

THE DARKNESS OF CALVARY

MARK 15:33-37

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott
Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey
March 17, 2002

Last week we talked about Jesus choosing not to save Himself so that He could save others. I personally believe this to be the most beautiful truth about the Christian faith. And, I also believe it is the most challenging thing to consider as we walk in the footsteps of our Lord. It is extremely difficult to choose not to save ourselves when we are under attack so that others may experience salvation.

Today I would like to take this discussion a step farther by considering the temporary victory that evil achieves when a good person chooses not to save himself so that others may experience salvation. I say “temporary” because evil never wins a final victory. Truth always triumphs in the end.

I have two sisters who are presently experiencing what seems to be the triumph of evil over good. What they are experiencing comes as a direct result of choosing not to save themselves from those who are attacking them.

My sister Nancy, after years of physical and mental abuse from her husband finally decided to reveal the truth. After the truth of what he was doing was made known, my brother-in-law was arrested and had to spend time doing community service. He is now living in Los Vegas, Nevada where he has filed for a divorce. My sister has every reason to lash out in anger over the way she has been and still is being treated by the one she chose to marry. She has every reason to go beyond what she has already done to save her own reputation. She has every right to give him what he really deserves. But several of us family members have advised her to restrain herself, and so far she has heeded the advice.

The advice we have given her is very difficult advice to follow, and these are very dark days for her. My brother-in-law is under a court order to send her money that will support her and their five children that she is left to take care of, but the last two checks he sent have bounced, placing her in a very difficult situation. And instead of delivering the divorce papers personally or through a lawyer, he had his girlfriend hand-deliver them to my sister. My sister was extremely offended by that. She has very negative feelings toward the woman who, years ago, began to interfere with her marriage. And probably the most difficult thing for my sister to

handle emotionally is the fact that her husband has spread the rumor that she is mentally ill. You see, my brother-in-law is an independent missionary and travels around from church to church raising money for his ministry. He has been telling his supporters that my sister is mentally ill. Even though Nancy has done everything legally possible to stand up for the truth, she now faces humility and loneliness and darkness.

My other sister, Barbara, is also facing darkness. Last week I told you about a woman who worked for a nursing home where the other employees were cutting corners. After she reported what was going on, she was fired from her job. Now Barbara, who works for the same nursing home, has also decided to speak out. She reported what was going on to her supervisor. That supervisor recently called all the employees together for a meeting to talk it out. During the meeting the other nurses and aids began to verbally attack my sister who openly admitted that she was a source of tension in the nursing home by insisting that the rules be followed. Now, after that meeting, Barbara is experiencing darkness in her own life. It seems that truth has been silenced. And she feels lonely as the other employees now avoid talking to her when she is at work.

The days are dark when evil enjoys its temporary victory. We go through sleepless nights as we struggle to restrain our anger. Sometimes we want to swear at those who are telling lies and attacking us. Sometimes we want to hit them; and, yes, there are times we think they would be better off dead. But the way of the cross reminds us to restrain ourselves, to focus our anger at Satan and not on people, and to realize that the dark days will not last forever. Truth always wins in the end.

Last week we noticed from scripture how Jesus could have saved Himself, but chose not to save Himself in order to save others. This week we are going to allow scripture to reveal to us the darkness that resulted from that decision. I would, first of all, like to examine the events surrounding the darkness. Second, I would like to understand the meaning of the darkness. Then, finally, we will attempt to understand how this story of darkness relates to us.

First, let's look at the events surrounding the darkness. Here, in verse 33 of MARK 15 and also in verse 45 of MATTHEW 27 and verse 44 of LUKE 23, we read that, as God's Son, Jesus Christ, was hanging on the cross, three hours of darkness fell upon the land.

When we study all four gospel accounts, we find that, from the time of His arrest in the Garden right up to the time when darkness fell over the land, Jesus underwent very cruel treatment. When we come to the story of the actual crucifixion, we must realize that He had already been falsely accused, whipped, spat

upon, and crowned with a wreath of thorns. It was the third hour, or about 9:00 a.m., that the nails pierced the flesh of Christ and they hung Him on the cross. For three hours Jesus hung there, while the people around Him hurled all kinds of abuse at him. "You who destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, come down from the cross." "He saved others, he cannot save Himself." "He trusts in God. Let Him (God) deliver Him now if He takes pleasure in Him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God'" The people were wagging their heads at Him and mocking Him for three hours. The two criminals who were crucified with Him were also mocking Him. Later, one of the criminals saw his own sinfulness and asked Christ to receive Him into His kingdom. But, for those first three hours, he also joined in with the others who were mocking.

During this cruel mocking, Christ said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." And just prior to the period of darkness, Jesus saw His mother and John, His disciple. And He said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son!" And He said to John, "Behold your mother." So Jesus entrusted His mother to John, and John took Mary from the scene of the cross, sparing her from that hour of darkness that was about to come.

As 12:00 noon approached and the sun reached its highest point in the sky, darkness fell upon the land, and there was silence. No mocking is recorded during those three hours, and no words of Jesus are recorded either—just three dreadful hours of dark silence.

And then, around 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon, the material day was again breaking through on the green hill and on the cross and on all the land of Judea. And, as the day breaks forth, the silence is also broken. But now what we hear is not mocking, it is something entirely different. We hear expressions of pity. It was as if the appalling silence and the overwhelming darkness had changed the entire attitude of man to the Savior. The vinegar they offered Him was offered in pity. What they said about Elijah expressed their desire to sympathize. The centurion began praising God saying, "Certainly this man was innocent." Afraid that He might still suffer in spite of the fact that He appeared to be dead, they did not break His legs, but thrust a spear into His side instead. Many left the scene, beating their breasts, overwhelmed and strangely moved by some new pity.

And then we have the words of Christ following the darkness. The first voice heard as the darkness lifted was the cry of Jesus, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" That was in the past tense. It was an expression of One referring to the experience through which He had just passed. And then, as John is careful to record for us, "Knowing that all things were now finished, He said, I thirst." Right after that we find the words of the great declaration, "It is finished."

And then, at last, His final words, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit." Then He died, not because His heart was broken and not because He was brutally murdered by the hands of men; but by an act of His own will, He yielded up His Spirit and passed on to God. The death that saves is not the physical destruction of a body. The death that saves is the spiritual death contained in those three mysterious hours of darkness, after which had passed, Jesus said, "It is finished."

Now we must make a brief attempt at answering the question, what is the meaning of the darkness? While Jesus was being arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, He said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come against Him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as against a robber? While I was with you in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me; but this hour and the power of darkness are yours." During His public ministry, Jesus talked about an hour that had not yet come but which could not be postponed.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus said to Mary, "My hour has not yet come." When Jesus' brothers were trying to persuade Him to go to Judea and display Himself publicly, He said to them, "My time has not yet come." At times during His public ministry, men tried to lay hands on Him or stone Him, but they were unable to do so, because His hour had not yet come. Not until Gethsemane did He declare that the hour had finally arrived, and it was the hour of the power of darkness.

In the Bible we read that darkness represents evil and light represents good. John 1:5 tells us that the light shines in the darkness and that the darkness did not overpower the light. The darkness tried to put the light out, but it failed. Evil tried to prevail over good, but it failed.

As Jesus was approaching death, He passed into a very real darkness. Satan's purpose during those three hours was to extinguish the light, but He failed. The material darkness that resulted was not an eclipse of the sun as some commentators have suggested, because it occurred during the Passover which was during a full moon. The material darkness that covered the land was a symbol of Satan's empire of sin.

We already know that the spiritual can take on physical manifestation. God, who is Spirit, became a man who had real flesh. And now, as the Son of God hung on the cross, spiritual evil also had its material manifestation. And here is how it was displayed: "At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour."

It was the time when God the Son was forsaken by God the Father in a way that we cannot comprehend. It was a time when God, who cannot have fellowship

with sin, actually became sin. It was a time when Jesus passed into darkness and the light temporarily went out. A terrible struggle occurred that I cannot understand or explain, and then the light returned. The only thing I understand is that, during those three hours, my salvation was made possible. The task of redemption, the work that God did to save people from sin was finished during those three hours.

When I call out to God to save me by forgiving me from the things I have done wrong and when I call out to God to save me by giving me strength to live a godly life and when I call out to God to save me by taking me to heaven when I die, what I am really doing is claiming for myself the victory that occurred during those three hours of darkness.

That darkness had to take place for justice to be satisfied. There had to be a punishment and a tragedy that was mightier than the sin itself. By just saying, "Never mind all those sins. Out of my love for the human race, I will forget about them all,"—by just saying that, God's justice would never have been satisfied. God's justice demands punishment.

But God is not the only One who would not be satisfied. Without that darkness, my own conscience cannot be satisfied. When crime has been committed, the conscience of a human being cries out for justice. There must be punishment. There must be tragedy.

Three days ago I saw a film clip of an Afghan soldier standing over the dead body of a Taliban soldier. The words he spoke reminded me of this truth I now share with you. He said, "This is what we live for: to see the death of our enemy. We hate them for what they have done to our country." That Afghan soldier did not know the one who had died, but somehow the sight of his dead body did something to atone for the crimes he believed had been committed against his people. I recently heard a child say that she now feels better about September 11, because the enemy has paid dearly for what they have done. Whenever sin is committed, the human conscience demands something somewhere to happen that will pay for the crime.

But unlike us, God's love can never be satisfied with the death of a human being that He created. Only His own death can satisfy both His love and His demand for justice. That is why He took the punishment upon Himself. That is also why He calls us to accept the punishment He took upon Himself during those dark hours rather than turning our own wrath upon ourselves or other people.

But how will people ever come to the place where they will be willing to accept the punishment that Jesus took upon Himself rather than seeking another way

to satisfy their conscience? For many people, it will only happen when they see the darkness.

One of the two thieves crucified along with Christ witnessed the darkness and that darkness became the very thing that convinced him and others to change their focus. Hardened hearts of many people turn soft when they see the darkness having its temporary victory over the light. Mocking turns to pity when people see the one who stood for the truth being crucified for what they have done.

This was true when Jesus hung on the cross, and it is still true today. Jesus now lives inside every believer who has embraced the truth. And those who have embraced the truth will eventually be called to suffer for what they have believed. They will be called to pass through darkness. And people will watch those who are passing through the darkness. And many people will be touched when they see that there is no bitterness in the hearts of those who are passing through the darkness. The fact that these people are able to love the very ones who attack them will cause some people to be moved. And for many, there is no other way their hearts will be touched. They can hear a thousand sermons and nothing will happen, but when they witness another person passing through the darkness, they will be touched.

So we should not be afraid of the darkness when it comes, even if the end is physical death. Knowing that salvation is a by-product of the darkness should give us courage.

But remember this, the darkness will only come when, after taking a stand for truth, we are attacked and choose not to strike back against those who are attacking us.

I know the way I have been talking the past two weeks may sound like I am asking everyone to become passive in times of war. But that is not the main point I am trying to make. I do not condemn a person for deciding to take up arms to fight and kill other people during a war. Neither do I condemn a person who decides not to take up arms to fight and kill. God will judge our actions based upon our motives. The important thing is that our motives are based upon truth. And when our motives are based upon truth, we will eventually be attacked for the truth we have embraced. It happens to soldiers, and it happens to civilians. And the darkness will come when, for the sake of those who are hurting us, we choose not to hurt them back in return.

This message is meant to be an encouragement to those who are facing the darkness and are being tempted to strike back. For those of you in this situation, I want to encourage you to remain strong. Pray for those who are attacking you and

realize that your real enemy is the devil. Remember that people around you will be touched by your testimony of love. And realize that the darkness will come to an end some day. It never goes on forever. It can't.

This message is also intended to be a challenge for those who are afraid of the darkness. Remember how Jesus, Himself, agonized over the thought of entering into the darkness. He asked His heavenly Father to take that cup of suffering away from him. When we are tempted to run from the darkness, remember that Jesus can relate to our temptation, and He can also give us the strength we need to face it.

Imitating Christ does not mean we will be able to experience the darkness in the exact same way He did. Nor does it mean that we should try to make the darkness happen. Sometimes when we take a stand for truth, people cheer us on and there is no need to make the tough choice of restraining ourselves for the sake of saving others. We should be grateful when that happens. But there are times when we will have to make a tough choice. We have to choose to speak out the truth knowing full well that we will be attacked. When that happens and we restrain ourselves from striking back, then the darkness will come. And when it comes, there is a sense in which we are imitating Christ.

May God give us the strength we need when our hour of darkness comes, and it may happen more than once in a lifetime. And may God free us from the fear of darkness and fill us with the hope of salvation for ourselves and for others.

Application

Are you presently experiencing the "darkness" talked about in this sermon in your life? If so, then the prayers of others can help you during your time of trial. Is your fear of entering into the darkness preventing you from taking a stand for the truth? Allow the brothers and sisters from your spiritual family to encourage you and to pray for you.