

"THE DEATH OF THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"

**I. Introduction**

A. Luke's account of the death of our Lord is thick with meaning.

1. Every detail that he reports has profound significance.
2. And how could it be otherwise?
3. This is the event that stands at the heart of our faith.
4. Luke is telling how the only-begotten Son of God, the One who is God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, died the cursed death of the cross.
5. As Charles Wesley's great hymn declares,

*'Tis myst'ry all! Th' Immortal dies:  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.*

B. There is much that is mysterious about the cross of Christ.

1. There are depths here that no one, neither man nor angel, will ever be able to sound.
2. And yet, by God's grace and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, there is a great deal about the cross that we can at least begin to understand.
3. As we study Luke's account of the death of our Lord today, we will focus our attention upon several of the things that made Jesus' death such a extraordinary spectacle for those who witnessed it.

## II. An Unnatural Darkness

- A. The first thing that Luke mentions in our text is that an unnatural darkness came over the land.
1. As you can see by the footnotes in the ESV, the light of the sun failed from noon to 3:00 p.m. while Jesus was dying on the cross.
  2. This was not a solar eclipse.
  3. Jesus was crucified during the Feast of Passover, which was always held during a full moon, and a solar eclipse cannot take place during a full moon.
  4. This was a miraculous darkness, and it had several layers of symbolic meaning.
  5. First, this darkness signified God's judgment.
  6. On the cross, Jesus was experiencing what had been foretold by the prophet Amos when he wrote these words about the coming Day of the Lord: "'And on that day,' declares the Lord GOD, 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.'" (Amos 8:9)
  7. The mid-day darkness declared that Jesus had come under the covenant curse and was rejected by God.
  8. Our Lord was experiencing the pangs of hell as he suffered on the cross.
  9. God caused the natural world to bear testimony to this by blotting out the light of the sun.
- B. The unnatural darkness also recalls the plague of darkness that came upon the land of Egypt just before the Israelites celebrated the first Passover and were delivered from slavery and death.

1. Jesus' death marks the fulfillment of those events.
  2. Now that the true Passover Lamb is being sacrificed, darkness covers the land once again.
  3. God extinguished the rays of the sun to show that Jesus' death would bring about the deliverance of his people.
- C. The unnatural darkness also symbolizes the temporary prevailing of the forces of spiritual darkness over Jesus.
1. It brings to mind the words that Jesus spoke to those who came to arrest him in Gethsemane: "But this is your hour, and the power of darkness." (Lk. 22:53)
  2. The powers of darkness were doing their worst against Jesus as he hung on the cross.
  3. Think of the darkest times in your own life, the times when you were most susceptible to the influence of indwelling sin and temptations of the devil.
  4. Jesus was experiencing something far beyond anything that you or I have ever experienced.
  5. The forces of evil seized upon the physical, emotional, and spiritual torments that Jesus was enduring and used them as staging grounds to launch temptation after temptation.
  6. Yet in spite of all of these efforts, the darkness was not able to overcome the Light.
  7. Our Lord emerged victorious.
  8. This leads Charles Spurgeon to observe that, "The present battle in which you and I take our little share is as nothing compared with that wherein all the powers of darkness in their dense battalions hurled themselves against the almighty Son of God. He bore their onset, endured the tremendous shock of the assault, and in the end,

with shout of victory, He led captivity captive.”

### III. An Epochal Happening

- A. The second phenomenon that Luke mentions in our text is that the curtain of the temple was torn in two.
1. There were actually two major curtains in the temple.
  2. One separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place, and the other hung at the entrance to the Holy Place.
  3. Luke does not tell us which curtain it was that was torn in two, but the significance is the same regardless.
  4. The tearing of this curtain declared that Jesus' death on the cross marked the point when he entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies as our great High Priest and offered the one true sacrifice for sins, once and for all.
  5. Through that sacrifice, the way of access into God's presence was opened to every repentant and believing sinner.
- B. Closely related to this was the fact that Christ's death marked the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system and rendered the temple obsolete.
1. God made this abundantly clear by tearing the temple curtain in two.
  2. That curtain was a visual representation of the holiness of God.
  3. Under the old covenant administration, access to God's presence was carefully guarded and extremely limited.
  4. Ordinary Israelites were never allowed to enter inside the sanctuary.
  5. They had to worship the Lord from the courtyard.

6. Only the priests could go inside the Holy Place, and they had to be ritually cleansed before they could do so.
7. Only the high priest could enter into the Most Holy Place, and this only happened once per year, on the Day of Atonement.
8. All of this testified to the danger that God's holiness poses to sinful human beings.
9. But now that Christ has died for sin, those of us who believe in him can draw near to God's throne of grace with confidence, trusting that we will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
10. The tearing of the temple curtain declares that the reality that the temple-system existed to prefigure has arrived.
11. In the words of Isaac Watts' great hymn,  
  
*Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain,  
Could give the guilty conscience peace, or wash away the stain.*  
  
*But Christ, the heav'nly Lamb, takes all our sins away,  
A sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than they.*
12. Or as the writer of Hebrews puts it, "[Jesus] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." (Heb. 9:12)

#### IV. A Cry of Faith

- A. Another observable detail that Luke records in connection with Jesus' death is the loud cry that he made just before he died.
  1. Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."
  2. Then, having spoken those words, he breathed his last.

3. This final cry of our Lord from the cross came after two other cries, which are recorded by the other Gospel writers.
  4. The first was his cry of dereliction, when he quoted Psalm 22 to express the anguish he was experiencing as the object of God's wrath, saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
  5. The second cry was his cry of completion, when he declared that he had accomplished the saving work for which he had been sent, saying, "It is finished."
  6. After that cry of dereliction and that cry of completion, Jesus uttered a cry of faith.
  7. His words are a quotation of Psalm 31:5, where a righteous sufferer expresses his faith in God to deliver him from his enemies.
  8. In crying out to God with these words as he breathes his last breath, Jesus is confessing his belief that God will vindicate him by raising him from the dead.
  9. He is giving his spirit over to God's care and trusting that God is the guardian of his soul, and this in spite of the fact that those around him see him as accursed.
- B. As we reflect upon our Lord's final prayer from the cross, we should also understand that he prayed this not just for himself but also for all of those for whom he died.
1. He was not just committing his spirit into God the Father's hands.
  2. He was entrusting the spirits of all the elect to the care of the Father.
  3. Here is how John Calvin explains this: "Let us now remember that it was not in reference to himself alone that Christ committed his soul to the Father, but that he included, as it were, in one bundle all the souls of those who believe in him, that they may be preserved along with his own."

4. This is why so many Christians throughout the ages have used Jesus' final prayer from the cross as the model for their final prayer at the time of their death.
5. When Stephen is martyred in the book of Acts, he prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
6. When the Bohemian forerunner of the Reformation John Huss was burned at the stake for his teachings, he prayed, "Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit."
7. When Martin Luther was on his deathbed, he prayed the very same prayer.
8. Every Christian would do well to memorize this prayer: into your hands I commit my spirit.
9. There is a sense in which it is a prayer that we should pray every day of our lives.
10. But it is especially fitting for that moment when we are confronted by the reality of our departure from this world.
11. Because Jesus faced down death by being made a curse on our behalf, everyone who believes in him can face death without fear.
12. In the words of one writer, "To [the elect] death is divested of its sting, and rendered powerless to do them any real injury. Not only is it disarmed of its power to hurt them — it is compelled to perform a friendly part to them. It is their release from warfare, their deliverance from woe, their departure to be with Christ." [Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 400]

## V. Witnesses of the Spectacle

- A. Having considered the particular phenomena to which Luke's account of Christ's death draws our attention, we turn now to see what this passage tells us about some of the people who witnessed this spectacle.

1. The first person who is singled out is the Roman centurion who stood guard at Jesus' cross.
2. This was a man who had been hardened by seeing many others die the tortuous death of the cross.
3. Yet as he saw Jesus' demeanor as he underwent this cruel ordeal, and as he witnessed the extraordinary things that took place while Jesus was dying, the centurion concluded that there was something unique about Jesus.
4. It was very unusual for a crucified man to have the strength to shout out just before he died.
5. And it was certainly odd to hear a crucified man say the kinds of things that Jesus said during his final hours on the cross.
6. This leads the centurion to declare, "Certainly this man was innocent."
7. This is the seventh declaration of Jesus' innocence in this chapter.
8. As one commentator puts it, the centurion's words stand as "the ultimate commentary on these events." [Bock]
9. In fact, the centurion was saying more than he understood.
10. The term that the ESV translates as "innocent" is the same word that the New Testament uses for "righteous."
11. Not only was Jesus innocent of the charges under which he was being put to death, he was also perfectly righteous in the eyes of God.
12. And because he suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, he is able to present all who believe in him as righteous before God.

- B. The second group of witnesses whom Luke mentions is the crowds that had assembled to see Jesus being put to death.
1. After watching Jesus die and seeing all the signs that accompanied his death, these people went back to their homes beating their breasts.
  2. In that culture, this was a way of giving outward expression to intense grief.
  3. This indicates that the crowds had reached the same conclusion as the centurion.
  4. They realized that Jesus was not guilty.
  5. Perhaps some of them were smitten with a sense of guilt for the part that they had played in this injustice by calling for his death.
  6. This might have been the beginnings of repentance for some of these people.
  7. It could be that some from this crowd were present fifty days later when Peter preached his Pentecost sermon.
  8. Luke tells us that that crowd was cut to the heart by Peter's message and asked, "what shall we do?"
  9. To which Peter answered, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."
  10. We are told in Acts 2 that three thousand souls were saved that day.
  11. This reminds us that the Lord does not bring people to a state of salvation by making them feel good about themselves.
  12. He does the very opposite.

13. He opens our eyes to see our sin and misery.
- C. The last people to be mentioned in our text are Jesus' acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee.
1. The way these people are described is a bit ambivalent.
  2. On the one hand, they are distinct from the crowd.
  3. They clearly have a different relationship to Jesus than the rest of those who are present.
  4. On the other hand, they are standing at a distance, probably because of their fear of being associated with this man who was being treated with such cruelty and disdain.
  5. This underscores the isolation and loneliness that Jesus experienced on the cross.
  6. While he did not ultimately lose any of his true disciples, they certainly did not provide him with much in the way of support as he faced his darkest hour.

## VI. Conclusion

- A. It may seem a bit strange for us to be studying an account of Christ's death on December 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- B. This is the time of year when we are celebrating the birth of the Lord Jesus.
- C. It is a season that is marked by joy and festivity.
- D. Now, I am no Scrooge.
- E. I think that it is right and good for us to celebrate Jesus' birth.
- F. However, we should never lose sight of why his birth is so significant.

- G. So as I conclude, I want to read a portion of a sermon that J. Gresham Machen preached right after Christmas in 1936, and just a few days before his sudden and unexpected death on New Year's Day:

"We have just celebrated Christmas, and it is right for us to do so. Happy at this Christmas season through which we have just passed have been those to whom it has not been just a time of worldly festivity but a time of commemoration of the coming of our blessed Savior into the world...

Yes, I say, thank God for the Christmas season; thank God for the softening that it brings to stony hearts; thank God for the recognition that it brings for the little children whom Jesus took into His arms; thank God even for the strange, sweet sadness that it brings to us together with its joys, as we think of the loved ones who are gone. Yes, it is well that we should celebrate the Christmas season; and may God ever give us a childlike heart that we may celebrate it aright.

But after all, my friends, it is not Christmas that is the greatest anniversary in the Christian church. It is not the birth of Jesus that the church chiefly celebrates, but the death.

Did you know that long centuries went by in the history of the church before there is any record of the celebration of Christmas?...

Well, then, if that is so with regard to the commemoration of Jesus' birth, how is it with regard to the commemoration of His death? Was the commemoration of that also so long postponed? Well, listen to what is said on that subject by the Apostle Paul. 'For as often as you eat this bread,' he says, 'and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'...

The birth of Jesus was important not in itself but because it made possible His death. Jesus came into this world to die, and it is to His death that the sinner turns when he seeks salvation for his soul." [*God Transcendent*, 203, 204]