

The Day the Light Went Out

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Date: 22 November 2020

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[0 : 0 0] We've been moving through Matthew in this series in the mornings for about a year now, and we're coming to the end. It's so easy when we're reading the Bible to kind of get lost in the moment to just kind of skim over what's there, what we're reading, and lose sight of the major picture, the overall kind of gist of what God is getting across.

It's easy to do. I remember a few years back, a study that I was in that changed the way that I view the Bible forever, was through the book of Genesis.

It can be kind of a difficult book. It's an ancient book, and it's written in a strange way, and it's about old stories, and there's all these questions that we bring to the table. But I remember going with this group of friends from our church through Genesis, week after week, we were struck deeply with the sense that God is determined to bless his sinful people.

We were struck over and over by this idea that look how humans fail again and again and again. We're not worthy, but why does God keep relentlessly pursuing and loving us?

That's the kind of big picture that we so easily lose, and it's a gift of God when it lands on our hearts in a special way.

[1 : 2 8] Now, I want to consider that in this passage because the whole Old Testament, the whole Bible up until this point is God relentlessly pursuing his sinful people with love, people that don't deserve that love.

And it's been driving to this moment right here. This execution of this guy from Nazareth is the center point.

It's the focal point of all of that stuff that came before. There's in Exodus 34, Moses asks God, he says, show me your glory and God hides him in the cleft of the rock.

You probably know the story. God passes by, allows Moses to just glimpse his back, and he declares his name. And part of what he says about himself in that crucial moment in the Old Testament is God says, I forgive iniquity, transgression and sin, and I will by no means clear the guilty.

Do you see the tension between those things? I forgive all the guilt, and I will never clear the guilty. How is that possible? Justice and mercy, they don't seem compatible.

[2 : 5 6] How do we reconcile that paradox? It's right here. This is how. This is the thing that all of that has been driving toward.

This is where the love of God on the cross is where justice and mercy kiss. This is the greatest possible display of the greatest possible love, of the greatest possible person.

And it's just in these verses. So we're going to read, we're going to pull apart and examine today and think about and be confronted by just a little section here that we read, it's verses 45 to 50, and we'll read it again in just a moment.

Now God is determined to destroy evil, but he's determined to destroy evil without destroying you.

And as people where the evil and the sin got way deep down in us when Adam and Eve fell in the garden way back in Genesis 3, it's inseparable from us.

[4 : 05] How will God destroy evil without destroying us? How is this possible? The answer is here. And it's curious, as I was reflecting on Matthew 27 this week, on this crucifixion narrative, as I said, probably the most important, crucial piece of literature that exists, let alone in the Bible.

Matthew doesn't seem to add any comments on it. He just kind of, he seems to just tell it like it happened and he doesn't apply it to your lives or he doesn't make a call of repentance and say, now reader, put your trust in this crucified savior.

He doesn't do that. Isn't that strange? Have you ever thought about that? Or does he? And I think he might.

In verse 54, the Centurion, part of the execution squad, sees all of the signs that accompany the death of Jesus. There's darkness, there's a curtain torn in the temple.

The earth shakes, the rocks split. Toons are opened and the dead stand up and walk around the city. The Centurion looks at all that and says, truly, this was the Son of God.

[5 : 18] That's a theological conclusion. The Centurion is doing theology because actually Mark is giving us commentary. Mark is explaining more than just the facts.

Mark is not a reporter. He's a teacher. And I'm sorry, Matthew, I've been saying Mark. Matthew is not a reporter. Oh, same goes for Mark. He's not a reporter. He's a teacher. And he's guiding us into understanding and applying what happened 2,000 years ago on Golgotha.

And in that passage and in his explanation, in his commentary, is the best news you could ever hear. In these few verses, we will find freedom, real freedom, eternal joy, hope, the deepest comforts.

But to get to all that comfort, we have to go through some discomfort. We have to stare into the darkness a little bit. So let's read verses 45 to 50 one more time.

Now from the sixth hour, there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, Why, Eli, lemme sub-Aqthani, that is, my God, my God, why, have you forsaken me?

[6 : 52] And some of the bystanders hearing it said, this man is calling Elijah. And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with salt wine and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.

But the others said, wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him. And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

Three hours of darkness, middle of the day, from noon to 3 p.m., what happened during those hours of darkness on Golgotha?

Well, there's the facts of what happened. And then there's the facts below the facts, as it were. And then there's what it means and how it impacts us.

So the facts of what happened, it's physical pain, physical agony. Roman crucifixion was a standard execution procedure designed to remove the victim from consideration as a human.

[7 : 58] It was designed to humiliate them and shame them as much as possible so that you wouldn't even relate to them as part of the human race.

We get the word excruciating from this word to crucify. So the execution squad took him outside of Jerusalem, outside the gates, outside the city, to a hill called the Place of the Skull, or Golgotha.

They hung him between two common thieves because they didn't think that he was any better. And in fact, they thought he was worse because he had been making these grand claims about being king of the Jews and the Son of God.

So they put a sign above his head to mock him. This is the king of the Jews in multiple languages so that no one missed the point. His impotence to be saved or to save himself was mocked.

Come down, save yourself if you're so powerful. Oh, if you're the Son of God, God must delight in you, but he doesn't seem to because he's not rescuing you.

[9 : 04] He was beaten, he was stripped. It was brutal. It was torturous. He was in unspeakable physical anguish and agony.

So those are the historical facts of what happened. But Jesus' death was only one of thousands of such executions.

I read somewhere that there was something like 30,000 crucifixions in this area in just this generation alone. Why did this crucifixion of this backwater Nazarene guy change the world forever?

Why does this one save souls? Well, to answer that question, we have to go to the facts below the facts. We've talked about physical agony, but we need to talk about soul agony.

Remember Thomas' sermon from last week, and we talked about, and maybe in your city groups you talked about this as well, the silence of Jesus during all of the proceedings leading up to the crucifixion.

[10 : 16] Like a lamb led to the slaughter, like a sheep to the shears. He was silent. He didn't complain. He didn't yell out. He didn't curse anybody.

Jesus has only one complaint in this whole episode. I've been abandoned by my God. That's his complaint. In the ESV it says he cried out with a loud voice, which is true, but it's a unique word, and it's not used elsewhere in the New Testament, because it's a unique moment.

And the essence of this word is that he screamed. Jesus shrieked that he'd been abandoned by God.

It's not just a yell. So we need to reiterate this. When a crown of thorns was pressed into his skull, he didn't scream, and he didn't complain.

And when his back was beaten and laid on the rough timber of the cross, he didn't complain or yell. When his hands and feet were nailed to the tree, he did not complain.

[11 : 26] It's at the peak of this darkness, when he experienced the far worse agony being abandoned by God, that he shrieked.

It's pain at the level of the soul, not physical pain, soul agony. And if we thought the crucifixion was bad, this kind of pain is far worse.

Now, we can't really explore fully what's going on here, what's happening in the Trinity right now. That's beyond the scope of human reasoning and human understanding.

But we can see what's written, and we can see the pain. Now, any time a loving relationship ends or is broken, there's pain. But I suggest that the pain goes equivalent to the duration and intimacy and perfection of that relationship.

For instance, if you are in a dating relationship for three months and no one's having a good time and it's uncomfortable, when that relationship's broken, no big deal. Kind of a relief.

[12 : 32] If you've been married for five years and you're growing closer and it's a sweet marriage and your spouse leaves you, unspeakable pain. If you've been nurturing a marriage for 50 years and your spouse leaves, exponentially worse.

Jesus, as the eternal Son of God, has been in perfect love and unity and intimacy with his Father for eternity.

When that loving relationship is removed, we can't even begin to imagine that level of anguish. That's why Jesus quoted Psalm 22 in Aramaic, Eli Eli Lemeseb Akhthani, are the opening words of the Psalm that comes right before, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Because to get to those still waters, Jesus had to go through the abandonment of Psalm 22. David in Psalm 22 is saying, it feels like God has abandoned me.

Jesus quoting Psalm 22, screaming it, says, God really has abandoned me. That relationship is broken.

[13 : 59] Now why the soul agony? We need to go a step further, just one more step, and keep staring into the darkness. Remember, Matthew's a teacher, not a reporter, so he's not just giving us data and information, he's giving us commentary.

And it's inspired commentary, so God himself is speaking through Matthew and is explaining and applying this Roman execution right in these verses.

And so to get at that, what I want us to do is look at the darkness. I don't mean that metaphorically this time, I mean actually think about darkness in this story. Like I said, from noon to 3 p.m., the sun is darkened.

There is darkness in the land. That's strange. Many people have said, oh, well it was just an eclipse, it just is a coincidence. That's not really possible.

It's too long for an eclipse. This is during Passover, which is at a time of the month when an eclipse really just isn't possible. It's not an eclipse. Plenty of people have offered other natural explanations, but none of them suffice.

[15 : 09] You may as well try to explain away Jesus walking on water and raising up the dead. This is a supernatural darkness. God has turned out the light.

If it's supernatural, then God has done it. It's a sign, it's a miracle from God. So it's God's own commentary on the death of his son.

So what is this sign point to? What does this commentary say? Well first, we're going to look at how Jesus talks about darkness in Matthew. He has a few things to say about darkness before he experiences this darkness.

And then second, we're going to go a little bit further back into the Old Testament and look at application and what it means for us. So first, how does Jesus talk about the darkness in Matthew?

Well, he uses the word darkness three times in a very particular way. Outer darkness. So outer darkness suggests inner light, and we'll get to that in a moment.

[16 : 11] So he speaks of this outer darkness in chapter 8, chapter 22 and chapter 25, twice as a parable and once is a statement of fact. So we know he's not merely being hyperbolic here.

Jesus isn't just being metaphorical. He knows something about this darkness that it's real, that it's tangible. So I'm going to read briefly for you these three passages.

So from chapter 8, he's speaking to the Centurion who had faith that put Israel's faith to shame. And Jesus says to him, I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.

In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now, let me pause and just point out two things here. The first is all of these three have to do with the kingdom of heaven.

We'll talk about it in a moment. And the second is what always goes with the outer darkness is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 22 from a parable, Jesus says, when the king came in to look at the guests, the king had invited everybody from the area into a wedding feast in this story.

- [17 : 33] When the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there was a man who had no wedding garment. He said to him, friend, how'd you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness.

In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The last one, Matthew 25, this is the parable of the investment, right?

Where you're given talents that one guy buried and didn't yield an investment. And Jesus says, for to everyone who has will more be given and he will have an abundance. But for the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away and cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness.

In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. So as I said, each of these three instances of Jesus using the darkness language in Matthew has to do with the kingdom of heaven.

And the other thing that we need to see is that the people who are cast into the outer darkness are the faithless, the uncommitted, the unfruitful.

- [18 : 44] The faithless sons of Israel who thought that they just deserved a place at the table in the kingdom are cast into outer darkness. The uncommitted guest at the wedding who just didn't even bother trying.

The unfruitful servant who just buried the talent in the ground. In other words, people who are cast into outer darkness are sinners like you and me.

That's the place that we deserve. Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven in all of these stories with the sort of language that evokes a feast or like a banquet hall on a cold, dark winter's night that's just a beacon of light and warmth and inside you hear laughter and joy and singing and there's good food, smells wafting out and there's plenty of wine.

That's how he visions the kingdom of heaven. It's that kind of richness. It's a place of light. And it's contrasted with this outer darkness, this gloom outside the kingdom.

Now who has a right to the light of the kingdom but the king himself? And now the king of light with the right to the joy of the kingdom of heaven is cast into darkness, isn't he?

- [20 : 09] Three hours hanging in the dark. The father's hand of special love and grace for his son, even the father's common grace has been withdrawn from Jesus at this point.

You think about it, God actively upholds us all. He actively, we call it this common grace, that he gives blessing to all of us, good things to enjoy in nature, but he also mitigates our pain and our suffering.

In other words, every painful emotion or experience that you have is not as bad as it could be because of the grace of God, because he is actively mitigating that pain for you.

And here in the darkness, that hand of grace is withdrawn from his son. Unmitigated pain and darkness. And in the darkness we see Jesus, the son of God, willfully entering into the outer darkness to be treated by God as the faithless, as the uncommitted, as the unfruitful.

We see the son treated as sin. He's being treated as though he were sin itself, because that's precisely what was happening there.

- [21 : 35] Donald MacLeod wrote, the human imagination is not ready to fathom or comprehend what it is like to be the sin of the world in the presence of God.

Outer darkness. Outside of the kingdom of light. Now there's one other thing I want to explore about the darkness. Remember now, Jesus is being crucified during the Passover season.

The Passover originated back in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. And back in Exodus chapter 10 in that area, God's chosen people are enslaved in Egypt. Israel's been in slavery for a long time and God has undertaken to free them from this slavery.

Now you probably know that God sent 10 plagues on Egypt before Pharaoh finally released the Israelites. And the last plague, of course, is probably the most well known, where God passes through Egypt at midnight and kills every firstborn son.

But do you remember the plague that happens right before that? It's darkness. Three days of darkness. A darkness, he says, that you could feel.

[22 : 54] So three days of darkness precede the death of the firstborn sons. Three hours of darkness precede the death of the Son of God.

That's significant. But what happened to the firstborn sons of Israel? So remember, the Passover lamb died in their place.

They took a spotless lamb representing innocence, purity, and they killed it. And they put its blood on their doorposts.

And the Lord passed over the houses painted with the blood of the lamb. The lamb died in the place of Israel's sons so that Israel's sons might live.

God gave them a lamb and said, he'll die instead of you. That's the gospel. That is the best news you could ever possibly hear.

[23 : 58] We have it in the darkness of Golgotha. Him instead of you. You and I are sinners. We have sinned and we fall short.

Present tense fall because we keep doing it. We fall short of the glory of God. And we deserve that darkness. We are the uncommitted, the faithless, the unfruitful.

We don't deserve the light of the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus took our sin, the sin of the world, on his own shoulders, on his own back. He bore it himself like the Passover lamb bore the death that should have been for the sons of Israel.

Jesus was cast into the darkness so that you don't have to be. Jesus was forsaken, abandoned by God, to make certain that you never would be.

Elizabeth Browning wrote a poem. I'll just read a stanza. Yea, once Immanuel's orphaned cry, his universe hath shaken. It went up single, echoless.

[25 : 09] My God, I am forsaken. It went up from the holy's lips amid his lost creation. That of the lost, no son should use those words of desolation.

Him instead of you. And my final point is an appeal. Look to Christ crucified.

It was sufficient for the apostles. Paul said to the Corinthian church that he was determined to preach only Christ and Him crucified. Christ crucified is where all of our hope is, all of our comfort, all of the sweetness with the Lord is in Christ crucified.

So look to Christ on the cross. See Him hanging there, mangled and abandoned, and bearing the agony of all your sins so you don't have to.

Look to Christ and see hanging there all the shame of your past. All of your faithless inconsistencies with God.

[26 : 26] All of your warped desires, all the wantings of the wrong thing instead of the righteous one. See hanging there on the cross, all of your apathy, all of your stinginess, all of your lust, all of your greed, all of your selfishness.

Nailed to that cross. Him instead of you friends, all of that stuff has already been paid for. We've been in slavery to that like the Israelites, but we have been on the cross in that darkness, freed.

A final, ultimate, once for all emancipation of the soul. So you do not have to bear one more moment of your sins hanging over your head.

Praise God. You do not have to bear one more second of shame of your past. You do not have to bear the thought that God doesn't care for you because here's proof that He does. God so loved the world, He sent His only Son to die.

He bore it all, all your sin, all of its eternal consequences so that you don't have to. You're free. If you love and trust Christ, you are free.

[27 : 51] Do you realize that? Now if you're already a follower of Christ, this never becomes old news. We never ever move beyond this moment.

The gospel, this story, Christ crucified, is our daily bread. We don't graduate from here to the next class. So we come to Christ and we let Him preach to our hearts.

Christ crucified, Christ crucified, again and again, right now, and in five minutes, and in five hours, and in five days, again and again, that's the Christian life.

Christ crucified, Him instead of me. And here is the fount of all of your renewed life, your refreshment, your spiritual vitality, your security in the Lord, all of your joy, all of your delight will flow from this.

And if you want to conquer your sins, well this is where you look, where your sins were already conquered. If you want to love God more, this is where you look, where the love of God could not be more clearly shown forth for you.

[29 : 03] This is the very iridescence of the love of God. This is where His justice and mercy meet. It's glorious, friends. Jesus is glorious.

And you can take all of today's failings and weakness and exhaustion and all of that to your crucified and now risen Savior and realize He already bore it for you.

It's already done. Okay, one last thing. You need to know there are only two options.

There are only two options. You can live as you like, bear your own sins, and experience eternal outer darkness, true anguish of the soul, or look to Christ.

Look to Christ crucified and trust that the price that He, the price He paid for your sins was final. No more needs to be done by you.

[30 : 09] So we just look to the cross and we go out and enjoy. We go out with unshakable, insurmountable, eternally secure joy.

That's what we get with Christ, Him instead of us. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we worship You. We trust You and we're so thankful that You looked on uncommitted, unfruitful, unfaithful us, unworthy us, and You loved us.

We love You for it. Please warm our hearts at those fires today and help that fire to never go out. Amen.