

The Cry of the Darkness

Matthew 27:45-49

Remember Mr. Ed, TV's talking horse? His trainer fashioned Mr. Ed's bridle with a nylon fishing line that fed into the horse's mouth. When the trainer tugged on the line, Mr. Ed tried to dislodge it by moving his lips, creating the illusion that he could talk. The deep, baritone voice of Mr. Ed belonged to a former popular film cowboy of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Allan "Rocky" Lane. Embarrassed to be playing the voice of a horse, Lane opted not to be listed in the show's credits, so Mr. Ed was billed as 'Himself,' which contributed to the illusion that the horse really talked. It was a profitable gig for five years, which actors usually appreciate, but Lane was embarrassed by the role.

If everyone was embarrassed at the idea of playing an unflattering role, you and I would be in a terrible bind. What if 2000 years ago one innocent Man from Heaven chose to recoil from the scandalous role of suffering servant and cosmic sin-bearer? Paul reminds us that Jesus was "in very nature God," but that He did not "consider equality with God something to be grasped." Instead, he surrendered the majesty of heaven to become God's "scapegoat" for mankind's sin.

The scapegoat was part of the ancient Hebrew Day of Atonement rituals. This fascinating ritual called for two goats and a bull. The high priest sacrificed the bull as a sin offering for himself. By lot, he selected one of the goats as a sin offering on behalf of the people. Blood must be spilled to demonstrate God's righteous judgment on human sin. The remaining goat was selected to be the scapegoat.

... ²¹He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites - all their sins - and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. ²²The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert. - Leviticus 16:21, 22

One bull and one goat died to symbolically satisfy God's judgment of sin. The other goat symbolically carried the sin itself away from the people. It was a powerful and touching symbol, but still just a symbol. Killing an innocent animal never really made any sinner any less sinful and no goat could really carry human guilt away into the desert. The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews would declare the obvious: "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (Hebrews 10:4). The atonement rituals were only shadows of a reality brought to light at the cross.

Up to this point in the crucifixion narrative, Jesus has forgiven His tormentors. He has promised Paradise to a repentant thief. He has united two hurting disciples, His mother and the "disciple whom He loved" in a tender act that foreshadowed the intimate Christian community we call the church. Now, we witness the most intense moment in the ordeal as darkness descends over the land and Jesus cries out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" ... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Of the seven utterances that Jesus spoke from His cross, for me, this one is the most troublesome. We believe that Jesus was God was in the Flesh. Jesus and the Father were One. But now, something is happening that confounds our ability to simply embrace this truth by faith. It appears as if the Father has turned His face away from the Son. Jesus is alone, suspended over the earth in a wilderness of darkness, playing the role of a cosmic scapegoat as He bears the sins of the entire human race.

They are difficult words. Nevertheless, Jesus spoke them, so we must reflect on them whether or not we can ever exhaustively understand them. In a sense, we are on Holy ground for we are exploring the Oneness that existed between the Son and the Father, two distinct Persons of one Godhead. Each by Himself, and Both together, agonized over human sin, the true severity of which we seldom truly recognize. Only one language could express this agony and that was the language of darkness.

I. Darkness Signaled the Disapproval of the Father (45)

⁴⁵From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.

A. The Biblical History of Light

To help us to understand God, the Bible describes Him in concepts. "God is love." "God is spirit." The concept that is most often used in conjunction with His presence and activity is "God is light." When God created the world, His first order of business was to dispel the darkness. He said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1). When Jesus was born, God filled the heavens with light. An angel appeared to the shepherds, "and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Luke 2:9). Three disciples caught a glimpse of Christ's true glory when Jesus was "transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Matthew 17:2).

When God wanted to make His presence known to Israel, light tended to be not only present but featured. What, then, did this curious darkness mean which covered the land at midday? As the Romans reckoned time, "from the sixth hour until the ninth hour" described "from high noon until three o'clock in the afternoon." This was the heat of the day, the unlikeliest time of day in any land for darkness to reign. The sun should have been beating down upon the earth. This was a remarkable miracle. God was making a statement that should not have been missed in the land of the Jews.

B. Did the Absence of Light mean the Absence of God?

Darkness fell over the land, *not* over the whole earth. Matthew was a Jew writing to his fellow-Jews to prove that Jesus was their long-awaited *messiah*, an anointed King from God. The Jews, who would associate God's presence with light, found their land cloaked in blackness. Even if the darkness had covered the entire globe, the meaning of this divine statement could only have been properly interpreted in the land of the Jews. Centuries earlier, speaking of a day of terrible judgment, Amos said:

⁹ "In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD,
"I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight." - Amos 8:9

When Moses was demanding the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, God sent a series of plagues upon the land to persuade Pharaoh. The next to the last one was a strange darkness:

²¹Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt - darkness that can be felt." ²²So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. ²³No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived. - Exodus 10:21, 22

Light shined on Israel while the surrounding countryside was shrouded in darkness. That time, light clearly meant that God's favor rested upon them, but now it was Israel that was shrouded in darkness. A discerning person might have detected the angry judgment of God upon the land and upon the nation. This was a powerful, but painful statement from God to His chosen nation.

One day, the sin of every human being who has ever lived converged upon one Man hanging on a cross, and darkness covered the land. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us ..." (2 Corinthians 5:21). Did divine disapproval of sin demand that the Father turn His face away from Jesus? These events were driven not only by the justice of God, but by His love for mankind as well.

II. Darkness Signaled the Despair of the Son (46)

... ⁴⁶About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"--which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

A. Jesus Experienced a Sense of Utter Estrangement

Jesus' companions had often boasted to Him that they would be loyal to the death in the event of trouble, but they were nowhere to be found immediately after His arrest. In fact, Peter actually denied that he even knew Jesus. However, it was not abandonment by men that is depicted so vividly in this particular scene. Did the Father literally abandon Jesus? A definitive answer to that question would be as elusive as a perfect understanding of the triune nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Suffice it to say that part of the mission of Jesus was to at least perceive a sense of total abandonment by His Father. Jesus, Who knew no sin, became the sin of the entire human race - past, present, and future. Jesus tasted the horror of being somewhere He had never been before and had never desired to be. He was abandoned by His Father for crimes He had not committed. Jesus was a cosmic scapegoat, lost in a horrible, desolate wilderness. For the first time in His life, He was where God was not. He was tasting Hell itself. "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani - My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

B. Jesus Experienced Every Consequence of Sin for Us

Whether the Father was literally absent from Golgotha is an open question. Is there anywhere that God is not? We could engage in all sorts of brain-teasers and fruitless discussions of divine paradoxes. What does seem clear is that is that Jesus grieved at a very real loss of any conscious awareness of His Father's presence, and that alone closely identifies Him with sinners. One theologian from over a century ago believed this to be only a perception that Jesus was made to endure. He wrote:

"The vision of God is one thing and his presence is another. We may miss the first without losing the second. Our real state before God does not rest on the shifting sands of our moods of feeling. In the hour of darkness, Jesus prayed. This was enough to show that he knew that he was not really and utterly abandoned by His Father. In spiritual deadness, when it is hard to pray at all, the one remedy is in prayer. Our cry can reach God through the darkness, and the darkness will not last forever; often it is the gate to a glorious light." - W. F. Adeney

Sin has physical, mental, and especially, spiritual effects, but never lose sight of the fact that Jesus freely chose to taste each of these in our place. Jesus was God, but He chose to become flesh. Then, in our place, He chose to become God's wrath upon sin. Was the abandonment of Jesus by the Father reality or perception? We cannot resolve that, so let us stick to what we can know. Jesus died for our sins so that no matter how estranged you feel from God, there is a way home. There is no sin that is greater than the love of God or His willingness to forgive it if you will repent and come home to Him. Of course, many are calloused to their need for repentance, a condition also expressed in terms of darkness, a darkness we call spiritual blindness..

III. Darkness Signaled the Disorientation of the Race (47-49)

⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

⁴⁸Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

A. The Greatest Peril of Sin is a Loss of the Sense of Sin

These verses make more sense when we are aware of a popular first-century legend that revolved around the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. You may remember that Elijah was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind and did not taste physical death (II Kings 2:11). Legend-weavers got busy right away at filling in the gaps. They told how God began to use this sky-walking prophet to come to the righteous when they are in distress and to rescue them. It was a sweet little myth, but no one really believed it, which is probably why some of the onlookers that day began to poke even more fun at Jesus.

What is clear is that the onlookers did not know how to react, because they didn't have a clue as to what was really happening. All that had been going on around them was for them, that they might see the sinfulness of their ways and turn to God. But, that is how callous sin can render a man. Even in the throes of a strange darkness that should have terrified them, they mocked the Savior of the world.

The spectators thought Jesus was crying out to the prophet Elijah. "Hey, Elijah, why have you forsaken me? Get me out of here!" One person appears to be moved by compassion to the point that he offered Jesus a drink, but the others seemed to get a kick out of what they may have perceived to be delirium on Jesus' part. "Leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." Stupid, stupid men. They would march straight into Hell unless they recognized this same Jesus they now mocked was facing Hell in their behalves. But, how could they know? They were blinded by sin.

B. The Message of the Cross Causes Man to See His Sinful Condition

We live in a narcotic society. People crave relief from whatever ails them at the moment more than they ever soberly reflect upon what it might mean to be truly reconciled to God. The message of repentance does not test well in the market place, so in many instances, the church of this age has diluted the Gospel and shifted into entertainment mode. Somehow, "growing a church" according to market research techniques has become more urgent than "making disciples" of Jesus according to a gospel of good news that demands repentance and obedience. The Gospel has been gutted of its demands in exchange for results. The problem is that if the church is too shy to talk candidly about sin, people who need to come to Christ will be handicapped in recognizing the severity of their need.

Jesus would be raised to life. Later, He would return to His Father. On the next day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit would descend upon Jesus' Apostles, and an unedited Gospel was preached, one that brought sinners face to face with their need. Some of these same people that did not know what to make of the darkness on the day Jesus died would become deeply convicted of their sins. On the very first day the Gospel was preached, three thousand souls responded in repentance and were baptized.

It took the Holy Spirit to awaken those three thousand people to their need for a Savior. I suggest that it is a distrust of that Spirit today that finds so many pulpits tinkering with the Gospel by proclaiming pointers for successful living rather than the need for repentance of sin and obedience to Jesus.

I believe that there is an inherent spiritual power in the Word of God proclaimed. Every week, I try to give it my best, but I also make a point to pray that anything that may happen in anyone's life as a result of one of my messages will happen not because of how I presented anything, but because of that power that is inherent to the Word of God. The ancients preached a message of repentance of sin, obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, a life of love, sacrificial service to others and bearing whatever cross is required for following Jesus. I just don't see how we can toy with that formula today.

There was never a more successful Christian servant than Paul. Consider his philosophy of ministry:

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. – 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Elsewhere, he worded the same sentiment in slightly different terms:

¹⁶I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. – Romans 1:16

Such a gospel doesn't test well in the marketplace, but when are we going to realize that it never has? Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit uses the message of the cross to truly open the eyes of the blind.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That was the cry of God's Son in torment uttered because human sin truly is a horrible thing. By the Holy Spirit of God, may God grant each of us the grace to see all of this as clearly as we should, so that the sacrifice of Jesus in our behalfs, for our own sins, will mean everything to us that it should. Once we see our own salvation as we should, our sense of urgency for a lost world can never be the same.

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