

The Sixth Hour

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the part of Scripture that we read. Gospel according to Luke chapter 23 and at verse 44.

It was now about the sixth hour. And I'd like to bring some thoughts before you from this passage concerning the sixth hour.

In this chapter we have Luke's take on the various twists in the trial of Jesus. It's worth remembering that although Luke was a physician, he was a careful researcher of facts.

You could call him an investigative journalist. He tells how Jesus was taken to Pilate then sent to Herod as Pilate looked for a way out of his dilemma.

Herod sends him back to Pilate. Pilate tries a further attempt to have Jesus released, suggesting that he be released instead of Barabbas.

[1 : 22] Again, Pilate is filed by the strident demands of the Jewish leaders and their followers.

After having him flogged, Pilate ultimately hands him over to be crucified. Luke gives us some of the details of what took place at Calvary.

He tells us when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him, that is Jesus, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

He tells of the prayer offered from the cross by Christ. He writes in greater detail than any other gospel writer of the dialogue that took place between Jesus and the criminals crucified alongside him.

And then he writes of the immediate events that took place around the sixth hour. He doesn't report everything that took place.

[2 : 35] It's as if he wishes us to focus on certain significant events that took place about the sixth hour and subsequently.

And so I'd like to set four thoughts before you. First, a strange phenomenon. Secondly, a startling occurrence.

Thirdly, a strong cry. And fourthly, significant groups. First, a strange phenomenon.

Luke writes, it was about the sixth hour and there was darkness over the whole land. You could say that the land was shrouded in darkness, metaphorically speaking.

An appalling act of injustice has taken place. The death sentence has been executed on an innocent person. And you might say, well, surely that is the reason for darkness and you would have good reasons for making such an assertion.

[3 : 53] But Luke assures us that this was no metaphorical darkness arising out of an appalling act of injustice.

This is real, physical, intense darkness about the sixth hour. The Jewish people marked their day in twelve hours, from sunrise to sunset.

Twelve hours, so that the third hour on their clock was nine a.m. in the morning. The sixth hour was twelve noon.

At midday. When the sun was at its height. You do not expect darkness, even on the most cloudy of days.

That's what makes this phenomenon so unusual. Luke doesn't probe the causes of this darkness.

[4 : 57] He merely states, while the sun's light failed. Makes you ask the question, is Luke not interested in the particular cause of this strange phenomenon, this strange unnatural darkness?

From the context, it seems to me that Luke obviously sees a connection between the crucifixion of Christ and this unusual phenomenon.

From the words used, he views it not just as nature's commentary on what's taking place, but as God's own commentary on what's taking place at Calvary.

Because God governs all things in nature. What then is the significance of this strange phenomenon?

This unusual darkness. If you go back into the Old Testament, you will discover that darkness is frequently associated with divine judgment.

[6 : 10] For example, darkness is associated with the sign of the last day. At other times, darkness is spoken of too.

You know, darkness is spoken of before creation is brought into being. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.

Even before there was light, there was just darkness. And you could transpose that to reflect on the condition of the natural heart of man before God brings his light to bear.

There is just darkness in the heart of man. The Bible speaks of darkness when God made a covenantal pact with Abraham.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham saying, To your offspring, I give this land.

[7 : 34] It was a strange sight. An amazing scene of dismembered animals drawn up in parallel lines, and this strange light moving among them.

God making a covenant promise, even if it means embracing death for himself. He promises that he will give this land.

And again in Egypt, thick darkness that was so intense, it was palpable, it was touchable, and the only way that people could go about was by feeling in front of them.

Again, not easily explained as a natural phenomenon. And it lasted for three days. It was a mark of God's displeasure.

God's judgment shrouding the land. The fact that it lasted three days emphasized, it seems to me, the completeness of his control over events in Egypt.

[8 : 38] He shows he has the power to return to chaos, the very realm he has created. It was a judgmental act. It demonstrated God's power, and it demonstrated that he had rendered a verdict of guilty on Pharaoh and the wicked Egyptians who were oppressing the people of Israel.

And although Egypt in such deep darkness, Goshen, the area where the people of Israel dwelt, was in light.

It reminds me of a time that I was at Communion here. And way back, many years ago, there was a blackout.

There was a power cut here in Garibust. I was down in Erd. There was a power cut in Erd. The minister who was preaching in Babel had no power cut.

And he was boasting of how he was in the light while his two brethren were in thick darkness. And so we were, whether spiritually, possibly too.

[9 : 59] I'm not sure. Anyway, that's how it was in Egypt. Goshen was in light, and Egypt was in darkness.

The ninth plague, then the tenth. And although the tenth plague occurred at midnight, not so dark, although it created and brought its own measure of darkness, when the firstborn, the darkness of grief, when the firstborn in every home, not under the shelter of the blood of the Paschal Lamb, was destroyed.

Well, this sixth hour is also Passover time. And throughout the prophetic literature, you will hear prophets warning the people of God, of God bringing darkness upon them because of their sin.

In the prophecy of Amos, chapter 8, one of the famous passages, Ah, the Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone more who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile? Be tossed about and sink again like the Nile of Egypt.

[11 : 16] And on that day, declares the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at moon, darkness, darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, all your songs into lamentation.

I will bring sackcloth on every waist, and baldness on every head. I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

So it seems to me that we can conclude that the message that Luke reads into the darkness and wishes us to understand is that this is divine visitation, bringing judgment against man's sin, the fulfillment of covenant promise of salvation.

And in some ways, there is another exodus taking place here. Remember, Jesus discussed it with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration.

And you see what Luke is saying. Luke is saying that the day of judgment has come, and guess what? It hasn't fallen on God's people.

[12 : 32] It's fallen, God's judgment has fallen, on his only son. The darkness prophesied against the people of God has fallen on his only begotten son, his beloved son.

The darkness is the picture of judgment of God against sin. And the judgment has been visited in these dark hours on his only begotten son.

So that God deals judicially with his only begotten son in these dark hours.

William Hendrickson makes the observation, the darkness, the darkness, he says, meant judgment. The judgment of God upon our sin.

The punishment, though, was borne by Jesus so that he, as our substitute, suffered most intense agony, indescribable woe, terrible isolation and forsakenness.

[13 : 41] And then he goes on to say this in very graphic language. Hell came to Calvary that day. Hell came to Calvary that day.

And the Savior bore its horrors in the Roman place of sinners. That's what the darkness is about.

And Luke is bringing our attention to this. Yes, because it happened. But more because it meant something. It's an indication of divine judgment falling upon the Son of God in our nature.

It fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. And Jesus absorbs the just judgment of God against our sin on the cross.

Luke is telling us what the cross is for, what the cross does and what Jesus accomplishes on the cross. The darkness was a strange phenomenon.

[14 : 50] At midday, an indication of divine judgment visited upon the perfect Son of God in our nature. So, first point.

Second point is this. A startling occurrence. The second significant event Luke describes for us takes place at a distance from Calvary.

Luke describes the tearing of the temple's inner veil. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. The time of the sixth hour.

How startling that must have been for those involved in temple service. They must have thought that judgment had come upon themselves.

There were, as you know, different areas of the temple. And Luke does not specify in this chapter which curtain was torn in two.

[15 : 53] But from the letter to the Hebrews, it becomes clear that this curtain was the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place.

The most holy place being the sanctuary into God's presence. That was entered only once per year on the day of atonement by the high priest.

For Luke, the message is crystal clear. Remember, this was not a human act. People didn't just go and try and tear the temple curtain.

It was too thick to tear with human hands. And for Luke, it's as if he's suggesting here that God is desecrating his own temple.

Is that not strange? God desecrating what essentially had been good. because you see, Luke is suggesting, and we have to probe into other areas of scripture to grasp this, suggesting that the only temple now that has function is the new temple in Jesus Christ.

[17 : 30] Christ. In the book of Revelation, we are told of the picture, one of the pictures that is given to us in the book of Revelation, full of pictures, and one of the pictures that is given to us is of heaven.

And in heaven, there is no temple. You might think that's strange. In the place where God is always worshipped, and there is no temple.

And the reason for that is that it's all temple. And there's no area where the presence of the Lord is not to be found in that place.

The Lamb of God is everything. He becomes the temple. And it's no longer, the temple is no longer to be located exclusively at Jerusalem.

Of course, that was something very difficult for the Jewish believers to grasp. God collapsing his old order, given through Moses, pointing to the new order in his son, Christ Jesus.

[18 : 53] every other place or sphere of worship, including the temple, insignificant, unless Christ himself is found there.

It's a moment of moments in the whole history of faith. God is saying, it is Christ and Christ alone in whom all must worship me.

And he makes that clear in Hebrews chapter 6, Hebrews chapter 9, and also in Hebrews chapter 10. That the tearing of the veil, giving entrance into the Holy of Holies, symbolized Jesus having opened our way into the presence of God.

For example, in Hebrews chapter 10, there are other references, Hebrews 6, 19, Hebrews 9, 3, Hebrews 10, 19. The author of the Hebrews says, Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us, through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with true hearts and full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Look, it seems to me, like the author of the letter to the Hebrews is saying that Jesus has opened our way back into fellowship with God.

[20 : 36] Remember how our first parents, they lost the joy of his nearer presence by their sin and disobedience. They lost the ability to talk with God face to face.

In Genesis chapter 3, we are told the Lord God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day, ready to experience fellowship with Adam and Eve. But they had rebelled against him.

They hid themselves. They were eventually, remember, cast out of the garden. And the cherubim, the guardians of holiness, placed at the east of the garden to keep our first parents from returning again.

But Jesus has provided the way back into the nearer presence of God. It's not a coincidence, is it, that he's just said to the thief who pleaded, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And he's just said to the thief, today, today, you will be with me in paradise. Today, there is a way back to God through faith in me.

[21 : 56] because of what he is doing on the cross. He's accomplishing the way that God's people get back into the presence of God to enjoy communion with him, to fellowship with him, to be near him, to be with him.

And Luke is telling us at the sixth hour, that's what the cross is about. that's what the cross accomplishes for all who trust in Jesus Christ.

Jesus opens the way into the presence of God. And Luke has shown us the darkness, the tearing of the veil, things that accompany Jesus' death on the cross to help us understand what Jesus' death on the cross accomplished.

a startling occurrence, the tearing of the veil, a strange phenomenon, the thick darkness at midday, thirdly, a strong cry.

Why do I say a strong cry? Just for this reason, we are told it is the cry of a loud voice.

[23 : 15] At the sixth hour, then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Now, in the normal course of events, we do not associate the cry of a loud voice with those who are in the throes of death.

And certainly not those who are being put to death by this barbaric form of death, crucifixion.

Luke tells us the words, he cried in the loud voice, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And there are two things here. These words come from Psalm 31.

We sang it first here today. And it gives us a hint, and I won't say more than that, but it gives us a hint that during these hours of darkness, Jesus is encouraging and strengthening himself through the ways in which he saw the book of Psalms referred to his own death and his own person.

[24 : 32] We know that he used the book of Psalms. Psalm 22. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Is it possible that he made his way through to Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd, even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of darkness, all the way to Psalm 31, where he commits his spirit to the hands of the Father.

And it's a loud, it's a strong voice, death. And I think it's worth remembering that crucifixion was not death by being transfixed by nails to a rough wooden cross.

It was death by asphyxiation. Death by prolonged and excruciating asphyxiation.

So that the person who died died because they were incapable are no longer able to breathe. No, the Savior after several hours on the cross cries out with a loud voice, Father into your hands, I commit my spirit.

[25 : 53] And what Luke is telling us, Jesus died not because he was incapable of breathing, like the normal person, but that Jesus decides when he dies, not the Roman soldiers, it is Jesus who decides when his work is finished.

He is willingly and authoritatively laying down his life for sinners. Nobody taking his life from him against his will. He is laying it down of his own will and by his own authority.

And no power on earth could take his life from him if he did not want to give his life. And John in his gospel records Jesus explaining that to his disciples before he ever went to the cross.

Do you remember where that is written? John chapter 10 verses 11, 14, 17 and 18. What do these verses say? I am the good shepherd. What does the good shepherd do?

the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd he says and I lay down my life for the sheep. I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord.

[27 : 14] I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my father. And Jesus is saying to us and Luke is teaching us because of what Jesus has said that Jesus deliberately willingly authoritatively decided to lay down his life for you.

Oh well my friend if you are in a state of grace today you know how unworthy you were of that supreme sacrifice.

that he authoritatively laid down his life for you. You see what Luke is telling us he decided when he died he decided how he would die he decided when to stop breathing and he did it because he was not a victim.

He was a willing sacrifice. He was a deliberate sacrifice. He loved you so much that he said father I will willingly lay down my life for him for her for him and for her.

for a multitude that no man can number. I'll do it because I love them.

[29 : 06] Oh how humbling to be the object of such love. My friend can you find yourself today within the encircle of that marvelous love.

That marvelous love. And Luke is saying that's what's happening on the cross. That's what's happening on the sixth hour.

He says it with a loud with a strong voice. In other words he's in control to the very last moment. he quotes scripture.

As king he reigns from the cross. He triumphantly, willingly, consciously, sovereignly, deliberately, royally commits his spirit into the hands of the heavenly father.

And John in his gospel tells us in chapter 19 he bowed his head. And I think you could understand from that that it was a regal action.

[30 : 21] He regally bowed his head and he gave up his spirit. It's all about Jesus. It's all about Jesus. John Piper, I don't know if any of you are familiar with the writings of John Piper.

He once said three little sentences and he is writing these sentences as if Jesus is explaining what he is doing here in Luke 23.

Here is what Piper says. My dying for your salvation is my design for your imitation. I pay the price for the one.

I give the strength for the other. You catch that. My dying for your salvation is my design for your imitation. I pay the price for the one.

I give strength for the other. What is Piper saying there? Well, it seems to me he is summarizing that Jesus in his death pays the price for your salvation.

[31 : 32] You don't add to that. But he is not only paying the price of your salvation, he is also showing you how to live and how he died.

And as he pays the price for your salvation, he also gives you the strength to live and die the way that he has given you the example.

In other words, living and dying for Christ. Committing yourself to the Lord in your life and in your death.

A strong cry, a startling occurrence, a strange phenomenon, finally significant groups. Let me focus attention on those whom Luke identifies for us in the passage.

There are three groups mentioned. The first group, they're nearest the cross. You might call them the execution squad. They're under the command of the centurion.

[32 : 41] He was the public executioner, if you like. He was the officer who was delegated to carry out this task. And Luke tells the kind of man that he was.

You see, it's the centurion who says, certainly this man was innocent. That's how he's thinking.

These are the thoughts going through his mind as he watches the spectacle. And if you read through the whole chapter, chapter 23, you cannot but think that Luke sees this as the climax to statement after statement made about Jesus.

all who pronounce judgment, all who sit in judgment on Jesus are forced to pronounce that he is innocent.

It seems to me one of the fascinating features of this chapter. Verse 4, I find no guilt in this man. Verse 14, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

[33 : 57] Verse 15, neither did Herod. Verse 22, I have found him no guilty serving death. Verse 41, the thief who came to faith, this man has done nothing wrong.

And now the person responsible and charged for carrying out the execution of the sentence stating that he is innocent. And you know, the other gospels, the other gospel writers tell us that this centurion even said, surely this was indeed the son of God.

Luke doesn't tell us that. But he tells us something that is very interesting. He tells what this man was doing.

He doesn't just tell us he's in a thought process and that he says he's innocent. But he tells us what he was doing. What was he doing?

He was praising God. God. He was praising God. Is that not strange? A man who's delegated to carry out the death sentence and he's praising God.

[35 : 07] Why is he praising God? Well, if this innocent man was not dying for his own sins, for whose sins is he dying?

and the answer that faith gives in the heart of every believer, he is dying for my sins, for my sins.

And that is what I believe Luke is encouraging us to see in this passage. Does that cause you to praise God today?

That he was dying for your sins? because it should. If you are able to say that he was dying for your sins, you have real cause to praise God.

The second group that he highlights are those who had assembled to watch the spectacle. And they may be the very ones who had called for his crucifixion.

[36 : 24] When they saw what had taken place, they beat their breasts. Now, beating of breasts in the eastern world at that time was a custom normally associated with women.

It indicates a display of extreme emotion. emotion. But here, it's not just confined to women. Extreme emotion.

And it seems to me that Luke is saying to us, that's probably all that it was. Because Luke says, they returned home. They returned home.

home. He leaves us with the centurion gazing on the Christ who died for others. Who knows what happened to the heart of the centurion.

But for those beating their breasts, for those who experienced an overwhelming sense of tragedy and sorrow at what happened to Jesus, they go home.

[37 : 31] and everything will be different in the morning. Oh, my friend, is that who you are with the gospel?

Perhaps at times your emotions disturbed, your emotions upset, but you go home and everything is different in the morning.

And you're unmoved. There is no real relevance for them. Do you remember, do you remember when Jesus was on the way to the cross?

There followed him a great multitude of people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. Remember what he said to them? Turning to them, Jesus said, daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves.

and your children. In other words, the problem is not mine. I'm going to the cross and I'm going there deliberately. I'm going to die for the sins of my people to set them free.

[38 : 44] And of all that you are seeing here is just an injustice, a man condemned wrongly at a physical level. But you do not see that it is to save sinners that he does this.

then you will remain indifferent because you don't need the Savior. The morning will make everything better.

A new day. And Luke wants you to realize and appreciate that you are a sinner in need of the Savior for there is no other.

Display of emotion is not enough. You need to trust in the Christ of God. And then the third group. They stood at a distance.

Luke just makes a very cryptic comment. All his acquaintances he says. And the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

[39 : 54] And isn't it strange all his acquaintances whom you might expect to have been emotionally disturbed. Luke doesn't say a word about their emotions or a tear shed.

And yet these were the ones who loved him most. These are the ones that Jesus has set apart. not just to be eyewitnesses of his death but who would also be eyewitnesses of his resurrections.

They are the first ones who would experience the blessing of grace and salvation through his death and resurrection. They are the ones who are going to tell the world what has happened when he bore the curse on the cross.

the innocent for the guilty in order that the fellowship of God that is Jesus' by right becomes ours by privilege.

Oh my friend do you value that fellowship today and the privilege associated with it. Now let me suggest in conclusion that you are in one of these three groups.

[41 : 25] That you are amongst those who are putting him to death in the execution squad. Or you're amongst those who are perhaps emotionally disturbed by an injustice committed but you're really indifferent to your spiritual state.

Or you're amongst his acquaintances and you love him deeply because he first loved you. The strange phenomenon, the startling occurrence, the strong cry, the significant groupings.

In which one are you today? Because he is the only way back into fellowship with God. He has taken the judgment of God upon himself for our sins.

Let us pray.