

The Darkness of Golgotha

by G. Campbell Morgan

The sermon explores the significance of the three hours of darkness during Jesus' crucifixion, revealing a symbol of spiritual evil and a material manifestation of the empire of sin.

Scripture: Isaiah 45:3, Matthew 4:16, Matthew 6:23, Matthew 8:12, Matthew 27:46, Luke 23:46, John 1:9, John 19:28, John 19:30, Ephesians 2:2

Topics: "The Cross", "Spiritual Darkness"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan explores the profound significance of the three hours of darkness at Golgotha, emphasizing that this period was not merely incidental but central to the crucifixion narrative. He reflects on how this darkness symbolizes the ultimate struggle against evil and the depth of Christ's suffering, revealing a transformation in the hearts of those present. Morgan highlights the psychological shift in the crowd, who moved from mockery to pity, and the significance of Jesus' final words as He emerged from the darkness. He asserts that the darkness represents a spiritual reality that transcends human understanding, ultimately leading to the treasures of forgiveness and redemption that arise from Christ's sacrifice. The sermon concludes with the affirmation that through His suffering, Jesus chose to save humanity rather than Himself.

Transcript

THERE'S ALWAYS THE danger that we might read this verse too quickly. We treat it too often as though it were merely the record of something incidental.

As a matter of fact, it is the central verse in the story of the cross. Indeed, the cross itself is not mentioned in the verse-no word is spoken of it or of the Christ. They are alike hidden, and yet the period was one of three hours' duration, the very central hours of the experience of the Savior of men. Christ and the cross are alike hidden within that verse, and that fact is most suggestive because in those hours transactions were accomplished that through all eternity defy the apprehension and explanation of finite minds.

It is not to be passed over lightly that all the Synoptists record the fact of that darkness. Three hours of darkness and of silence! All the ribald clamor was over, the material opposition utterly exhausted, the turmoil ended. Man had done his last and his worst. Beyond that period of the three hours' silence, even human actions were expressive of pity. Nothing has impressed my own heart, or amazed me more in reading this story anew, and attempting to meditate upon it in view of this service, than what I shall venture to describe as the wonderful psychological conditions of those hours beyond the hours of silence.

It is as though that appalling silence and that overwhelming darkness had changed the entire attitude of man to the Savior. The very vinegar they offered Him to drink was offered Him in pity. What they said about Elijah was expressive of their desire to sympathize. The centurion's testimony was that of a man whose heart was strangely moved toward the August and dignified Savior. When presently they found Him dead, and therefore did not break His bones, the spear thrust was one of kindness, lest perchance He might still suffer, in spite of the fact that He appeared to be dead. Multitudes dispersed from the scene at Golgotha smiting their breasts, overwhelmed with a sense of awe, and strangely moved by some new pity. And there is no picture in all the New Testament more full of pathos and of power than that of the women standing silent and amazed through all those hours of His suffering, and still standing there beyond them.

Then also all of the cries that passed the lips of Jesus beyond the darkness were significant. "My God! My God, why didst Thou forsake Me!"--Matthew 27:46--for that was the tense; a slight change from the tense of the actual Psalm, a question asked by One who was emerging from the experience to which He referred. And then as John is most careful to record for us, "Knowing that all things were now finished, He said, I thirst"--John 19:28. Beyond that came the words of the great proclamation, "It is finished"--John 19:30. And as last the words of the final committal, full of dignity, were spoken: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit"--Luke 23:46. Everything was changed beyond the hours of silence and of darkness.

Much has been written about these hours of darkness, much which is not warranted by any careful spiritual attention to the story itself. You will call to mind how, at great length many years ago, it was argued that the darkness was that of the sun's eclipse. But that is entirely impossible, for Passover was always held at full moon, when there could be no eclipse of the sun. The darkness has been described as nature's sympathy with the suffering of the Lord, but that is a pagan conception of nature, a conception of nature as having some consciousness apart from God and out of harmony with His work. It has been said that the darkness was brought about by an act of God, and was expressive of His sympathy with His Son. I admit that that is an appealing idea, and has some element of truth in it, in that we may discover the overruling of His government; but to declare that that darkness was caused by God because of His sympathy with His Son is to deny the cry of Jesus which immediately followed the darkness and referred to it. The darkness was to Him a period when He experienced whatever He may have meant by the words, "Thou didst forsake Me"--Matthew 27:46. If I have succeeded in these words spoken in reverent spirit, in suggesting to you the difficulty of those central three hours, then our hearts are prepared for going forward.

I submit thoughtfully that no interpretation of that darkness is to be trusted save that of the Lord who experienced it. Has He flung any light on the darkness which will enable us to apprehend the meaning of the darkness? Did any word escape His lips that will help us to explain those silent hours? I think the answer is to be found in these narratives, and to that teaching of the Lord we appeal in order that we may consider the meaning of the darkness, and the passing of the darkness, and thereafter attempt reverently to look back at the transaction in the darkness.

The Meaning of the Darkness

What was this darkness? How was it caused? What did it really mean? That this question is of importance is proved by that to which I have already drawn your attention, the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke alike carefully record that it took place at this very time. The reference is made by each of them in detail. It was something to be noted, something to be remembered, something that made its impression alike on the evangelist who saw the King, the evangelist who saw the Servant, and the evangelist who saw the Perfect

Man. We cannot pass it over as though it were merely incidental, and consequently we shall attempt to discover its meaning in the light of what our Lord Himself said before He passed into the darkness.

Luke records for us a fact not mentioned by either of the other evangelists, that in Gethsemane Jesus said to the man who came to arrest Him, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness"--Luke 22:53. That was a most suggestive word, spoken as I have reminded you, in Gethsemane before He passed from the garden to and through those trial scenes with which you are familiar. After the High Priest cast the incense on the fire and just as He was leaving the garden, Jesus spoke to the men about Him, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." This is your hour! I go back to this phrase again, not to tarry at length with it, but to ask you most carefully to ponder it.

At the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, He referred to an hour which was not yet, to an hour which was postponed. During the course of His ministry, you will find that the evangelists more than once allude to the same hour, and to that hour, whatever it might have been, as to a postponed hour. Men attempted to arrest Him, but they could not because His hour was not yet come. Men desired to encompass His death, and wrought with all their strength, all their wit so to do; but they were unable, because His hour had not yet come. And not always by the use of that particular phrase, but over and over again our Lord was looking forward toward some consummating, culminating hour which no man could hurry, and which no man could postpone, but which He did perpetually postpone until in the economy of God its set time should have come.

"We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day. The night cometh when no man can work"--John 9:4, was one of the profoundest sayings of Jesus in illuminating His own immediate ministry. It had larger values, I will readily admit, but often we miss the profoundest value because we fail to observe the first intention. There was an immediate application of that word, which the Revised Version helps us to appreciate by a change of number in the personal pronoun. "We"--He was speaking of Himself and His disciples--"We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh," a time of darkness and desolation, "when no man can work," when you must stand aside from cooperation and fellowship with Me. That was the consummating hour to which He looked, the night of darkness that at last would come, in which no man could work, but God alone must work.

Now, in light of that all too rapid examination of a very definite movement manifest in the ministry of our Lord, we come to Gethsemane. The soldiers were about to lay hands on Him and lead Him away to Caiaphas and to Pilate and to Herod, and then to Pilate and to death. Before they did, He said, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." The night, the hour postponed had arrived, and this was its character. From the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. We have no picture of the Son of God during those hours, no record of a word passing His lips. It was the period of the infinite silence, the period of the overwhelming darkness.

What, then, is this that Jesus said concerning the darkness? It was the hour of evil, it was the hour under the dominion of the powers of darkness. In those three hours we see the Savior in the midst of all that which resulted from the action of evil. Not without remarkable suggestiveness did the great apostle Paul speak in a letter written long afterwards of Satan as "prince of the power of the air"--Ephesians 2:2; and not without suggestiveness did he speak of him as presiding over the age as ruler of the darkness. Not without significance did John, the beloved apostle, when opening his gospel and writing concerning Jesus say that in Him was life, and the life was the light of men; that the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness apprehended it not, comprehended it not.

Neither the word apprehended nor the word comprehended means "understood" in this connection. The declaration is not that the darkness did not understand the light, but that the darkness did not extinguish the light. The apostle's declaration at the beginning of the gospel is that the light was always shining, and however deep and dense the darkness, it never succeeded in entirely extinguishing the light. The darkness apprehended it not--did not put it out. In that very negative declaration of the apostle you are brought face to face with the positive purpose of evil, with the purpose of Satan. What was Satan's supreme desire? To extinguish the Light. "There," said John of Jesus, "was the true Light . . . which lighteth every man, coming into the world"--John 1:9. Satan's purpose was to extinguish that Light.

From the very beginning of the shining of that Light, focused in history by the Incarnation, the one supreme purpose of the enemy was to apprehend it, to comprehend it, to extinguish it, to put it out. And in these three hours of darkness we are brought face to face with the time when all the force of evil was brought to bear on the soul of the Son of God, and all the unutterable intent and purpose of evil wrapped Him about in a darkness that is beyond our comprehension.

In that moment there was material darkness. It was the material symbol of the empire of sin. If the questioning of the heart shall become so material as to inquire--and I grant you it almost necessarily must--whether Satan did in some way actually produce the material darkness, I shall have to reply that I cannot tell, but I believe he did. I believe that by some action of those spiritual antagonisms, the world of principalities and powers, of which the early Christians were far more conscious than we are, and therefore more ready to fight with, under the captaincy and leadership of the prince of the power of the air, there was wrought out in material experience a symbol of the spiritual intention of hell.

I suggest for some quiet hour the study and examination of biblical symbolisms, and especially the use of the figure of darkness in biblical literature. For the purpose of illustration I confine myself entirely to the gospel of Matthew. Listen to these phrases, and immediately you will see how darkness is indeed a symbol of spiritual evil. "The people which sat in darkness"--4:16. "If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness!"--6:23. "The sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into the outer darkness"--8:12. "Cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness"--25:30.

Wherever the word occurs in this gospel of Matthew, indeed wherever it occurs in the New Testament, or its equivalent in the Old, it is the symbol of spiritual evil in its issue and in its ultimate. Darkness is the twin sister of death. Death and darkness express the ultimate in evil. And in this hour, when the Lord Himself was passing to death, there was darkness. That material darkness which impressed the evangelists and the multitudes, and changed their attitude of mind toward Him, was but the outward and visible sign of the more mysterious and unfathomable spiritual darkness into the midst of which He had passed. Through the channel of His earthly life, all spiritual things were having material manifestation. The Incarnation itself was but the working out into human observation of the truth concerning God. And now, in the hour of the dying of the Son of God, in that infinite, awful mystery, spiritual evil had its material manifestation in the darkness that settled over all the land. The darkness was of Satan; it was coincident with the ultimate in the suffering of the Son of God.

The Passing of the Darkness

And now, before we ask the most difficult of all questions concerning the transaction of the darkness, in preparation for that inquiry, let us look once more at that at which we have already glanced, the passing of

the darkness. In order that we may understand, let us listen again to the four words that passed the lips of the Lord beyond the ninth hour when the darkness was passing away and the light of material day was again breaking through on the green hill, on the cross, and on all those Judaeen lands. Notice reverently, then, the four cries that escaped His lips, and divide them, as they most certainly are divided, into two groups, the first two and the second two.

The first cry was the expression of a backward thought. "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?" It was the call of Jesus as He emerged from the darkness, and from all that happened therein, of which no single word is actually written. It was in itself a revelation, like a flash of light piercing the darkness. "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?"

In the next word we have the expression of His immediate experience, of that of which in His humanity He became then supremely conscious, "I thirst."

Almost immediately following it we have another expression of His immediate experience, that of which in the essential mystery of His Being He was conscious, "It is finished."

The final word described a forward glance. As the first word beyond the darkness expressed the backward thought, "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?" the last word expressed a forward confidence, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

We have listened to these words simply in order that we may try to be near Him as the darkness passed, and with all reverence, by listening to Him, appreciate something of the thinking of His own mind. A backward thought, "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?" An immediate experience within human limitations, "I thirst." Spiritual accomplishment, "It is finished." Then the future, the glorious future, "Father into Thy hands I commend My Spirit." Then He died, not of a broken heart, not of human brutality, not of murder by human hands; but of His own volition He yielded up the Ghost, and His Spirit, commended to God, passed to God. The death that saves was not that physical dissolution, but the infinite spiritual mystery of the three hours and the darkness, which being passed, He Himself did say, "It is finished."

In all that remained of the story beyond the hours of darkness, we have no record of any word uttered by the foes of Jesus. They were not present, or they seem not to have been, during that time. Indeed, it is something to be meditated with thankfulness of heart that no rude hand ever touched the body of the dead Christ. After the darkness, beyond the death and the dismissal of the spirit, they were loving disciple hands that took Him from the cross, wrapped Him round, and buried Him, giving Him the temporary resting place of a garden tomb. In death He was wonderfully preserved from all dishonor. The foes of Jesus seem to have withdrawn. Satan seems to have been absent.

Where was Satan? There is no answer in the records of the evangelists, and so I pass on to apostolic writings where I find this written concerning Christ: "Having put off from Himself the principalities and the powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it"-- Colossians 2:15. In the deep darkness, and in the midst of the silence, He triumphed over the forces of evil, the principalities and powers, and made a show of them openly by the cross, putting off from Himself all that assaulted Him in, and by, and through the darkness.

As the darkness passed, we again see the attitude of the people. They were arrested, they were touched with pity; there came illumination to them concerning the dying and the dead One, and a great fear

possessed them.

The Transaction Within the Darkness

So, finally, we come to the most impossible subject of all, that of the transaction within the darkness. We admit that this can have no final exposition. We admit immediately that any even partial thing that may be said is incomplete. Every aspect of the infinite whole is larger than we can know. Every theory is of value, but all theories fail. This is not the place, nor would it be within the highest purpose of our worship, to attempt to prove that statement. But at least I may be permitted to say that, so far as I know, for 25 years I have been reading--with ever growing gratitude--great books on the Cross, and from each one I have gained something and every one I have at last laid down, saying as I did so, Yes, yes! All that, but more; something not reached, something not spoken!

God cannot finally be expressed in finite terms. "The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes"--Matthew 21:42. It cannot be explained; it is the perpetual marvel. God must pity any man who thinks he understands this cross completely. God have mercy on any child of God if the day comes in which he has not to sing, "Love so amazing, so divine." When the amazement dies out, it is not that the cross has been analyzed, but that the gazer upon it has become blind.

Yet we may gain some light from the words of the Lord as He emerged from the darkness, and the darkness itself was suggestive. We remember the word we have in Matthew 4:16: "The people which sat in darkness." Into that darkness the Son of God experimentally passed. "If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"--6:23. That darkness had passed into His heart, when He said, 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?'--27:46. "The sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into outer darkness"--8:12. The Son of God passed into that outer darkness.

That does not answer the inquiry as to what happened. I have no answer for that. Only this I know, that in that hour of darkness He passed into the place of the ultimate wrestling of evil in actual experience. There is light as I hear the final word, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit"--Luke 23:46, for the word is a word which declares that whatever the transaction was, it was accomplished; that whatever the dying indicated, it was done.

Let us go a little further back, before the darkness, and listen to the chief priests who joined in the hellish clamor that beat on the suffering soul of the dying Savior. Among other things, they said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save"--Matthew 27:42. That brings me nearer than anything else. Those were wonderful hours of the transmutation of basest things to high and noble things. That was the last taunt of His enemies; it has become the most illuminative word about the cross.

"He saved others; Himself He cannot." So they laughed at Him. Hear it again as a truth sublime and awful: because He saved others, He cannot save Himself. In order to save others He will not save Himself. Said the rabble, and said the rabbis joining in the unholy chorus, "Let Him come down from the cross"--27:42. He did not come down from the cross, He went up from the cross. The great Priest who already had burned the incense in the holiest place bore the symbolic mystery of His own shed blood into the holy place, but before He could do so, He passed into the darkness and abode in the silence three hours--a human measurement in order that we may somehow understand--and in those three hours He could not save Himself. That was because His heart was set upon saving others.

Why could He not save Himself? My question descends to the level of common, everyday human experience and capacity at its highest and its best. He might have saved Himself. He might never have gone to Gethsemane's garden. He might even in Gethsemane's garden have asked for twelve legions of angels, as He Himself did say. He might with one glance of His shining glory have swept the rabble from about the cross and descended to the deliverance of Himself. If He had spoken in terms of power He might have saved Himself. Why, then, was it that He could not save Himself? Because He is God, and because God is love, and love is never satisfied with the destruction of a sinner, but with the saving of a sinner. Love never finds its rest with holiness and righteousness vindicated by the annihilation of the things that oppose. Love will find its rest only when those who have been swept from righteousness and holiness are restored thereto and are remade in the image of the Father, God. That is why.

Yes, but once more. If that be true, then on the ground of the mystery of the compulsion of the ineffable love of God in Christ, could love find no other way? Love could find no other way because sin knows no ending save by that way. The conscience of men demands that, the experience of men demands that. I base the twofold affirmation on the testimonies of the centuries and the millenniums. I base the affirmation on what I know within my own soul of sin.

Someone may say to me, "Cannot God forgive out of pure love?" I shall answer, "If He can, I cannot." If He could forgive me for the wrongs of which I am conscious, and that have left behind them their stain and pollution-if He could forgive me by simply saying, Never mind them, then I cannot so forgive myself. My conscience cries for a cleansing that is more than a sentiment of pity. Somehow, somewhere, in order that I may have forgiveness, there must be tragedy, something mightier than the devilish sin.

I do not know what happened in the darkness, but this I know, that as I have come to the cross and received the suggestions of its material unveiling, I have found my heart, my spirit, my life brought into a realm of healing spices, to the consciousness of the forgiveness of sins. And there is no other way and there is no other gospel of forgiveness.

In the darkness He saved not Himself, but He saved me. He declined to move toward His own deliverance in order that He might loose me from my sin. Out of the darkness has come a light. The word spoken to Cyrus long ago has been fulfilled in the spiritual glory to the Son of God, "I will give thee the treasures of darkness"--Isaiah 45:3. And because fulfilled to the Son of God by the Father who loved Him, and wrought with Him through the mystery of His forsaking, the word has been fulfilled also to the sons of God who are born not of blood, nor of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God. He gives us the treasures of darkness.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land, and from the darkness have come the treasures of pardon, and peace, of power, and of purity.

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