

Trial and Triumph: God is Dead

Mark 15:33-39

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As I was traveling over the last couple weeks I learned something. And that is that traveling with small children who have access to their own water bottles affords a person the opportunity to stop and sample all the bathrooms between here and any destination. We won't be giving out water bottles again. But doing this enabled me to observe one of my guilty pleasures which I know none of you are immature enough to enjoy, but that is sampling all the theological and political commentary that gets scratched into the bathroom stalls at truck stops.

And one of the highlights this time was a quote: "God is dead" – signed Nietzsche. Did you know Friedrich Nietzsche had a pit stop in Williams Lake? Anyway, immediately after his quote was another "Nietzsche is dead" – signed God.

Well today we are back in Mark. And if you've been walking through this study with us you know we are right at the end. In fact today, in Mark 15, we reach the climax of the book; the pinnacle of the dialogue, and we arrive at the death of God.

So if you've got a Bible go ahead and open it up to Mark 15. We are going to be picking it up in verse 33. And would you stand with me? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 15:33-39]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

The text starts with Jesus on the cross. He's been strung up by Pilate and hung between two criminals. And as He hangs there, Mark gives us a piece of surprising context: "At noon, darkness came over the whole land until 3pm."

Now this is something Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree on. And in fact there are non-biblical records that talk about a strange darkness during this time as well. So the historian, Thallus, who wrote his regional history in 52AD records about this strange darkness. And, in searching for a cause, attributed it to an eclipse.

But there are a few problems with this. First of all Solar eclipses only last a maximum of 7 and a half minutes. So that is far too fast because Mark says it was dark for three hours. And second, eclipses always happen when the moon is new and passing between the earth and the sun. But Passover, which is when Jesus died, always happens at a full moon. So it couldn't have been a solar eclipse.

And if you are wondering, lunar eclipses do last longer – almost 2 hours. But they happen at night and so can't cause darkness from noon till 3.

Other people have said well maybe it was a sandstorm. These are common in the desert regions around Israel and can kick sand into the air that can make it dark for days so three hours would be no problem. But sandstorms happen in the summer, and Passover happens during rainy season. So it couldn't have been a sandstorm.

There simply aren't any natural causes that can account for the darkness people experienced in the moment of Jesus' death. And this means the darkness had miraculous causes and has spiritual significance.

And I want to unpack three spiritual significances about this darkness today. First, the darkness at Christ's death describes our own darkness, second, it pictures the darkness Jesus experienced. And finally, it shows us how the darkness Jesus experienced empowers us to leave our darkness behind.¹

First, the darkness of this text symbolizes the darkness in our own hearts. So throughout scripture physical darkness is a picture of spiritual darkness. For example, in John 3 we read:

God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. (John 3:19)

So there is a connection between physical darkness and spiritual darkness. And similarly there are connections between light and God. So in Malachi God tells us:

"But for you who fear My name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture. (Malachi 4:2)

So physical darkness is a metaphor for everything that is wrong with the human heart – for spiritual darkness. And the cure for it is turning our face towards the Sun of Righteousness who rises with healing in His wings, this is where abundant life resides.

If you want to live, point your face to God. God is the source of life and truth. He is like our sun that enables us to see everything else for what it is. And every time we replace God at the center with anything else – even great things like love or family or work or success – the result is darkness and death. Other things can give temporary happiness, but nothing is able to light up our lives like the Sun of Righteousness.

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So what happens in the dark? Have you ever experienced total darkness?

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Most of us live in the city and there is almost never total darkness here. If the stars aren't shining we've got street lights and cars. You can walk around at 2am without trouble. But I remember being a teenager out at Pilot Mountain, north of town. And the closest neighbour was about 500 meters away up a little hill from where I lived. And I would hang out at their house until 9pm when it was time to be home. And I remember one evening leaving their house on a cloudy night in the middle of winter.

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-death-of-jesus-5511/> (Accessed March 31, 2022)

And as I walked to the end of their driveway and around the corner I realized that I could not see my hand in front of my face. It was absolute darkness. And in that moment my mind started racing. I thought of every boogie man story and wolf attack that I had ever heard about. My adrenaline was pounding. But I had to get home. So I pointed myself down the hill towards my house, and I set what probably still stands as a world record for running 500 meters in snow boots with my arms straight out in front of me. Just seconds!

Miraculously I arrived at the bottom of the hill without injury and was met by light coming through the trees from my house. And to this day that light is burnt into my memory as an incredibly beautiful sight.

Total darkness brings fear and disorientation. In the dark your mind plays tricks on you. And spiritual darkness is the same. So when we take the Sun of Righteousness out of the center of our lives and start living for money or sex or love or career, at first this kind of life can be exhilarating, but if you ever get the things you are seeking you will experience an incredible let down. Nothing else is big enough for our souls.

This is why wealthy businesspeople kill themselves when the stock market crashes. This is why people are devastated when their relationships break down. This is why people say things like “if you lose your health you don’t have anything left.” When the things we center our lives around disappear we lose our identity. Darkness results when the Sun of Righteousness isn’t at the center.

But it doesn’t end here, ultimately, like a plant left in the closet, a life lived outside the influence of the Sun of Righteousness results in death and disintegration. Pastor Tim Keller makes an interesting point here. He cites Genesis 1:1 which says “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And into the chaos and darkness God speaks the words “Let there be light.”

But Keller says there is a picture in Genesis 1:1 of Genesis 1 verse 0 – some strange existence before creation. Only chaos. Only darkness. And this is what God pushes aside to create. The beauty of creation is the radical triumph of light over darkness.

But this move to the light is tied to God so every move away from Him is a move back towards the darkness and un-creation of Genesis 1 verse 0. And this isn’t just something that affects atheists, this can happen to anyone.

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So I’m a pastor and I want to be a good pastor. But one very interesting reality I’ve found is that it is just as easy for me to make work the center of my life as it is for anyone else. And when this starts happening disintegration begins.

So if my job is the most important thing to me then when you don’t like the way I’m doing my job, it can quickly become an ultimate thing. If I’m chasing approval and I don’t get it, or if I’m trying to perform at a certain level and I don’t get the results I’m after then I’m a failure. Life disintegrates.

This happens in relationships too. If you've ever fallen into having a relationship become everything to you, or if someone has ever made you god in their life – if you have become the most important person to someone, then you know the pressure that occurs. And when you let that person down they get incredibly angry because it is their god that is letting them down. And a life like this is a life lived moving back to Genesis 1:0 – it's a move towards uncreation.

And of course uncreation only happens partially in our world. But ultimately, if we choose to live our lives oriented around another god then God will allow us to go there. He will not force Himself and His love on us. He will give us what we want. He will let us go into the abject darkness of uncreation.

So in Isaiah 13 the prophet talks about Judgment Day and he describes it saying:

For see, the day of the LORD is coming— the terrible day of His fury and fierce anger. The land will be made desolate, and all the sinners destroyed with it. The heavens will be black above them; the stars will give no light. The sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will provide no light. "I, the LORD, will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their sin. (Isaiah 13:9-11)

On Judgment Day God will give every person over to the god they have spent their life seeking. And we will find that every move away from the Sun of Righteousness has been a move towards darkness and uncreation. And the reality of the human heart is that this is our default move. The human heart is desperately wicked – your heart. And that's the first picture that the darkness of this text depicts.

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But there is another. Second, the darkness of the cross shows us the darkness Jesus experienced. So at three in the afternoon, after three hours of darkness, Jesus cries out: "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" Which means "My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?" What is going on here?

Well Jesus is actually quoting Psalm 22. A psalm that was written by David a thousand years before Jesus was born. But if you read this psalm you will see it is a prophecy of Jesus' death by crucifixion. But crucifixion didn't exist when David wrote this. In fact it was the Babylonians who first experimented with crucifixion some 400 years later. And yet these words speak about Jesus. They read:

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
 Why are you so far away when I groan for help?...
 I am scorned and despised by all!
 Everyone who sees me mocks me.
 They sneer and shake their heads, saying...
 If the LORD loves him so much,
 let the LORD rescue him!"...
 My enemies surround me like a herd of bulls...

My life is poured out like water,
 and all my bones are out of joint...
 My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs...
 They have pierced my hands and feet.
 I can count all my bones...
 They divide my garments among themselves
 and throw dice for my clothing. (Psalm 22:1-18)

Doesn't that sound like Jesus' death? The mocking. The water and blood poured out. The bones out of joint. The pierced hands and feet. The throwing dice to divide up His clothing. All this was recorded a thousand years before the Son of Righteousness was born, and His light shone into our darkness.

And this means Jesus' death wasn't an accident. Suffering the cross was God's plan-A. God ordained that all the darkness and evil of the world would be thrown at Jesus on the cross, and this is what He was experiencing as He cried out.

But as He hangs there in the darkness in absolute agony notice what He doesn't say. He doesn't cry out "My hands, My hands, they are hurting Me." Nor does He say: "My clothes, My clothes, they are stealing My clothes." What He says is "My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?" The greatest darkness Jesus experienced on the cross was the loss of His Father.

And the reason He experiences this is because our Judgment Day was coming down on Him. The rod of God's wrath had been stretched out over Him. The flaming sword of the Garden that kept Adam and Eve from returning to the tree of life was swung at Him. On the cross, in the darkness, the Light of the World who spoke creation into existence experienced the darkness of uncreation. Jesus was undone. And it was hell for Him. But by far the greatest agony of this experience was the loss of the Father.

In fact everything else, the thorns on His head, the nails in His hands, the jeers of His own creation, the suffocation of being stretched out on the cross. All of this was a mere mosquito bite in comparison with the darkness of the back of God. And so He cries out "My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?" This is the darkness Jesus experienced.

But this isn't where the text ends. Just like in the bathroom stall, Nietzsche doesn't get the last word. And so while the darkness of the cross exposes our own darkness and pictures the darkness Jesus endured, the good news of the cross is that the darkness Jesus embraced enables us to leave our darkness behind.

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So this passage is the climax of the book of Mark, and we get this climax in verses 38 and 39:

Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed His last. And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. When the Roman officer who stood facing Him saw how He had died, he exclaimed, "This man truly was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:38-39)

In the curtain and the Roman officer we get the climax of Mark. So first the curtain. This was a huge curtain unlike any you have ever seen. It was 30 feet wide and 30 feet high and 9 centimetres thick, so it was more like a wall than a curtain. It would have weighed thousands of pounds. And it stopped everyone from entering the presence of God.

In fact only one time a year could one person enter in past the curtain. And it could only be the most holy person – the high priest – of the most holy people – the Jews. And he could only do it on the holiest day – Yom Kippur. And he could only do it accompanied by a blood sacrifice. So to say access to God was limited is an understatement.

But really it was access to people that was limited by the curtain. Our God is a consuming fire. He's the Sun of Righteousness. And nobody other than the holiest person of the holiest people on the holiest day with the holiest sacrifice could ever endure Him.

But when Jesus died that curtain was torn from top to bottom – it was God breaking out. And He could come out without destroying us because our sin had been covered and paid for by His own sacrifice. By the death of the Son. And now anyone can connect with God. The barrier's gone.

So it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. It doesn't matter how far you've fallen or what people would think if your sin was known. The fact of the matter is that Jesus' blood makes it possible for broken sinners like us to encounter the Son of Righteousness and not be burnt.

And Mark makes this totally clear by having it be the Roman officer who gets it first. You see the whole Gospel of Mark is about how Jesus is the Son of God. The very first verse in the book lays out the thesis. It says:

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

But then throughout Mark Jesus is showing us who He is and what He can do and nobody gets it. Peter doesn't get it. He is on the mountain with the glorified Jesus and all he can do is start a building project. The other disciples don't get it, they saw all His miracles and heard all His teaching without putting two and two together. The religious leaders don't get it. Nobody can understand Jesus until the moment of God's death when the curtain is torn. And then, for the first time, everyone can get God. God can come out and anyone can get in. And the evidence of this is this totally unlikely encounter.

Centurions were professional killers and Romans. So he wasn't a Jew and he wasn't a high priest. And on top of this he wouldn't have even been a nice guy. Centurions were known for their brutality and abuse of power, and this is the guy who looks up at how Jesus dies and concludes "surely this man was the Son of God." He gets it.

And this is what Mark wants you and me to see. We are broken. We all live in darkness. No one is righteous, not even one. All of us deserve to be forsaken and abandoned by God. All of us deserve Judgement Day. But there was One who was righteous. And He went to the cross and took the darkness and abandonment that you and I deserve. He took our Judgement Day so we could be forgiven. He took our darkness so we could walk in the light.

And here's the takeaway – if you aren't a Jesus-follower, and you are wondering whether you could possibly center your life on God and be accepted; if you think you've gone too far, you've got to see this centurion. He was a professional killer. I mean this is PG so maybe some of you have the same job – I don't know – but it doesn't matter. There is no depth you could have gone that is too far to be covered by the blood of the Son of Righteousness. So let Jesus' blood cover you and choose to center your life around Him. Even you can walk in the light.

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Second, maybe you are a Jesus-follower, but you've been walking through some really hard times. And you are tempted to ask "Why God." Maybe it feels like the heavens are hard and you've been abandoned. Even if you aren't there now, the time is coming, everyone is going to suffer. Everyone will experience the dark night of the soul sooner or later. So this is relevant.

But here's the good news, of every religion in the world only the Christian faith has a God who has taken on suffering on our behalf – there is no other. It was so bad for Him that He too asked "My God, My God why have you forsaken Me?"

The difference is that Jesus was forsaken so that we can be accepted. He was abandoned so we can be embraced. He was judged so we can be forgiven. So whatever meaning you take from your suffering know that it doesn't mean God has left you. He is actually unable to leave you because Jesus' blood has bought you a place in the throne room of heaven.

So brothers and sisters, hold on. Don't give up. Stand strong and let your suffering sanctify you. Let it cause you to grow more and more like Jesus the suffering God.

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2000 years ago God suffered and died. But death and suffering didn't get the last word. Love and light triumphed. And He lives so that you and I can live too. Amen?