

The Darkest Day

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[0 : 00] Let's again read these words we find in verse 33. We read, and when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

There was darkness over the whole land. In his book, *The God of All Grace*, Douglas Macmillan writes this, Calvary is a strangely attractive place.

It is attractive to both the Christian and to the non-Christian. I remember in my own unconverted days how a sermon on Calvary would hold my attention as no other sermon would do.

I used to wonder what the whole theme was about. Jesus, such a good man, and yet men, men like ourselves, took this good man, Jesus, and they led him outside the city of Jerusalem, and there they crucified him.

What was it all about? Calvary is a strangely attractive place, and yet it's also a somewhat repellent place.

[1 : 05] I was having a conversation with one of our older members a few months ago, and it was one of those conversations that really remind you of the privilege of being a pastor.

This woman was speaking about her own mother and about how her mother would find it so hard to read about Calvary, how she would find it so hard to hear sermons about Calvary, everything about Calvary, and what happened to Jesus at that place was so distressing to her.

Well, this morning I want us to spend a few moments at this place called Calvary as we prepare to come to the Lord's table in a few moments. As we do so, we'll look at these verses under three headings.

We're going to look at the dereliction, then the division, and finally the devotion. The dereliction, the division, and the devotion. First, the dereliction, verses 33 to 36, where Mark focuses on Jesus' cry of dereliction.

Jesus' cry of dereliction. In verse 33, we see the darkness. We can start by reflecting on what's happened. Jesus has been betrayed and arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

[2 : 19] He's been brought before the Jewish leaders who have falsely accused him and declared that he is deserving of death. He's been delivered to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who's had him scourged and then handed him over to be crucified.

Finally, he's been nailed to a wooden cross outside the walls of Jerusalem between two criminals. We see what happens next in verse 33. Mark's already told us that Jesus was crucified at the third hour.

That's 9 a.m. He now tells us that it was the sixth hour, 12 p.m. Jesus has been hanging on the cross for three hours. And at the sixth hour, darkness comes over the whole land.

This isn't the natural darkness of an eclipse or a sandstorm. This is an eerie supernatural darkness. It's the darkness of divine displeasure.

This is the imposition of God's own judgment. And this imposition of God's judgment is being concentrated on Jesus, who has become the sin bearer and sacrifice for his people.

[3 : 28] R.C. Sproul puts it this way. God is too holy to look at sin. He could not bear to look at that concentrated monumental condensation of evil.

So he averted his eyes from his son. The light of his countenance was turned off. All blessedness was removed from his son, whom he loved. And in its place was the full measure of the divine curse.

God adds to these details astronomical perturbations. At midday, he turned the lights out on the hillside outside Jerusalem, so that when his face moved away, when the light of his countenance shut down, even the sun couldn't shine at Calvary.

There's Jesus under the curse of God's judgment. And that dreadful darkness remains for three hours until the ninth hour, until three in the afternoon.

We move from the darkness, though, to the dereliction in verses 34 to 36. Mark records now what Jesus did, beginning of verse 34. At the ninth hour, he cries out with a loud voice.

[4 : 40] Saul become too much for him. And he vocalizes his feelings. And Mark goes on to record what Jesus said. Look again at verse 34. The words that he speaks are Aramaic.

Eloi, Eloi. Lemus abachthani. And Mark provides the translation for his Roman readers as he writes that this means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

It's a horrific cry. It's the cry of a soul in torment. Throughout his life, Jesus had always been conscious of his father's love, his father's acceptance, his father's approval.

He went through life hearing the words, this is my son whom I love with. With him I am well pleased. But in these hours of darkness, Jesus has no sense of this.

He has no awareness of this. He finds himself forsaken by his father as the waves of God's holy and just wrath against sin come crashing against him, the sin bearer.

[5 : 47] He's no longer able to address his father as Abba, father, as he had always done, as he had taught the disciples to pray. Instead, all he's left saying is, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Mark goes further, though, and records how the bystanders responded. Look at verse 35 and 36. As they hear Jesus' words, some of them think that he's calling Elijah. There's a widespread Jewish belief at the time that the prophet Elijah would return and rescue the righteous and they're out of need.

And as the bystanders hear Jesus crying out, Eloi, Eloi, my God, my God. Some of them think he's actually crying out, Elijah, Elijah.

And upon hearing this, someone goes, fills a sponge with sour wine, puts it on a reed, and gives it to Jesus to drink. And as they do so, they say, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come down and rescue him.

I've been at many deathbeds as a pastor, and I've seen how even a small sip of water might revive and refresh someone just for a few moments.

[7 : 08] Give them a little measure of relief in these final minutes, perhaps. But this giving sour wine to Jesus was no act of kindness, no act of relief.

It's a cruel test where the bystanders are wanting to keep Jesus alive as long as they possibly can, prolong his agony, just to see if Elijah will come, just to see if Elijah will rescue him.

It's a cruel taunt. It's a cruel test. Well, friends, as we consider these verses, we can see what Jesus suffered for his people. What Jesus suffered for his people.

That's what Mark's showing us here in Mark 15. Here we find a Jesus who's been scourged, a Jesus who's been spat on, a Jesus who's been stripped, now enveloped in the darkness of divine displeasure.

Here we find a Jesus who's been crucified, subjected to cruel taunts and contempt, now experiencing the imposition of God's condemnation, God's judgment.

[8 : 16] Here we find Jesus bearing the sin of his people and becoming aware of a breach in his communion, his fellowship with his father, as he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Tim Trumper calls this the cry of hell, as Jesus bears the full weight of the wrath of God. And friends, that's worth our attention today.

The judgment of God, the damnation of God, the hell of God, fell on the head of Jesus so that it will never fall on the heads of those who belong to Jesus.

Jesus endured the darkness of God's holy wrath so that his people will never have to enter that darkness. Jesus cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

So that his people will never have to say that either in this life or in the life to come. There's a story told about Professor John Duncan concerning these words.

[9 : 30] Professor John Duncan taught in the Free Church College in the 19th century. He's a deeply devout man, very famous for his close walk with the Lord. And on one occasion, he was lecturing on these words, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And one of his students wrote about the incident. Aye, aye, do you know what it was? Dying on the cross, forsaken by his father, said Professor Duncan. Do you know what it was?

What, what? It was damnation. And damnation taken lovingly. And he subsided into his chair, leaning a little to one side, his head very straight and stiff, his arms hanging down on either side beyond the arms of his chair, with the light beaming from his face and the tears trickling down his cheeks.

And he repeated in a low, intense voice, it broke into half a sob, half a laugh in the middle. It was damnation. And damnation taken lovingly.

Well, my friend, let me ask you today. Are you sorrowful, yet also rejoicing, as you consider what Jesus suffered for his people?

[10 : 49] Because you have come to the place of realizing that he suffered all this for you. That he didn't just suffer it for me.

And that he didn't just suffer it for Colin. But that he has suffered all of it for you. Damnation taken lovingly for you.

Well, that's the dead election. We come second to the division. Look at verses 37 to 39. Where Mark focuses on the division of the temple curtain. The division of the temple curtain.

Verses 37 and 38, we see the division of this curtain. Mark tells us that Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. Verse 37. Now this is remarkable.

Shouldn't be overlooked. Crucifixion was a slow death, an agonizing death that involved suffocation, loss of bodily fluid, multiple organ failure, crucified victims would die with barely a whisper.

[11 : 55] Here's Jesus. And he's dying with a loud cry on his lips. And having uttered that loud cry, he breathes his last. And after Jesus breathes his last, another supernatural event takes place.

Look at verse 38. We read that the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This was the thick, heavy curtain in the temple in Jerusalem that separated the holy place from the most holy place.

The most holy place was the place where God was said to be especially present. And only the high priest could enter it and he could only enter it once a year with the blood of an animal.

This curtain symbolized and shouted, preached and proclaimed that full free access to God was prohibited. It was out of bounds.

And now this curtain has been sovereignly, supernaturally torn in two from top to bottom. It's as if God himself has come. And he's ripped that curtain apart so that access into his holy place, access into his presence has now been opened up following the death of the sin bearer, Jesus.

[13 : 16] And we move from the division of the curtain to the declaration of the centurion. Look at verse 39. Mark tells us that a centurion was present. This man would have been in command of the best part of a hundred soldiers.

He was responsible for the whole execution process. And Mark says that he was standing and facing Jesus. And that he saw firsthand the way that Jesus breathed his last.

And Mark tells us what he said. He exclaims, truly, this man was the son of God. Now think about this. This man is a Roman.

This man is a Gentile. This man isn't Jewish. Furthermore, he's a centurion who would have become hardened, accustomed to seeing the regular deaths of numerous individuals.

But when he sees the manner in which Jesus dies, he realizes that he has been in the presence of a unique figure, an unparalleled figure, a divine being, the son of God.

[14 : 22] And in many ways, this is the climax of Mark's gospel. You know, if you go back to Mark chapter 1, Mark opens his account of Jesus' life saying that Jesus is the son of God.

And now he brings his account of Jesus' life to an end by recording not anyone, but a Roman centurion of all people declaring Jesus to be the son of God.

He wants his readers to understand that Jesus is more than a good man. He wants him to understand that Jesus is more than a great man. He wants him to understand, realize that Jesus was and is the God man.

Well, friends, again, as we consider these verses, we can see what Jesus secured for his people. We've seen what he suffered for his people. Now what he's secured for his people.

That's what we've got here in Mark 15. Jesus, the sin-baring Savior, dies. And as he dies, the temple curtain symbolizing man's restricted access to God is ripped apart.

[15 : 35] The death of Jesus has secured unimaginable, unlimited access to God for all his people. Francis Schaeffer puts it like this.

The central message of biblical Christianity is the possibility of men and women approaching God through the work of Jesus. Do you ever think of that?

The central message of Christianity is the possibility of men and women approaching God through the work of Jesus. And that is so important for us to reflect on today.

Isn't it an incredible thought that access into a holy God's presence has been opened up for us through Jesus' death symbolized in the tearing of the temple curtain.

Jeff Thomas, wonderful preacher, we had him in the High Free a few years ago, tells a personal story to illustrate this most profound truth. He writes this, When I was a boy, I'd go with my father to where he worked.

[16 : 47] He was a station master of two country railway stations, and he would walk between the two on the railway line itself. Our footsteps matching the regular sleepers. We would pass every warning notice.

Trespassers will be prosecuted. Without a second glance, because my father was in charge of a section of the line, he was taking me with him. And he had the authority to do so.

And so it is, when we put our hand in the hand of Christ and follow him, we are not trespassing when he takes us sinners through every door that would keep us right out into the presence of God himself.

Whoever we are, his death is our all-sufficient plea. However great our sin, however poor and ignorant we are, the death of Christ is intrinsically adequate to meet all our needs and all the demands of God's holiness.

And so today, this torn curtain, the message of the torn curtain, contains a word, friends, of invitation and a word of warning to each of us.

[17 : 55] There's a word of invitation. The temple curtain restricting access to the presence of God has been torn in two. And because of this, you and I are invited to draw near to this God in a way that the Old Testament saints could only ever dream of.

The writer to the Hebrews emphasizes that we can draw near to God with boldness, with confidence and with full assurance.

We can approach God, friend, without reserve, without restraint, because Jesus has opened up a new and living way to us.

Isn't that glorious news to hear? Isn't that a grand invitation? That you come into this building in the middle of Glasgow and you hear that you can approach the living God freely and fully because of Jesus.

There's a word of invitation. But there's also a word of warning. The temple curtain restricting access into the presence of God has been torn in two.

[19 : 07] And it is important and it's imperative that we don't try stitching and sewing it up again with all our man-made rules and traditions. Anytime we start telling ourselves that our salvation, our acceptance before God is dependent on something that we have done, something that we are doing, something that we hope to do in the future, we're attempting to sew up that curtain that God's ripped apart.

And anytime we start telling someone else that their salvation, their acceptance before God is dependent on something that they have done, something that they are doing, something that they ought to do in the future, we are attempting to sew up that curtain that God has ripped apart.

Anytime, friends, that we move away from a Jesus plus nothing gospel to a Jesus plus something gospel, we're attempting to take up that old torn curtain and stitch it up again.

Jesus has secured full access to God, free access to God for all his people. And can I ask you today, friend, are you approaching this God boldly?

Are you approaching him confidently? Are you approaching him with full assurance, saying with the hymn writer, I need no other argument, I need no other plea, it is enough that Jesus died and that he died for me, for me.

[20 : 44] Well, this brings us third and finally to the devotion. Look at verses 40 and 41, where Mark now focuses on the women's display of devotion, the women's display of devotion.

Mark notes who was present at the crucifixion and he starts by saying that women were there.

Jesus' male disciples have already been recorded by Mark as disappearing into the night.

Mark's even mentioned the cowardly denial of Peter before the various Jews in the high priest's courtyard. But these female disciples are all present as Jesus breathes his last.

And Mark identifies some of the women who were present. We have Mary Magdalene. She was one of Jesus' most devoted followers. She'll be the first person to see the risen Jesus. She was a woman whom Jesus had cast out seven demons from and she never forgot all that Jesus had done for her.

We also have Mary, the mother of James and Joseph. We don't know anything about this woman. All we know is that she was the mother of James and Joseph who were evidently well known to the readers of Mark's gospel in Rome.

[21 : 59] And finally, we have Salome. Some suggest that she's the wife of Zebedee, the mother of James and John, two of Jesus in her circle of friends, but we don't know.

And Mark tells us what these women had done and what these women were doing. He tells us what they had done. They had followed Jesus, he says, from the time when he was in Galilee. They had ministered to Jesus while he was in Galilee. And they, along with many other women, had come up with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem.

That's what they'd done. And now Mark tells us what they were doing. They were looking on at Jesus and all that had happened to him. These women are going to function as eyewitnesses to the death and the resurrection of Jesus in the weeks that follow.

You know, friends, we wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the witness of these women because poor Peter and the rest of them wouldn't have a clue what had gone on.

[23 : 02] They were going to be relying on the witness of these women. But for now, these women aren't there recognizing they're going to be witnesses in the future. They're simply silent spectators.

They're perplexed. They're puzzled. But they're present. They have followed Jesus. And they followed Jesus to what they believe is the end.

And so as we consider these verses and Colin, if you want to get the Sunday school out, you can. As we consider these verses, we can see what Jesus seeks from his people.

What Jesus seeks from his people. That's what we have here in Mark 15. These are ordinary women who have followed Jesus in his life and they're continuing to follow him as he dies.

They take what they think is their last opportunity to be with Jesus. One commentator, Mark Strauss, writes this, while Mark emphatically stated that at his arrest, all of Jesus' disciples deserted him, the women at the crucifixion remind us that devotion to Jesus is still alive.

[24 : 22] Devotion to Jesus is still alive. And that's important for us to reflect on. These women are an example to us of the kind of devotion that Jesus seeks from his people.

You know, Jesus isn't seeking fair weather friends who are going to be with him when the sun is shining and who are going to disappear as soon as the first cloud appears.

Jesus is seeking people who will stay with him even in the day of trial, even in the day of trauma, even in the day of trouble, even in the day of tears.

Jesus is seeking people who will remain committed to him even when their crisis comes and even when their hearts are filled with confusion.

Over the years, I've received a lot of grief from people, young, old, male, female, regarding what I believe to be the greatest movie scene of all time.

[25 : 27] I think Lisa's heard me yapping on about this once or twice, Samuel. It comes from the 2007 adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. Captain Wentworth has written to Anne Elliot telling her that she has pierced his soul, that he's half in agony, half in hope, and is now offering himself to her.

And when she gets the letter, Anne runs through the streets of Bath and upon finding him with the piano blaring away to a dramatic crescendo, she tells him that she's in receipt of his proposal and she's minded to accept.

Great way to accept a proposal. I am minded to accept. Captain Wentworth asks her if she's quite certain. to which Anne replies, I am.

I am determined. I will. And nothing you may be sure will ever persuade me otherwise. Nothing you may be sure will ever persuade me otherwise.

And I often think, and I often say to our own congregation, that it's such a helpful illustration of the kind of commitment, the kind of devotion that Jesus is seeking from his people.

[26 : 50] He's looking for people who will remain with him on the good days, the best days. But he's also looking for people who will remain with him on the very worst of days, the darkest of days.

this morning, we have the opportunity to publicly proclaim our commitment to Jesus, our devotion to Jesus, just as these women displayed their commitment to Jesus, their devotion to Jesus on what they saw as being the darkest of days, the darkest hour.
And I leave you, friend, with the encouragement, I leave you with the exhortation to do so. Let's put what's gone on in the past week behind us.
Let's put what we're thinking about in the future behind us. And let's express together our commitment, our devotion to Jesus.
Let's do this.