

Failing Suns and Fraying Curtains

Introduction

The Text

⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" ⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. (Luke 23:44–49)

"I Just Want to Be Loved"

- A. Megan and I were watching something the other night, a woman's life was just spiraling out of control, and when someone's pressing the issue with her and asking what is it that you want?
 - 1. She responds with little hesitation: "I just want to be loved."

- B. And, you know, deep down I think it's really the same for all of us. We like to think that we are these complex beings with many layers to us and things, and perhaps we are, but at bottom, isn't this it? We just want to be loved.
 - 1. This is why you stay up at night, replaying what your old friend said to you, wondering, did I offend them, were they upset with me, will they want to talk with me again? You just want to be loved.
 - 2. This is why you try so hard at your job and will do anything to see more success. You say it's about the money or getting the car or the house or whatever. But really, you just want people to notice you, to be able to have your friends from grad school come and visit and hear them say, "Wow. You've really made something of your life. It's impressive." You just want to be loved.
 - 3. This is why you've started using those dating apps, though you swore you never would. You're tired of being alone. You want someone to share life with. You just want to be loved.
 - 4. This is why you're bitter and angry and unforgiving. You wanted to be loved and you weren't. You were hurt. So you burn bridges and build walls. And you isolate and self-protect. You just want to be loved.

- C. This is what Disney has tapped into in nearly all of their movies, right? You need a hero, you need a prince, someone who can come in, sweep you off your feet, and love you. And we keep tuning into these stories because it touches some deep longings down in us.
 - 1. They're not wrong, we do need this, we do all long for this, the hero, the love. But they just never go far enough. It's not some man that will do it, nor some woman. We latch onto

that idea and then are inevitably let down in the end. Because they are sinners like us. And they will love imperfectly.

- D. But here in our text we have something else entirely. Here we see what perfect love looks like. Here we see how far Jesus is willing to go, in love, to get us. He's going deep into the dark, plunging into the pit of hell, to save you.
 - 1. Here we see that what we all deep down long for is true, that we are loved, greatly loved . . . by God. And we see the extent of it, the fullness of it, put on display.
- E. The title of this sermon is "Failing Suns and Fraying Curtains" and the two pieces there really are the two headings that mark out our path for this morning. So that's how I'll organize my thoughts: (1) Failing Suns; and (2) Fraying Curtains. Let's go!

(1) Failing Suns

"The Sixth Hour"

- A. Our text begins with a quick timestamp, telling us when the events at hand were taking place: "It was now about the sixth hour . . ." (v. 44).
 - 1. Luke will give us another timestamp later. And as we'll see, these timestamps are not insignificant. They're hints towards a deeper meaning.
- B. So with this first one, by the way the Jews reckoned time, during the day, they counted up from 6:00am. So the "sixth hour," therefore, would be about noon.
 - 1. And this, Luke says, is the time when, as Jesus hung there on the cross, suddenly "there was darkness over the whole land" (v. 44). Or as he puts it in v. 45: "the sun's light failed."
 - a. In other words, at high noon, at the time when the sun should be at its brightest, the sun goes out.
- C. We are not allowed to assume this is just some natural occurrence, like a cloud or something passed between earth and the sun. No.
 - 1. We are supposed to get the fact that something supernatural is happening here. God is telling us something with this darkness.

Layers of Meaning

- A. But what is he telling us? What does the darkness mean? It's a little detail that you might otherwise just read right on by, but my job is to slow us down and help us see what's here.
- B. My guess is we can kind of intuit something of what this darkness means. I don't know what you think about the dark. I have kind of a mixed relationship with it.

1. On the one hand, I appreciate it because then I can see the stars more clearly, and I love that. Just last weekend at the All Church Campout, I was up when everyone else was asleep and I had my telescope out, in the dark, and I was able to see the rings of Saturn and the moons of Jupiter and the craters on the moon and things. It was awesome.
2. But on the other hand, the dark is frightening right? I remember I used to live in this place called See Canyon when I was in San Luis Obispo and, because it was in this canyon, it would get dark and creepy much earlier than anywhere else. And one of the things I loved to do with the college kids I was pastoring at the time, is we'd have leader meetings and things at my house and then we'd go out on what I'd call "lantern walks" where we'd just head out into the dark with just a lantern. Which if you know anything about lanterns, they're almost useless for stuff like this. You can't shine them out like a flashlight and see way off in front of you. You can only see your next step. So anything we'd hear, any rustling in the bushes, we'd all freak out and laugh hysterically and things. It was fun. But it was scary.
 - a. And I did go once alone and that was something else entirely. It's one thing when all your friends around. But it's another thing when it's just you and the dark. There's something disconcerting about it.
- C. So just reading quickly through Luke's account of the cross here, we kind of get this idea of darkness, that it's maybe a bad thing, a scary thing, an ominous thing. But I don't think we can just intuit the full biblical import of the concept. And I wanted to just take a sermon and fill that out for us a bit.
 1. There are layers upon layers of meaning here, stuff that we might otherwise miss, all of which tell us the extent to which Jesus would go in love to rescue us.
 - a. I want to show you these layers now by running through the various ways the Bible talks about darkness and in that we'll kind of fill out what Jesus is experiencing here at Calvary. I've got six layers for us to consider . . .

Layer #1: The Darkness of Disorder (Cosmic Darkness)

- A. This takes us all the way back to the beginning. You've probably read the creation account, but I wonder if you ever noticed how darkness factors in: "¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.^{2a} The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:1-2a).
 1. There was a certain primeval chaos to things before creation, a disordered darkness, and God, in creation, brings order to it all. And his first words, of course, are what? "Let there be light," (Gen. 1:3). Or as Paul records it: "Let light shine out of darkness . . ." (2 Cor. 4:6). And then he starts to form and fill.
- B. So creation is presented in the Scriptures as the move from disorder to order, from darkness to light, and yet here on the cross, at the time when the sun's light should be brightest, that light fails, it gives way to darkness.

1. What is being communicated? It's as if Jesus in these moments, the one through whom all things have been made, is himself slipping off the edge of created order and sinking back into that place of disarray and chaos. He's being un-created as it were, or to put it positively: he's being destroyed.
 - a. Creation is God taking disorder and bringing order.
 - b. The cross is God taking his Son, the only true well-ordered human being that ever was, and throwing him into the deep and chaotic dark . . . for us.

Layer #2: The Darkness of Depression (Emotional Darkness)

- A. Some of us have perhaps used the idea of darkness in this way. You have those moods where it just feels like there's a cloud over your head.
 1. I was reading Levi a Bernstein Bear book the other night and that's how they pictured the bad mood the cubs were in. There was a little dark cloud over them with rain coming down. They're depressed. It's emotional darkness.
- B. And the Scriptures talk about darkness in this way as well. Perhaps the most poignant example comes from [Ps. 88](#), easily, in one sense, the most depressing Psalm in all the Bible. All the others seem to end on a high note, or at least a note of hope, but this Psalm just gets worse as it goes on.
 1. And here's how it ends: "¹⁴ O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? ¹⁵ Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. ¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. ¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. ¹⁸ You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness" (vv. 14–18). "God has abandoned me. My family and friends have turned their backs on me. My closest companion now is the darkness. That's all I've got!"
 - a. Now, what's he saying? Is he literally sitting in the dark. Probably not. But the sun has gone out in his heart, you see. Emotionally, all he feels is darkness.
- C. Could not Jesus have recited from this Psalm as he hung there on the cross? Do you not think he knew something of the darkness of depression in these moments? His Father forsaking him. His family and friends falling away from him, letting this play out. "This darkness is all I have left."

Layer #3: The Darkness of Death (Corporeal Darkness)

- A. You may have noticed, but even there in [Ps. 88](#), the psalmist refers to how he's been close to death since he was a kid. There's a relation between darkness and death in the Scriptures.
 1. And this makes sense. Death is going down into the grave. It's the lights going out. And you can't turn them back on again. It's not just a lightbulb that needs replacing. It's over. There's a certain finality to it. It's dark.

- a. So the Bible refers to people as sitting “in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79; cf. Ps. 107:10, 14).
- B. And, of course, as Jesus is hanging on that cross, we could say that this shadow moves over him. He’s not just depressed here. He’s dying. He’s descending into the grave, into the darkness of death.

Layer #4: The Darkness of Depravity (Ethical Darkness)

- A. The Scriptures often talk about sin and wickedness as a type of darkness.
 - 1. So Pro. 2:13 speaks of evil men who “forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness.”
 - 2. Or Paul, in Rom. 13:12 and Eph. 5:11 speaks of what he calls “the works of darkness.”
 - 3. Or Jesus himself speaks most poignantly on this point in John 3:19 when he says: “[T]his is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”
- B. There’s a moral, ethical, component to the Bible’s depiction of darkness. And, no doubt, some of that might be in view here as Jesus is hanging on the cross and the sun’s light fails.
 - 1. We know that Jesus himself is sinless, morally pure, ethically upright, but we also know that on that cross, as Paul says: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Or take Peter’s words for it: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree . . .” (1 Pet. 2:24).
 - a. As the sun’s light fails and darkness settles in heavy upon this Man on the cross, is that not a vivid picture of the ethical transaction taking place in those moments. The Light of the world is taking upon himself the dark depravity of us all!

Layer #5: The Darkness of the Demonic (Spiritual Darkness)

- A. I’ve spoken with people who would claim to have been demonically oppressed before. And one of the things that has characterized every one of their stories is that they talk about how suddenly it’s as if the darkness around them grows thick—like the darkness has a substance, as if suddenly it has hands that can strangle and weight that can lean in heavy on them.
- B. And we shouldn’t be so surprised by this. The Bible regularly speaks of the demonic and satanic realm as a realm of darkness.
 - 1. As Paul says in Eph. 6: “[W]e do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (v. 12). He’s talking about spiritual opposition and evil. The powers over this present darkness.
 - 2. Jesus himself, when he knows his time has come for the cross and things, do you remember what he says to the guys who come to arrest him there in Gethsemane? Luke 22:52-53: “⁵²

Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs?⁵³ When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.”

- a. He knows who’s behind all this. You remember at the table of the Last Supper there, Satan enters Judas, and Jesus says, “Go do what you’ve got to do” (cf. [Luke 22:3](#); [John 13:27](#)).
- C. Make no mistake, then. As Jesus is hanging on that cross, the demons are howling round about him, like a wolfpack circling its prey and jawing at the victim’s flesh.
1. Since I brought up Disney movies at the beginning, in Beauty and the Beast, I wonder if you remember what it was that turned Belle’s heart towards the beast? He threw himself into a wolfpack to save her. That’s what got her. And that’s what Jesus is doing here for us.

Layer #6: The Darkness of Damnation (Theological Darkness)

- A. But there’s more, right? It’s not just the demons who are on him in these moments. That’s really the least of Jesus’ worries here.
1. Who fears the fangs of wolves when you have to face the wrath of God? What’s the anger of a demon to the fury of a deity? That’s the real dilemma. That’s the deepest darkness of all.
 - a. Jesus is not merely bearing our sin in these moments, he is paying the full penalty to God for them.
- B. All throughout the Scriptures darkness is associated with the wrath of God, his judgment, his holy fury:
1. So the ninth plague YHWH inflicts upon the Egyptians, do you remember what it was? Darkness: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt’” ([Exod. 10:21](#)). “I want them to feel my wrath in this darkness.”
 2. Or all throughout the prophets, God speaks of the coming day of the Lord, the day when he will come in judgment to punish the evildoers and make all the wrong right. And he says for the wicked, listen, it’s going to be a day of darkness:
 - a. So [Joel 2:1-2](#): “¹ Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, ² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!”
 - b. And [Zeph. 1:14-15](#): “¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. ¹⁵ A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness . . .”
 - c. And perhaps the one put most profoundly given its connections to our text in [Luke 23](#), [Amos 8:9-10](#): “⁹ ‘And on that day,’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I will make the sun

go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.¹⁰ I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.”

- i. “When I come in my wrath, the sun will go dark at noon, and people will mourn as they would for the death of an only son.” Wow! If that’s not what’s happening on the cross, then I don’t know what is!

(1) Jesus, God’s only Son, is there taking the judgment we deserve. The thunderbolt of God’s holy fury strikes the lightning rod of his beloved Boy. He is absorbing it so we don’t have to!

3. To take it just one step further here. In the New Testament, I wonder if you realize, hell is described, not just as fire, like we often think of it, but actually as darkness . . . outer darkness. So the wicked, Jesus says, shall be cast “into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; cf. 22:13; 25:30).

- a. That’s what’s happening here at Calvary. Jesus is being treated by God as if guilty for all of yours and my sin. He’s being hurled into the outer darkness. He’s being dropkicked into the very heart of hell . . . for us.

- C. This is the reason for that scream that Luke passes by but is recorded in the other gospel accounts: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

1. This is the only time in all the gospels where Jesus doesn’t refer to God as Father, because God was not so much Father in these moments on the cross as much as he was Judge.
 - a. Listen to one theologian’s reflection on this point: “In the moment of the Son’s greatest need and greatest pain, God is not there. The Son cries and is not heard. The familiar resource, the only resource, is not there. The God who was always there, the God who was needed now as He had never been needed before, was nowhere to be seen. There was no answer to the Son’s cry. There was no comfort. Jesus was left God-less, with no perception of His own Sonship, unable for the one and only time in His life to say, ‘Abba, Father.’ He was left with no sense of God’s love and no sense of the operation of God’s purpose. There was nothing but that ‘Why?’, trying vainly to bridge the Darkness. He was sin. He was lawlessness, and as such He was banished to the Black Hole where lawlessness belongs and from which no sound can escape but, ‘Why?’ That was the Son’s only word in His final agony as He reached out to God whom He needed so desperately but whom as Sin He couldn’t discern and from whose presence He was outcast. There could be no accord. ‘God His Son not sparing’! He had to be dealt with not as Son, but as Sin” (Donald Macleod as quoted by Christopher Wright, *To the Cross*, 80).

- D. This is the darkness of damnation. It’s the sixth and final layer to this darkness as I’m outlining it here. And all of this is what Jesus went through in love, to save us.

(2) Fraying Curtains

Two Truths in Tension

- A. We get a greater sense of the goal in all of this when we consider this second heading and what Luke says next in v. 45: “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.”
 - 1. Most believe this likely refers to the inner curtain that separated the Holy Place of the temple from the Most Holy Place at the very heart of it where was God was presumed to dwell.
- B. Just a quick background to set up this point. The temple was designed by God to reinforce two seemingly paradoxical ideas it seems to me.
 - 1. The first is that God still wants to dwell with sinful human beings because he’s good and he’s gracious.
 - 2. But the second is that God can’t dwell with sinful human beings because he’s holy and he’s just.
- C. So there’s this sort of schizophrenic messaging we get from the temple.
 - 1. On the one hand, it is mercy, and it is this wonderful picture that God wants to be in our midst.
 - 2. But, on the other hand, there were so many limits and boundaries set up, though you knew God wanted us near, you also got this sense he wanted us out.
 - a. So if you were a Gentile, there was the Court of the Gentiles and you couldn’t go past that. You could merely peer in from the outside, but that’s as close to God as you could get.
 - b. If you were a Jewish woman, you could come in a little further, but you could only hang out in the Court of the Women.
 - c. If you were a Jewish man, well okay you could carry on past the next boundary into the Court of the Israelites.
 - d. But even you would then hit a wall as only Jewish male priests could go into the Holy Place of the temple.
 - e. And then even beyond that, only the High Priest and him once a year after much preparation could pass through that curtain and enter the Most Holy Place of all.

Solving the Riddle

- A. So you see there’s this sort of paradox, a tension if you will, at the heart of the temple and all it stood for. God wants us near, but, because of our sin and his holiness, we can’t be near.
- B. In the OT the closest we get to the resolution of this, the way both are able to be held together at once, is through sacrifice.

1. There God could put the penalty owed our sin in his justice upon a substitute so we can still come near to him. And so there were sacrifices constantly and the blood of these sacrifices was put all over the temple to atone and to make it possible.
 - a. But, of course we know, as the author of Hebrews says: “[I]t is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). That was just a picture. They don’t really atone.
 - i. Why? Because that’s an animal dying in our place and we are human beings, and we’ve broken the covenant.
- C. We need a perfect, spotless, covenant-keeping human being to take on hell in our place. Then the riddle would be solved. And, of course, this is what Jesus is doing here on the cross. The cross is the answer to the riddle.
 1. How can a holy God dwell with sinful man? How can sinners be brought near, out of darkness and into the light of his presence? Oh it is only through the blood, not of bulls and goats, but of Jesus.
 - a. This is why, as he breathes his last there on the cross, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (v. 45). He’s done it!
- D. And he does it at what time does Luke say? Well it’s the “ninth hour” (v. 44) or 3:00pm.
 1. This time, we know from elsewhere, was referred to as the “hour of prayer” held there at the temple (Acts 3:1; 10:3) which also coincided with the offering of the evening sacrifice prescribed long ago by Moses (Exod. 29:38-39).
 - a. In other words: the temple and all its sacrifices were fulfilled in Jesus. And now we can come running in . . . we can come home to God!
 - i. This is why the author of Hebrews says: “¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:19–22).
- E. Barriers are breaking, curtains are opening, light is coming through and people are getting it. And it’s no coincidence that some of the people immediately mentioned by Luke here are this Gentile centurion and a group of women. Two classes that would have been kept at a distance are marked out here as likely some of the first to come in!
 - a. And, you know, what that means is you and I can come in too!
- F. Jesus has gone out into the dark for us, he’s ripped open that curtain, and there’s light!

Conclusion

How Should We Respond?

- A. So what should you do? How do you respond in light of this? Well, we ought to take our cues from those in the text Luke mentions next.

Response #1: Rejoice

- A. For one thing, we see this Roman centurion. Look at v. 47: “Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’” As light’s first breaking in for this guy, that’s his knee-jerk response. He praises, he rejoices.
- B. And that’s a good place for us to start.
1. As the curtain is drawn back for us, you know what’s crazy, it’s kind of the reverse of what happens with that curtain in the Wizard of Oz.
 - a. There, if you remember, they hoped the wizard was a god and when they went behind the curtain they found out he was only a man.
 - b. But here, Jesus at first looks to be only a mere man but when the curtain tears and they see what’s really going on they realize he’s God and he’s good and he’s loving and he can fix you and heal you and help you. He’s so much more than you thought. Here’s your hero. Here’s the one who can make the wrong right. Here’s the one who can love you and never let you down. He’s nose-dived all the way down into hell for you. He’s journeyed through the darkness to save you. Jesus knows everything about you and loves you still and will love you always.
 - i. And so you can rejoice. You can just receive that. You can praise God for that.

Response #2: Repent

- A. But the second thing you can do is what we see happen next with crowds. Here’s what Luke goes on to say in v. 48: “And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.” It was a symbol of grief and probably even of repentance.
- B. And that’s another place we could go with this. You see, as Paul says, when you see God’s kindness, when you really get it, it actually leads to repentance ([Rom. 2:4](#)).
1. When you get that you’re loved, that you’re safe, that God is ready and wanting to forgive you and wash you, that’s the only way you can really come out of hiding and face yourself as you really are and be honest, confess, repent.

- a. You don't have to deny what you see. Nor do you have to despair when you see it. You can own it while still having hope. Because we know we're not going to be rejected for it. We're going to be received. We're going to be loved. We're already loved. We can repent and change.

Response #3: Reflect

- A. If I could say just one last thing. You know, everywhere Jesus went light was breaking forth, boundaries were broken, people encountered the love of God.
- B. And it should really be the same with us. We are called not just to receive his goodness and things, we're called to reflect that out into the world. So Paul says in Eph 5:8: "[A]t one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light."
 1. So are you doing that? Are you laying down your life for people like Jesus is here? Sometimes that's the only way people will come to get it. You can talk and talk about the gospel, but when you ready yourself to die in love for them and show them what it means, well, suddenly light breaks in.
- C. So I'll leave you with that to consider now, later, this week sometime. In view of the great love of God for you in Jesus, what can you rejoice over, what do you need to repent of, how can you reflect that same love and light out in the world around you?