

## *The Son of God Goes Forth to War*

Suddenly, right at midday, when the sun is supposed to be the brightest, the first Good Friday turned dark for three hours. Luke (23:35) explains, “*The sun stopped shining.*” No sunlight. Just darkness. Do you suppose everything came to a stop? Even for essential workers? Older folks had, no doubt, experienced at least one solar eclipse in their life, but the darkest eclipse lasts only 7½ minutes (acc. to space.com). This three-hour darkness on Good Friday was no eclipse.

Apparently there are historical records which inform us that as far away as Egypt, everyone was experiencing the same mysterious, frightening darkness.

The darkness marked the second three hours of Christ’s crucifixion. Oh now that’s an ugly way to put people to death. It could sometimes take a couple days to die. That’s a long time to suffer. A crucified criminal’s diaphragm worked slower and slower until he was asphyxiated from lack of breathing.

Jesus now hung on a cross outside of Jerusalem. What a change! Thousands of people had followed him for three years, listened intently to him, and praised him as someone sent from God. Just five days before, the

crowds had called him Savior by shouting ‘Hosanna!’ to him. ‘Hosanna’ means “Save us, please.” On Friday morning, Jesus acknowledged to Pontius Pilate that he was indeed the King of the kingdom of truth. He was God’s special soldier. But now the warrior was dying. This was the final battle. The big one. **THE GREAT BATTLE FOR YOU.** Jesus had come into the world for this. He had prepared throughout his life for this. Your future, my future, the future of every soul was hanging on the outcome of this battle.

During this battle Jesus suffered physical agony. It started with the distress Jesus had on Thursday night in Gethsemane. We doubt Jesus slept that night because of the three hearings one after another. Once he got into Pilate’s hands on Friday morning, then came some special reprisals: a crown of thorns, the mocking, the spitting and the fists to his face, the humiliation of having his clothing stripped off, the cruel scourging that ripped out skin and flesh with each lash. In that weakened state, he was forced to carry the heavy cross out to Golgotha. But Simon of Cyrene had to finish the task because Jesus collapsed. After all that the Roman soldiers laid him down on the cross, drove long nails through his wrists and

feet, hoisted up the cross, and dropped into its hole. If you have any sympathy, it's hard to hear what they did to Jesus.

But notice our warrior withstanding all that agony without complaint. Amazingly, we hear him ask the Father to forgive all those who crucified him. We hear Jesus answer the request of the believing thief with a promise of paradise that very day. We hear him calmly tender his mother to John. All this while he suffers.

But look deeper than the physical pain. Feel the darkness. Could it be that Jesus' physical suffering amounted to 'the sting of a fire ant' compared to the spiritual suffering he endured on the cross? The three-hour darkness gives us insight into how much God hates it when we sin, for instance, when we overreact to a problem and make the situation worse. The three-hour darkness gives us insight into how much God hates it when we treat sports or hunting or gaming or food or anything like it's more important than hearing his Word or helping someone in need. See the darkness as God's reaction to the injustice of Governor Pilate and Chief Priest Caiaphas condemning God's innocent Son. At the same time see the darkness as God's dreadful judgment on our sin as

something that must be punished because God is just. See the darkness as a marker of the Great Battle for You.

A part of me wants to express gratitude for the darkness. It may have shut the mockers' mouths. But it also made it harder to see the innocent Son of God on that cross, alone, battling the forces of hell. Satan hated Jesus. Was he delighted to see the Son of God at his weakest? You know how hard Satan had worked to turn Jesus from his life's work of redeeming the whole world. Makes me wonder if Satan tried muttering to Jesus: "You won't make any difference, Son of God. You can't cover the whole world's guilt. Humanity is on my side—look how much they love to return to their sins. Why care about these people? It doesn't matter how many will make Confirmation vows to remain faithful to you. I'll get many of them back shortly after they stop making time for your Word." Yet in the darkness see warrior Jesus fighting this powerful evil angel, alone, pure, holy, and faithful. Still loving us. Still holding his ground.

Then comes the worst part of the Great Battle for You. Jesus asks, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

(Matthew 27:46). I have trouble wrapping my mind around this. How could it be that God the Father, source of all true love in this world, turns his back on God the Son? Isn't Jesus the one whom the Father twice called "*My beloved Son*"? Yes, same person. Yet the Father pushes his Son outside of his loving presence so that the warrior Son can suffer for this entire world's sins. It must have torn at the Father's heart. Yet God is just. So sin must be punished. Yet God is love. So Jesus took the punishment, all of it, and the Father was willing to accept Jesus' death as punishment for all sin (Romans 4:25). This is the worst moment of Jesus' life. Here is where the Great Battle for You is either going to be won or lost as Jesus suffers. We know this from the prophet Isaiah, who explained 700 years earlier what is happening on the cross: "*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted*" (Isaiah 53:4).

"If only we could sin less. Then Jesus wouldn't have had to suffer so much." We like to tell ourselves such things. But is it enough to 'sin less'? Most people tend to understate how much they sin anyway. And we pastors don't enjoy pointing out how much

people actually sin, even God's people. So lots of us go through life not really appreciating how much Jesus had to suffer in order to redeem us. Maybe it's too hard to think of all the sins of all people bearing down on Jesus all at once. So think about this. Each of us has at least one sin that we are particularly weak toward. What's yours? Greed? Greed can lead people to think that 'accumulating wealth' is more important than 'spreading the good news about Jesus.' What an insult to our Savior! Greed can show itself in how little a person gives away to the charities that fill the needs of fellow humans or charities that fund medical research for cures. What an insult to our Creator! If greed isn't your weakness, what is? Fear? Fear can be seen in our decisions, when we follow a path that tries to satisfy our fears more than satisfying what God wants, as revealed in his Word. What an insult to our God, who calls out, "*So do not fear for I am with you...*" (Isaiah 41:10). Even when we are not aware of how much we sin, we still sense that something inside us is broken, something we can't fix no matter how hard we try. Our temptations are bigger and stronger than we are. We need a warrior who is strong enough to purchase forgiveness for all!

So the Son of God goes forth to war, to fight the Great Battle for You. Jesus is truly human so that he can be a fitting substitute for all humans, and truly God so his innocent death can count as payment of the penalty for all sin. This Jesus maintains his faith in the heavenly Father, referring to him as “*My God, my God,*” even when the darkness and the wrath of God against sin are bearing down on him.

You see where this is heading, right? Look up. Is the darkness beginning to retreat? Perhaps a little, so the end must be near. But first some mockers need to get in one last lick. “*When some of those standing there heard him say ‘Eloi, Eloi,’ they said, ‘He’s calling Elijah.’*” I think these mockers were the Roman soldiers who didn’t understand the words Jesus had spoken in Aramaic. ‘Eloi’ sounds close enough to ‘Elijah’ for them to mock Jesus as he comes to the end of his suffering.

And then Jesus says, “*I am thirsty*” (John 19:28). *Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, ‘Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him’*” (Matthew 27:47-49).

But Jesus doesn’t need Elijah. He is the Son of God. The Scriptures have been fulfilled. It’s time to announce his victory in the Great Battle for You. “*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished’*” (John 19:30). “*And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice—‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit’—he breathed his last and gave up his spirit*” (Matthew 27:50, Mark 16:37, Luke 23:46).

At that moment the temple curtain was “*torn in two from top to bottom*” (Mark 15:38). What a great way for the Father to say “Amen” to “*It is finished*”! What a great way to signal that there is no more need for sacrificing animals to make atonement with God! Human priests are no longer needed. The way into the Most Holy Place of the temple is open to all. Come on in, all sinners! There is enough room for you near God. He sees you as righteous in Christ Jesus. Satan can claim we’re too bad for God to love us, too sinful for God to wash us clean, but that’s a lie that we can see through as easy as “*It is finished.*” The Great Battle for You has been won. You are right with God thanks to Jesus.