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The Miraculous Darkness

And it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened.—Luke 23:44-45.

This is the first of the six miracles of Calvary, the chain of signs which wrapped around the death of Jesus Christ and held it fast to the one meaning of eternal redemption. The second miracle was the rending in twain of the veil of the Temple; the third, the earthquake and rending of the rocks; the fourth, the opening of the graves; the fifth, the condition of things existing inside the grave of the just risen Jesus; and the sixth, the coming out of their graves after His resurrection of many bodies of the saints who slept.

Such were the Calvary miracles; all of them in direct connection with the death of Christ. Some of them were from the heavens, some from the earth, and some from under the

earth, yet all together they constituted a class of wonders by themselves. Each great sign, in its own meaning and force, marshalled to its place the one line of testimony; and all the six, in solid phalanx, encompass Jesus Christ in His death, defend the truth of our redemption in His blood.

THE SCENE DESCRIBED

Already for three hours Jesus had hung on the cross, and now "it was about the sixth hour"—that is, noon, and *then* there was darkness.

The darkness was "over all the earth"; or, as Matthew states, "over all the land." No one can positively say that the darkness did not extend over the whole of the daylight half of the globe. But if the phenomenon was limited to Judea, it was certainly even then sufficiently remarkable. Indeed, in that case, it had a concentration of force, like that of the three days' darkness in Egypt, while yet there was light in Goshen. At any rate, the darkness did extend over all the land.

But it was not such darkness as sometimes precedes an earthquake, like that at Naples in A.D. 79, when Vesuvius became a volcano. Not such a darkness as that, for this darkness extended far beyond Calvary, the *originating*

point of the earthquake which followed it. And this says nothing of the fact that the earthquake itself was not a natural occurrence.

NO! NOT AN ECLIPSE

Over all the land the darkness continued for *three hours!* Therefore it did not result from an eclipse of the sun, for the longest eclipse can last but a few minutes. Besides, it occurred during the festival of the Passover, which always was observed at the time of full moon, when an eclipse of the sun is impossible.

And yet "the sun was darkened," eclipsed, in some strange sense. There was a failure of its light. The darkness was not caused by the absence of the sun—the occasion of our night. It was darkness at noon time, a darkness in the presence of the sun and while the sun was uneclipsed by the intervention of another celestial body, a darkness, we might say, which was the antagonist of light and the overcomer of it. In the ordinary course of nature, darkness being the negation of light, it is light which is the antagonist of darkness and which always banishes it. But the darkness of Calvary smothered the sun at noon! What an impressive thing! What a trembling conception of the almightiness of God!

Did the darkness come on by a process of slow and gradual deepening? In the words of the text, it was darkness at the beginning of the three hours, as it was darkness at the close. All at once from out of the heavens, it shut down upon the scene. It seems to have departed suddenly, and so, we may think, it came suddenly. At the same time, however, as it would seem from the symbolism of the darkness as connected with the sufferings of the cross, the blackness of it grew as the hours wore on. We think this because of the cry of the Sufferer at about the close of these hours. It would appear that the silence of His endurance could be no longer maintained, for more and more intense had grown His sufferings.

How deep was the darkness? We are not expressly told, and yet, there is that in the narrative to show that it was not twilight. It was a frightful darkness.

A BUSY THREE HOURS

Up until the instant of its occurring, what a busy three hours had passed on Golgotha! The Crucified Himself was busy, if we may use the word. What interest He showed in what was taking place about Him! He was audibly interceding for His crucifiers, listen-

ing to the cry for mercy of the dying thief, and answering him in that sublime assurance of salvation; recognizing the presence of His mother and the beloved disciple and executing His last will and testament concerning her and him. The soldiers were busy watching and mocking Him, dividing His garments among them, and casting lots for the seamless coat. The chief priests were busy criticizing Pilate's inscription on the cross and venting their indignation. The scoffers were busy—priests, rulers, and multitude passing by, wagging their heads, railing and reviling. All the currents of iniquity surged on unchecked around the cross.

NOW SOMBER SILENCE

But now at this instant of noon, what? Silence, sudden, somber. The very narrative speaks but one word—"darkness," and then is itself silent. The time from twelve o'clock till three is a blank in the narrative, and the reader is made to feel how hushed was the scene.

At the end of that time, when the sun is again shining, all is action again. Jesus Himself speaks, and the multitude moves about. But during those three hours we see only darkness; we hear only silence. The great Sufferer

is silent, as if underneath that darkness some huge horror hung over His own soul. And all else is silent. No taunt or insult is flung at Him now. The crowds are transfixed with amazement. The blood is heard dropping. The suspense is frightful. As all hearts drink in the darkness, they are trembling at a certain mysterious fearfulness of the crucifixion.

The gospel historians do not say all this, indeed, they say scarcely anything; yet so illustrative is their suggestiveness that they create for us this whole scene. The little that they say is placed like a parenthesis betwixt the activities antecedent and subsequent—that little is the one word, "darkness." The darkness thus cast its own shadow of silence along the whole three hours, until the thoughtful reader begins to feel how awful this dismal gloom was! And to this implication of their narrative, the historians give both fixedness and fullness by the remark with which they close the story of the crucifixion and its immediate wonders. They tell us that the Roman centurion, having witnessed the things that were done, "feared greatly," and many people "smote their breasts."

CREDIBILITY OF THE RECORD

So far, then, for explanation of the text. But

now may we rely upon it as historically true? Yes, for the inspired historians have written it. We might add to their testimony that of heathen historians who have referred to it, especially the admission of Celsus, the famous opponent of Christianity in the third century; or better yet, the challenge of the Christian Father Tertullian, who, at the close of the second century, boldly says to his heathen adversaries, "At the moment of Christ's death, the light departed from the sun, and the land was darkened at noonday, which wonder is related in your own annals and is preserved in your archives to this day."

But it is enough that the sacred writers have declared it. I, for one, want no corroboration of their testimony. That darkness did come down on the earth and in a simple belief of it, with the vividness of a cultivated Christian imagination, we should place ourselves under its impressiveness, as though we ourselves beheld and felt it.

HOW EXPLAIN THE MYSTERY?

What sort of an event, then, was that darkness? A miracle, a visible suspension of the order of nature. Thus what a visibility of God was that darkness, for none but He, the Great First Cause, can interfere with the regular

course of His own established natural causes. It was He, then, who stepped forth from out the universe of natural causes and became displayed to our view as being Himself distinct from the universe—a living, interposing, personal God, standing with “darkness under His feet.”

And yet, all the while at and around Calvary there rolled on in all other regards the whole mighty mechanism of natural causes. Creation had within itself no cause which could have produced the darkness. Yet creation itself, with its every law at work, was the scene of the darkness. There was no shock of disturbance to make creation tremble. The Almighty Author of creation Himself put forth His hand and touched His own instrument, striking it in unison with His immediate purpose. But no string of all the vast arrangement was snapped or strained and not a note in all the scale was left discordant.

God meant to bring Himself in contact with our sensibilities by standing out apart from the whole framework of nature, which yet all the while His power was upholding.

When we consider how exclusively the darkness attached itself to the death of Christ, we have the most decisive proof of design on the part of God in so displaying Himself to view. Jesus, the Son of God, was dying. God

was appearing. There stood the cross, and there came down the darkness. It was His providential purpose both to authenticate and to interpret the death of His Son.

WHAT IT TEACHES

1. Accordingly, this miracle of darkness *was God's seal to the truth of the Savior's character and mission.*

When Jesus told His disbelievers that He came to save them from their sins, they were offended at Him. When He said, "I am the Son of God," they took up stones to stone Him. "Show us a sign from heaven," they said. Now then the precise formula of their willful rejection of Him came back upon them in terrific confutation. The heavens did give forth a sign, and the very frame of the universe bent in reverential obeisance to the crucified Sufferer on that place of a skull. Even the Roman exclaimed, "Truly this was the Son of God."

2. Secondly, it was especially *the magnifying of the death of Jesus Christ.* On no other principle is it conceivable that God's concernment with His death should have been made so supernaturally manifest and so overwhelmingly impressive.

Now the importance which Jesus claimed

for His death was that of redemption, the redemption of us sinners from our sins. He claimed that importance for it on the night before He suffered, and repeatedly before. Our pardon, our peace, our eternal life, should be secured to us only through Himself, in His blood.

And, if true, was there ever an importance like this? "With what comparison shall we compare it?" The universe, the ages, all earthly interests—is not the whole, in the comparison, as the mere dust in the balance?

WAS JESUS DECEIVED?

Moreover, as Jesus thus claimed, so also did He feel. In His self-consciousness He realized Himself as being made answerable for our iniquities and as bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows. "I have," He said, "a baptism to be baptised with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" It was the prime inspiration of His life. And although there was in it a joy set before Him, and although He looked forward to being satisfied at seeing the travail of His soul, yet it was also a consuming zeal. It was a drinking up of the beauty of His countenance, a plowing into His face the lines of disfigurement, and the making of Him a Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

Did Jesus, then, miscalculate in His estimate of His death? Was His intense interest in it a fanatical self-deception? Let God answer for Him, as, from behind the veil of natural causes, He came down on Calvary with such stupendous effect. God's own sign-manual was that miraculous darkness, and over the cross, the legend, "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world."

3. Thirdly, it symbolizes *the inconceivable suffering of Jesus Christ in His death*. God's own miraculous testimony was thus borne to the fact of redemption in the death of Christ. That testimony took the form of darkness, because of the sufferings of that death being inflicted by Himself. It was He who laid upon Jesus the iniquities of us all, and it was He who dropped out of the heavens that thick funeral pall about the cross of Christ. "Smitten of God" was what the darkness attested. The Father's own Son wounded, bruised, chastised, beaten with stripes, by the very Father. It was not merely the suffering of crucifixion; it was anguish immediately from God. The death-sweat of His Gethsemane agony was forced out of Him by the pressure of His Father's hand before the rude touch of the soldiers had profaned His sacred person. The death-darkness of His Calvary agony was the indication of a yet heavier bearing down

upon Him of the same Almighty hand.

NO LONGER ENDURABLE

Accordingly, at about the close of the darkness, but before it had closed, when His ever deepening agony in enduring the Father's wrath against man's sin had become no longer endurable in silence, then in a startling voice, and with an amazement of wretchedness irrepressible, He looked up into the darkened heavens above Him, and cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Yes, God was there in the darkness, and yet, for the time being, in the comfort of His communion He had forsaken His Son. Of that forsaking—His punishment as the Sin-bearer—the darkness, so deep and so dread, was the image and the symbol. Ah! Christ's bearing our sins in His own body was not a make-believe. It was a stern and experienced reality.

HID FROM HUMAN EYE

Again, the darkness wrapped Him all around. Just at His most excruciating sufferings the darkness shut Him off from all witnesses. This, the impenetrable secrecy of those last hours, is that which gives to our imagination the most appreciative idea of

what is yet inconceivable. Throughout the previous hours, in whatever suffering He expressed, He was exposed to view. But it was not for human eye to see Him in His superlative anguish. The man's sensibility could not have done justice to that. If His *life* of suffering as the Sin-bearer stamped itself on His very face, as Isaiah seems to say in his fifty-third chapter, and if it caused Him to be recognized as having no beauty that men should desire Him, then those last hours in which His sufferings culminated must have stamped themselves on His person in impressions proportionate to their unapproached severity. Gethsemane is described, but not the latter half of Calvary. Peter, James, and John were admitted into His privacy of suffering in Gethsemane, but God at Calvary drew the drapery of darkness around Him to hide Him from human gaze.

Oh, the mysteries of that suffering! No eye of man might see them. Only at the last may be heard one loud cry of unfathomable woe and uttermost desolation. Yet, in that cry is the accent of assured victory. "Why hast thou forsaken me" has coupled with it the shout of confidence "My God, my God!"

WHAT IT PROVES

So were symbolized by the darkness those

inconceivable sufferings of our Redeemer. And yet, while the darkness was the symbol of the Father's wrath, it was also a proof of the Son's righteousness. None but a person of spotless righteousness, having no sins of his own for which to answer, could be made responsible for sinners. If, therefore, He was the stricken of God, so also He was the Beloved of God. To suffer for man's sin He was indeed appointed. But by that very appointment, as deep as were His sufferings, so deep was the Father's delight in His person and character.

All this shows us what an untold evil and curse is man's sin, since only thus might Infinite Love save us. At the same time it shows us that God's love is so much stronger to save us than our sin is to destroy us.

Great indeed to us is the joy and the glory of Christ's work; but great to Him was the pain of it. At His birth, when the grandeur of results would be especially thought of, the night became light; but at His death, when the process of reaching those results would be the prominent thing, the light became night.

REDEMPTION WROUGHT

When, however, the darkness was gone because of His having passed through it, He

was able to say, "It is finished!" Redemption is done! Then after once again crying aloud in trumpet notes of a conqueror with a voice which rent the rocks and opened the graves in prophecy of His own resurrection, He sweetly said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." In filial trust and satisfaction He, laying Himself down in His Father's arms, so yielded up the ghost.

WHAT IT IMAGES

Finally, the Calvary darkness imaged forth the doom of those who were now crucifying Christ. It was the Father who smote His Son—who therefore would have died had not the Jews crucified Him. But for the same reason that it was competent for God to smite Him for us—namely, that He was a righteous person—it was wicked for them to do it. "They persecuted Him whom God had smitten, and they talked to the grief of God's wounded."

There is a remarkable prophecy in Amos concerning the miseries of the Jewish people. "It shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day." What an exact description of the scene on Calvary! That prophecy refers

to a yet future time of misery for the Jews. The darkness on Calvary was both pledge and earnest of that darkness spoken of by the prophet. In accordance with this, as He was being led to crucifixion, Jesus said, "The days are coming when they shall say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, Cover us; for if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" That is, if they do these things to Him, the green tree, the fruit-bearing vine, of whom His people are the branches, what shall become of them, the dry tree? What shall God do to them?

Oh, by the fearfulness of that scene at the crucifixion, all rejectors of Christ shall perish!

Brethren, true believers in Christ, the Calvary darkness is gone, and the true light now shineth. In that light, the path of the believer is itself as the shining light, which shineth more and more to the perfect day. Then our sun shall never go down, and the days of our mourning shall be ended.