha, it shows us, I think, the significance of the cross. Let me say that again so that everyone gets it.

The darkness, you look to the darkness and you see the significance of that event. One of my wife's favorite films is the 2004 film, *The Day After Tomorrow*. It's terrible. But don't, please, don't tell her. [9 : 22] Have you ever seen my wife? Don't tell her that I said that. She's not here. So, it is a terrible film. A real Hollywood or blockbuster film, really, you know? So, the idea that, yeah, global warming, in the last two weeks of the film, global warming has caused all of these natural disasters that are threatening to destroy the world imminently. Okay? Real Hollywood blockbuster thing. Okay, it's not the greatest film in the world. It does help us at this moment, because at one point in the film, if you've seen it, some of you probably have seen it. At one point, scientists are desperate to show politicians that unique rises in sea temperatures over the previous couple of weeks, they're going to have these knock-on effects that's just going to destroy the world. Okay?

Unique rises in sea temperatures. So, what do the scientists do? The scientists burst into the Pentagon, as you do, burst into the Pentagon. They take their laptop and they put it before the politicians. Now, here's the critical thing. In amongst all of the data on the laptop, they have the unique rises in sea temperatures on the screen there, but they're flashing on the screen. Okay? Everyone can picture that, you know, all the data, but then here's the unique sea temperatures on and off, on and off. You can see what the scientists are saying.

It's going on and off. They're saying, look at this, politician. Look at this. This is unique. This is an entirely unprecedented event. This is going to be catastrophic. This has never happened before. Think about it. Do you not see? Is that not something similar to what's happening at Calvary? That in order to alert humanity to the unprecedented nature of Jesus' death, what is happening? Light is not going on and off and on and off at Calvary. But in order to alert mankind to the uniqueness of this death, light has been completely and utterly withdrawn at Calvary. Now, I'd ask you to consider God's incredible, amazing grace in doing that. I mean, isn't it absolutely astounding?

Like, such is God's concern that man will look and ponder and consider the cross. What happens? It's almost as though God has just taken the sun out of the sky from, he's disrupted all of the cosmos.

[11 : 59] But just as the Father, think about it, just as he marked the unique birth of Jesus with this really bright star in the sky where Bethlehem. What happens at the unique death? The Father marks this unique death with his blackened sun. But don't you see the grace? It's all for us. It's actually all for you, isn't it? That we might look and see this is a remarkable event. This is a unique event.

And I do think surely in that there's application for us and for you, especially if you are a Christian in here. How has lockdown in this period in the last few months been for your soul and your spiritual walk? For you? I mean, really, just now, functionally speaking, are you ignoring that great work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross? Has it been an awful long time since you just sat in your home and pondered in amazement and in wonder and in praise and in gratitude what Christ Jesus has done for you?

Or is it a different way for you? Is it actually a long time since you have told other people of this history-defining moment? A long time since you evangelized, spoke to some, a long time since you told your kids or the kids of this congregation of the wonderful nature of the cross. If so, consider it for a moment. God is so concerned that you would look and linger on the cross. What does he do? It's like God just extinguishes light at Golgotha. So, the significance. Second, this darkness that we're considering here, it shows us the sorrow of the cross. The sorrow of the cross. Now, I don't know many of you good people at all. I was thinking about, it was racking my brain. I've never preached here.

I did speak at a conference here a million years ago, maybe 15 years ago, down the stairs, I think. But I don't know you. But I am going to conclude that you are a theologically astute and biblically literate congregation. I'm sure that's the case. And so, when I say to you the phrase, the last days, I'm sure we all know, don't we, what we mean by that in reformed circles. What's the last days? The last days is not something coming, is it? Now, we understand, biblically speaking, the last days, that's actually the time from Christ first coming through to his return. Isn't that the last days? It's from the cross of Christ right through to the consummation of all things. Okay, the last days. Now, you're maybe looking at me thinking, why is he talking about the last days? I'll tell you the reason. There is a portion of Scripture in the Old Testament that talks about the last days, okay? But this is a portion of Scripture that ought to inform our understanding of this darkness. Does everyone hear that? A portion of the Old Testament Scriptures that really should color how we interpret that darkness. So, if you've got a Bible, I'm going to ask you to turn there. Okay, so it's Amos chapter 8, and I can't help you with a page number, I'm afraid.

[15 : 26] Amos chapter 8, but also it's coming up on the screen. Now, as we look at this, I'm going to give you that illustration that you've probably heard a thousand times before about Old Testament prophecy, and Old Testament prophecy being a mountain range. We all heard that one before. Think of this.

It's on the screen or in your hands. It's a mountain range. Think about it in terms of three mountains standing one beside each other. I don't know. Like, let's imagine it's the Coullins or some mountain range. If you look at a mountain range, three mountains, you know, from afar, you're with me, are you, that they seem like they're standing one beside the other, don't they? If you look at it 10 miles away, look at a mountain range. There's three mountains. They look like they're together, but as you get nearer those mountains, what happens? You realize, no, they ain't together.

You know, there's miles between the mountains, okay? That's Amos 8. That's Amos 8. So in the first place, the first mountain, Amos is writing a message to his initial readership centuries ago. You got it? It's the first mountain. Third mountain, miles away. Amos is also here prophesying about the last day, the last judgment. What does that leave? Second mountain.

I think here, you'll see that Amos is also prophesying about the very cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Look with me at verse 9. Do you see it? Now here, Amos speaks of a terrible day, and it's a day not only, now listen, not only when the earth, you tell me what day it is, you know?

He tells us of a, prophesies of a day, one day when the earth, not only will it be darkened when it's supposed to be broad daylight, but look at it. At what time will it be dark? You see it in verse 9?

[17 : 21] He prophesies of this day coming when it's going to go dark at noon. So is everyone with me? That's the cross Amos is speaking about. Now, what we've skimmed over there is that in verse

10, if you look at it, he calls this day, the day of the cross, a day of sorrow or a day of mourning. So I have a question for you. It is rhetorical, but I have a question for you nonetheless. At the cross of Jesus Christ, as the darkness falls, who is grieving?

As this darkness falls, who is it that sorrows? I want to suggest this tentatively, and I want to ask you to chew over.

I'm going to suggest that what we see in the darkness of the cross is actually the very sorrow of God himself. The Amos here teaches that at the cross we see something of the grief of the Father. Now, you might object to that. Honestly, you might. You might come back to me and say, but Andy, the confession says that God is a God without passions, which is the idea that nothing in all of creation can impose pain on God or evoke a surprise emotion from God.

But that's not what happened at the cross, is it? That wasn't unexpected to God the Father. Not in any way. It was planned. Hang on.

[19 : 02] Look at the words in verse 10 again. On this day, when the sun goes down at noon, how is the sorrow described? Look at the end of it. It is mourning like that for an only son.

In the darkness, Amos says, mourning like that, sorrow like that for an only son. And surely, if you follow that, you are struck by how much God must love you.

If you're a Christian, I wonder if you have lost sight of how much God must love you. Think of it. All to save you.

All to take you and claim you for himself. What has God done? The almighty creator, everlasting God, has willingly endured planned sorrow.

A sorrow that you see in the darkness at Golgotha. So we see significance. We see sorrow. Last thing. We also see the sin bearing in the darkness.

[20 : 13] The darkness shows us the sin bearing. Okay, so I've affirmed and I've assumed that we know our Bibles reasonably well. So because of that, what I'll say next probably won't come as much as surprise to you.

And that is that the darkness of the cross suggests the anger of God. Right? That doesn't come as a surprise if you know your Bible, does it? The darkness goes hand in hand with judgment.

Right? We see that in Deuteronomy, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah. Lots of times darkness symbolizes the fury and the wrath of God.

That doesn't surprise anyone. What might surprise some in the room or some watching in at home is who it is that I'm going to say God is angry with at Golgotha.

The object of God's wrath. See, it might be surprising because over the centuries many good commentators, many good men have suggested that the darkness shows us God's fury with mankind.

[21 : 18] I guess we follow the logic. Do we? Do we see what they're saying? It's the idea that the darkness shows us God almost turning away and he's turning away with utter disgust at what man is doing to his only son, his beloved son.

The darkness shows us God turning away with fury against the Jews and the Romans and so forth. I do not think that is correct.

You see, we had, didn't we, friends? We had two readings today. Maybe you're wondering why we had two readings. Think back to Exodus. I'm reckoning it's a story known to so many of you.

What happens there? The plague. You know it, don't you? We're taught it from Sunday school onwards. God acts in judgment over Egypt. What does he do?

He sends darkness over Egypt. And what is that sign of? It is a sign of God cursing the land.

[22 : 23] Has everybody got that? The darkness in Egypt in Exodus 10 was a sign of God's curse upon Egypt. So I wonder, friends, don't you see it?

What is, I'm asking you, what is the primary reason that it was dark at the cross? Was it that God was angry with the Jews? Was it that he was angry with the Romans? Not a bit of it.

It was because God was acting in judgment over his only son. And why? There in the darkness see it. That Christ Jesus was becoming a curse.

And a curse for you. The darkness falls. Because God was punishing his son, Christ, becoming accursed for us.

Now, you're with me when I say it. We always think about that from the Father's perspective, don't we? We always think about it. Oh, that means that the Father's wrath has been turned aside. You know, the Father's anger at our sin has been satisfied.

[23 : 25] We think about it from the Father's perspective. But will you not just consider it from Jesus' perspective on the cross? Do you understand what he did and endured for you?

He really went through hell. There, Jesus on that cross endured the outer darkness. That he himself preached about and spoke about.

Don't you see? He knew on that cross a separation from the God in whom there is no darkness at all. A separation from his Father.

And isn't it the case that that darkness is a visual picture for you of the spiritual misery and dereliction Jesus knew as he cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

You ask, I ask, why was it dark at the cross? It was dark because of the greatest paradox in all of human history.

[24 : 30] There at Calvary, God the Father punishing a son he loves so much and all to free you and to claim you as his own.

So I want to end just speaking to the two groups of people that are in this room. The two groups of people who are listening online. First, I want to speak to you if you are a Christian in here and I want to plead with you to go home rejoicing in the gospel and rejoicing in what you read here in Mark's gospel.

Listen to it. That at the ninth hour, what happened? Light returned to the land. Do you not see why? As a Christian, that should fill your heart with joy. Light returned. The darkness was no more. Don't you see? Sin was done. Sin was dealt with.

God's wrath was satisfied. All in that darkness, in those three hours, light returned. We can rejoice. We have hope. We are right with God.

[25 : 39] We see it in the light. But then the other group of people. To those in here, to those at home who do not know Jesus Christ, please hear this.

Outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, you today still stand with the curse of sin upon your shoulders. And the reality is, outside of Christ, you stand to face the consequences of your rebellion against God, the consequences for your sin.

You stand to face that, not for three hours. In death, you stand to face the consequences of your sin forever and evermore.

And right now, in His grace, God says to you in His gospel, it need not be like that. Just here, in the gospel, God says, you can be saved.

[26 : 41] You can come out of that condemnation. You can be accepted by God if you will only come to Jesus Christ. So I stand here and I plead with you, run to Jesus.

It isn't nonsense. Come to the Lord Christ. Repent of your sin and believe. Because I can guarantee you this, the light shines in the darkness.

And the darkness has not overcome it. Friends, let's bow before God and let's pray. Gracious Lord, our heavenly God, we pray to you with wonder and amazement.

Lord God, we are wretches and we are sinful and we are so self-obsessed and self-centered and we offend you by our sin, yet you have done all things well and all for us.

Lord God, we praise you for the great work of Calvary. We thank you for the fact that the darkness shows us the great significance of that death. We thank you that it shows us indeed the sorrow, the cost of our salvation.

[28 : 03] But we thank you also it shows us we are forgiven in Christ of all of our sin. Lord, would you work in the hearts of some, even in these moments.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.