

Matthew 27 (45) – Don't Be Afraid of the Dark

Today is Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified. We call it Good Friday because of what was accomplished. On the cross, Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, so that we might have eternal life. Indeed, what the cross accomplished was good. But the way it was accomplished doesn't look so good. The lesson is that the way to the good was through the bad. In what Jesus went through for us. And, in what we go through as we follow him.

To the people who gathered around the cross, those people who loved Jesus, those people who were trusting in him, it looked anything but good. To see your hopes and dreams die is not good. Everything you had faith for, every glimmer of light, had suddenly turned dark. But they would understand soon. And for us today, you need to understand it, too. You must come to grips with the reality of our bad being overcome by God's good. And how it doesn't happen after the pattern of this world. Instead, at the cross, God calls you to see Jesus and your life with new, spiritual eyes.

Children are naturally afraid of the dark. And we move around carefully when we are in the dark. It is normal to be scared when it's dark in a place you aren't familiar with. Children want a night light. People want a flashlight. Cars need their headlights. For the lights to suddenly go out in an unfamiliar place makes you wonder, what's going on, what's going to happen, am I safe? The uncertain and unfamiliar take on a whole new fear when you can't even see what is going on.

Death on a cross was an unavoidable public spectacle. Everyone was meant to see the horror and humiliation. And crucifixions were always on a low hill outside the main city gate, to make sure anyone coming in or out of the city would have to see it. As for Jesus, before he was placed on the cross, he was beaten, mocked, cursed, spit on, and flogged so badly that he was hardly recognizable. After that, Jesus is forced to carry his own cross to the place of his execution. That cross was heavy. And Jesus was wounded so badly already that another man had to be forced to help him carry it.

So, they put Jesus on the cross. It was 9 am. The cross was a cruel means of death. It involved lingering, torturous suffering. You were laid down, and placed with arms spread, and feet together on the wooden beams. Then you were nailed to the instrument of your death, and lifted up to hang there, suspended on that cross, fastened by the nails in your body. You would feel the pain of the spikes driven into your flesh, but that was just the start. You would be hanging there, sinking down, feeling the horrible stretch with no relief, only more and more agony. Hour after hour, you would dehydrate, you would lose strength, you would lose blood, you would lose breath, then you would lose consciousness, and eventually, you would lose your life.

It's 12 o'clock, noon. Jesus had been on the cross for about three hours. And suddenly, the sunlight stopped, and the sky went dark. Jesus was mostly silent during the next three hours. This is the time he feared. When the wrath of God against the sins of his people was manifest by this darkness. And by what Jesus said – *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

In his divinity, God the Son knew that this was going to happen. And in his humanity, Jesus knew there was going to be a terrible price to pay. But the feeling of being abandoned by the love of God, and turned over to the wrath of God. There was no way a human being could ever understand this complete contrast. And in his humanity, Jesus cried out for all humanity. And more than anyone else who has ever lived, Jesus understands how bad a broken relationship feels. He can help you and give you hope. His cry is a quote from the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 22, and verse 1. So many of the events of this day were foretold in that Psalm. It is all pointing to Jesus. It pictures affliction, abandonment, and agony. But it ends in triumph.

However, what about those people on that day? Those people who loved Jesus, who were trusting in him, what were they thinking? What did they think they were seeing, and suddenly not seeing, when the sky went dark? Well, to the human eye, what was going on was simple. Jesus was dying and they were crying. They thought he was God. And he was, and is. But in those three hours, all they could do is wonder in the dark what this all meant.

Most of us know what it's like to watch someone you dearly love be in pain, emotional pain, relational pain, social pain, physical pain, mental pain. Jesus was suffering all of this, to a degree no one else ever has, and there weren't many people who were on his side that were by his side at the time. A night full of injustice and betrayal. A daybreak of mocking and beatings. And now, three hours of torture, and then three hours of darkness. Can you imagine what that must've been like? What would you have been thinking? Where was God? For all they knew, he was right there, on that cross, dying! Everything had gone wrong! The light of the world had gone out! And that is how it seems to us at times, even on this side of the cross.

People look at the cross and get the wrong idea. Of course, to the unsaved world, the cross looks like a defeat. But Christians think of the victory of the cross, and how it causes us to be in everlasting triumph. However, that victory comes at a cost. And that victory takes time to play itself out. In human history, and in your personal history.

The Christian life is not about living your best life now. It is about living the Jesus life now. Yes, we have an assured triumph and we are always being led in a triumphal procession. But the biblical picture of triumphal procession means that King Jesus is leading around a bunch of losers that he has conquered. And his conquest of us, and his reign of his kingdom, began with his own death! Even if we are very smart, very successful, very good people, we can look like losers, just as Jesus did on that cross. The Apostle Paul said that to the world we look like the scum of the earth!

We don't look at the cross just to see our need and God's provision for our sin. We look at the cross to see God's plan for our lives. There are things that only Jesus can do. Like pay for our sins on the cross. But because of Jesus there are things that you can do. Like take up your own cross.

Think of all Jesus did to help others, and yet how he was treated. That happens to us when we follow him, and take up our own cross. Lots of people think Christians are losers. And how many so-called Christians stand

away from the people of God all the while claiming that they know God? Of course, it wasn't always like that for Jesus, and it isn't always that way for us. But there comes a time. Are you ready for the dark?

We do the mercy ministry, the missions, the orphanages, the shelters, the relief efforts, helping the needy, the oppressed, standing against injustice, standing up for the vulnerable, sacrificing our time and money and even our lives. But what does that bring us? Oftentimes it is mocking, persecution, marginalization, criminalization, martyrdom. You keep telling people about Jesus, but no one seems to care. Or worse, they come after you.

Think about that dark scene at the cross. The Christian life is not triumphalism, it is faithfulness despite what seems like hopelessness. We are called to be, do, and say certain things even when those things don't bring the rewards we want in this life. We must live the truth even when it means we must let go of other good goals. We have to say truths that may result in frustrating our good goals. Sometimes when we are winning it looks like we are losing. Look at the cross, and realize that sometimes, winning hurts.

Think about the cross, and think about how its message applies to you as you live out the cross-bearing life. The cross means that you must forgive someone even if it means they look good and you look bad. The cross means that you have to say certain things are sin, and that we are all sinners, knowing it will give people a reason to rage against you and call you a hypocrite. Even other Christians. The cross means you know what love really is, and you stand by and take it when others say you aren't loving.

The cross means that Jesus demonstrated his love for the world, while being scorned by the ones he came to save. The cross means that you have to say Jesus loves you when it means people will hate you for it. The cross means that you must warn people even if it means they lash out at you or distance themselves from you. The cross means you help those who are hurting. The cross also means that sometimes you are helping those who are hurting you. The cross means that sometimes you're going to be terribly discomforted in

order to bring comfort to someone else. The cross means you will ultimately win in the end, but you will have to suffer losses now. Dignity, respect, responsibility, love, mercy, forgiveness, grace, peace, all of these things and more are transformed by looking rightfully at the cross.

The cross means you win. But it doesn't mean you have nothing but wins in this life. The "always a winner" idea is a theology of glory, when what you need is a "theology of the cross." The cross means you do things, not because they help you win, but because they are right and true, and because the victory you seek only comes when you persevere through the defeat you wanted to avoid. That is what taking up your cross means.

The cross means you win. But the cross also means you lose. You lose the right to retaliate, or spew your anger on others. And if you aren't doing what Jesus says you should do, or you are doing what Jesus says you shouldn't do, it means that you aren't looking rightly at the cross. But the good news is that you can come back to the cross, repent of your sin, and find forgiveness, and ask for cleansing. The cross is always there for you. But it doesn't mean that grace is a license to sin. It means that the grace of the cross is what motivates you and empowers you to overcome sin. The cross means that sin has been defeated. But the cross also means that sin must be battled. And even when you've been overcome with sin, you go back to the cross and thank God for the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from all our sin.

The cross means you don't have to fear death. The cross also means you must be ready to die to your self-interests. The cross means you can fail but still be forgiven, you can still forge ahead. The cross reveals your weakness. The cross means you are vulnerable. But the cross also means you have hope even when you don't have help.

The cross teaches you patience. Think about those three last hours. And realize that sometimes, all you can do is stand around in the dark wondering what's going on while God is doing his most important work. And you don't have to be afraid of the dark, when you live in light of the cross.