

God's Greatest Providence in Earth's Greatest Darkness

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on Easter Sunday, 4-4-2010

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Matthew 27:45 Now **from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour.**

⁴⁶ About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**" ...

⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

⁵¹ And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.

In God's providence, the time that Jesus died was very significant. The book *The Murder of Jesus* records: 'At the moment the tearing of the veil occurred, the temple was packed with worshipers who were there for the killing of their Passover lambs. By God's design, it was in the very hour that those thousands of lambs were being slain that the true Passover Lamb died. He was the real Lamb whom all the others merely symbolized. In fact, He perfectly fulfilled *all* the symbolism of the worship in the temple. From that day on, all the temple ceremonies lost their significance, because what they were meant to foreshadow had finally arrived ... God sovereignly declared Christ's death a sufficient sacrifice for sins forever, by supernaturally splitting the temple veil from top to bottom and opening the way into His presence.'¹

Imagine being in the temple when all these events take place. In God's providence, it was on Passover that Jesus died, the very day that Jews were celebrating their deliverance from Egypt in darkness 3400 years ago, the Passover meal remembering their redemption by the blood of a lamb that had lived among them that was slain. It was a supernatural darkness plague over Egypt before that redemption. The lamb's blood covered their doorposts so that God's wrath would pass over them and not bring death on those within it.

It was again in darkness that deliverance for God's people would take place, not just physical redemption of Israel, but a spiritual redemption of all God's people, Jew or Gentile, at the cross. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world for all who trust Him and His blood shed at Calvary as their only hope for the wrath of God to pass over them. Jesus dwelt among His people and was slain, so that all who are within Him ("in Christ" as NT says) will not experience eternal death and darkness and damnation

Darkness was to the Jews a symbol of God's judgment, here not just judgment on a people, but punishment on a person: Jesus. The unusual darkness this day is even attested outside Scripture:

- ancient Greek writer Phlegon Trallianus, in *Olympiades*: "In the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad [AD 32-33], **a failure of the Sun took place greater than any previously known, and night came on at the sixth hour of the day**, so that stars actually appeared in the sky; and **a great earthquake took place** in Bithynia and overthrew the greater part of Niceaea"
- this fragment concerning the failure of the Sun is unusually well-attested. Seven ancient historians directly quote it ... and [at least 5 other ancient writers] cite Phlegon's account ... Kepler was familiar with Phlegon's report, as it caused trouble for one of his historical theories.

- Samaritan historian named Thallus [writing maybe as early as 50 AD?], is quoted by Julius Africanus, saying: "On the whole world there pressed **a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down.** This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his *History*, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun."
- multiple sources record tectonic activity on the day of Christ's execution.²
- Origen (*Against Celsus*, 2.33) reported a statement by a Roman historian who mentioned such a darkness.
- Tertullian, wrote to some pagan acquaintances about an unusual darkness on that day, "which wonder is related in your own annals and preserved in your own archives to this day." [Tertullian lived and wrote in 2nd and 3rd centuries]
- There was also a supposed report from Pilate to Emperor Tiberius that assumed the emperor's knowledge of a certain widespread darkness, even mentioning that it was from twelve to three in the afternoon.³

But in earth's greatest darkness, God's greatest providence was at work, which should be of greatest encouragement to us. Whatever dark times we face politically, personally, painfully, God is there. And He is not a passive bystander but is a providential benevolent gracious and good Shepherd who is with us in the valley of the shadow of death, and specializes in bringing light from darkness.

The very first verse of the Bible speaks of God's creation of the heavens and the earth, and the 2nd verse of the Bible says that there was darkness over the earth while God was at work and beginning His work of creation. Now once again darkness covers the earth and God's providence is at work in the new creation, the salvation of sinners, the redemption of even people like me who trust Christ!

In the first week of earth history, the Lord finished His work and rested on the seventh day, and now in Christ's final week leading up to His death, He finishes His work of salvation, even saying "*It is finished!*" He then rests on the seventh day in the tomb, awaiting His resurrection the day after the Sabbath, this Lord's Day today, a new day of a New Covenant celebrated in the N.T. (Acts, Revelation, etc)

In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit sheds light on what God was doing in His providence precisely at that moment of greatest darkness. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples in mighty miracles and Peter explains to the crowd of Jews in Acts 2:16-17:

"this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ... ²⁰ ***The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood, Before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come...***

Joel's prophecy was of the last days, which began with Christ on earth and their fuller final manifestation when Christ returns. But Peter seems to be saying the *signs they had already seen* should be evident to them that Jesus was and is and will be the Lord that Joel spoke of. What they had seen was the type of thing Joel spoke of.

²² *“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— ... [we know they knew about the sun turning to darkness because they had seen it 50 days earlier, but I’d never really studied about the sign of “the moon to blood” before]*

John Stott: ‘It is possible to understand these predictions ... literally as upheavals of nature (which already began on Good Friday...),’⁴

F.F. Bruce in his in-depth commentary on Acts wrote: “on the same afternoon, the paschal full moon may well have appeared blood-red in the sky in consequence of that preternatural gloom.”⁵

New Bible Dictionary, p. 69: ‘aspects of [Joel’s prophecy] were fulfilled in the passion of our Lord ... a solar eclipse can make a blood-red moon.’”

Rick Larson: ‘In ancient literature...[language of “moon to blood” in v. 20] means a lunar eclipse. Why bloody? Because when the moon is in eclipse it is in the Earth’s shadow. It receives no direct light from the sun, but is lit only by the dim light refracted and red-shifted by the Earth’s atmosphere. The moon in eclipse does glow a dull red ... with Kepler’s equations we can determine exactly when historical eclipses occurred. Perhaps it will not surprise you to learn that only one Passover lunar eclipse was visible from Jerusalem while Pilate was in office [⁶]. It occurred on April 3, 33 AD [Passover Friday, the only other possible date for His death was in 30 AD] ... He was removed from the cross before nightfall to preserve the sanctity of the impending Passover. But the signs and wonders did not end. When the moon rose [4-3-33 AD], it was blood red. We can imagine the wonder of those who were present through all of this, and their increasing dread as the signs kept coming ... Kepler’s equations indicate that the moon rose already in eclipse, already bloody [much like] Joel’s vision. Necessarily, this means that the eclipse commenced *before* moonrise. With software we can look below the horizon and see Earth’s shadow begin the eclipse. When we do, we find that at 3 PM, as Jesus was breathing his last on the cross, the moon was going to blood.’⁷

The NASA Eclipse website confirms an eclipse on that very date of 2 hours, 50 minutes, and shows the red shades during eclipse.⁸

****[VIEW SLIDES HERE](#)****

If Jesus died in 33 AD, friends, that is a staggering example of the Providence of God, orchestrating natural events, even predestining the location of sun, moon, and stars, surrounding the very moment of greatest darkness at the cross, God’s greatest providence. God set it all up like clockwork when the universe was created and the orbit of moon and earth set, all to converge at precisely this dark moment in human history, Passover Friday afternoon, 33 AD!⁹

²⁰ *‘The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood, Before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. ²¹ ‘And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ²² “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— ²³ this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.*

The point was not merely astronomical, but theological. A dark sun and blood-red moon is a precursor or preview of coming judgment, and Revelation says similar signs, whether natural or supernatural will happen again in the future before the final day of the Lord and before the final judgment of all people. But at the cross, judgment was not falling on sinners, it was falling on the innocent sinless Savior.

The dark was not just a physical phenomenon but had spiritual significance. God in His predetermined plan through wonders and signs that the people of that day themselves knew, was punishing man's darkest sins through the red blood of His Son so that all who call on Him can be saved from the judgment signified by those heavenly signs, saved from the place of eternal darkness and wrath. God's greatest work of providence now pierced greatest darkness:

*2:24 "**But God raised Him up again**, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.*

Peter goes on to quote Psalm 16 and says in v. 31 David "... looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither **abandoned** to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay."

The word "abandoned" there is the very same Greek word Jesus had cried out to God on the cross after those 3 hours of darkness: "*my God, why have you **forsaken/abandoned** me?*"

But here's the good news, the greatest news from greatest darkness for our greatest sin: *Jesus was forsaken by the Father temporarily so that all who trust Him will never be forsaken by God eternally!*

At that moment, in the darkness, as our sin was placed on Jesus, the Father had to turn His face away, and the Son was forsaken ... but God did not abandon Him or leave Him in the grave. God raised Him up, putting an end to death's agony for all who trust Christ. He was raised so you can be raised on the last day if you trust Jesus alone, what He did on the cross, He can and will be your Passover lamb whose blood covers you, if you repent, you can know God won't abandon your soul to Hades. All in Christ not only die with Him but will be raised with Him.

Jesus Himself who gave up His own life, not because we were so lovely, but because He was so loving! Let the depth of the grace and love of Jesus hit you, and if it has not hit you or pierced your heart yet, then listen to Peter's conclusion:

³⁶ "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." ³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter said to them, "**Repent**, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." ⁴⁰ And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "**Be saved** from this perverse generation!" ⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴² They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

What amazing grace, that those who were calling out “Crucify Him” just days earlier, were now being *called out by the Lord our God to Himself*, so that they now say “brothers, what shall we do?”

Answer: Be saved, if you have never repented, repent. Turn from your sins and publicly confess Jesus as Lord, and if you’ve never been baptized or devoted yourself to a local church, you need to do that. The NT Christians devoted themselves to receive teaching and they devoted themselves to fellowship, prayer, the breaking of bread in communion – the church wasn’t optional but was essential to their growth and true love for Christ shown by loving His people. We’ll be studying some of those things in the weeks ahead, and if you’re not already a part of a church, you need to be part of a church, and we would love to have you join us or be of any help.

We serve a risen Savior, a triumphant exultant Savior who is at the Father’s right hand right now, and whose hand of providence continues to guide all things in heaven and earth, and whose hand of mercy and grace right now is extended to all who come repentantly, humbly and lowly to the resurrected Lord who specializes in bringing light from darkness and transferring sinners from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

¹ John MacArthur, *The Murder of Jesus : A Study of How Jesus Died* (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 2000), 231–232.

² These first several quotations and documentation available at Rick Larson’s website <http://bethlehemstar.net/day/day.htm> (see footnotes 41-42)

³ These last 3 citations are from John MacArthur, *Matthew*, Vol. 4, 1989, Chicago: Moody Press.

⁴ John Stott (1994). *The message of Acts : The Spirit, the church & the world*. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, p. 74.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Book of Acts*, p. 69.

⁶ Larson cites Colin J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, "Dating the Crucifixion," *Nature Magazine*, Volume 306, December 22/29, 1983.

⁷ Larson, <http://bethlehemstar.net/day/day.htm>

⁸ <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/LEhistory/LEhistory.html>

⁹ Beale, G. K., & Carson, D. A. (2007). *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, p. 535 says Acts ‘2:19–20 may be future from Peter’s (and Luke’s, and our) point of view; a readership familiar with Luke 21:25–28 would have had no difficulty making the leap. It is true that in 2:22 “miracles, wonders, and signs” were done by Jesus, but these hardly fit “wonders in the heaven above.” Mention should be made of the hypothesis that the moon assumes a dull red color at the time of eclipse, and there was an eclipse visible in Jerusalem at Passover in AD 33, which is taken to be the year of the crucifixion (Humphreys and Waddington 1992). However, many scholars think that the crucifixion is more plausibly dated to AD 30, and the portents are more plausibly understood as direct precursors of the day of judgment.’