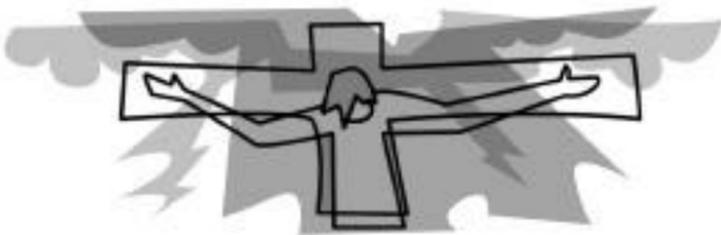


Darkness at Noon



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 27:42, 45; Mark 5:33; Mark 15:31; Luke 23:44.*

Memory Text: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (*Matthew 27:46*).

For those who will listen, nature speaks eloquently about the character of God. It's a loudspeaker, suffusing our senses with sublime messages about the One who created it all. But even in their fullness and beauty, nature's words are often muted, and, sometimes, because of *static*, the signals can be grossly misread.

In contrast, the Cross is the ultimate revelation to humanity about our Creator. Only as we grasp the incredible reality that the Man hanging on the cross was also God—the One through whom all things in both heaven and earth were created—can we begin to understand truths about this God that the most vibrant sunset or exotic plant could never reveal. As we grasp, too, what kind of death He in His humanity died, and why He agreed to do it, we learn lessons about our God that surpass what anything growing out of the ground or floating in the heavens ever could teach us.

The Week at a Glance: What irony is found in the leaders' taunts against Jesus? What caused the darkness that surrounded Him? What was the meaning of His cry “Why hast thou forsaken me?” What does the Cross teach us about the nature of sin?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 19.*

“He Saved Others!”

From the bogus trials, Jesus was led down the Via Dolorosa (“the Way of Pain”) to Golgotha, “the place of the skull,” where He was crucified. Little did His murderers know what they were doing. No doubt, His awareness of their ignorance was partly why Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (*Luke 23:34*). Their ignorance, though, will not excuse them on the day of judgment, not when they had so many opportunities to know the truth. If those who, having never seen Jesus, will be condemned for disbelief (*John 3:18*), imagine the fate of those who rejected Him while He lived among them.

As Jesus hung on the cross, He faced numerous taunts, such as those depicted in Matthew 27:42, Mark 15:31, and Luke 23:35. Though meant as an insult, what great truth were these men uttering in their ignorance?

He saved others, but He couldn’t save Himself. That’s true: He couldn’t save others and Himself at the same time. It had to be one or the other but not both.

Jesus could have chosen *not* to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world (*see Matt. 26:39; John 10:17, 18; Gal. 2:20; Heb. 7:27*), but then the world would have been lost. Only by offering Himself could He save *others*. There was no other way.

Though uttered in derision and hate, those words captured the greatest truth of all time: If Christ wanted to save the world, He could do it only at the Cross.

In Matthew 26:39, Jesus asked that if it were possible, let this cup pass. Obviously, it wasn’t possible, not in the sense that He had no choice in this matter (If He had no choice, why even bother to utter the prayer?) but in the sense that it was not possible for Him to be spared if the world were to be saved. With this idea in mind, read also Mark 8:31, Luke 24:7, John 3:14. What are these texts telling us about the necessity of Christ’s death for our salvation?

Darkness at Noon

Read Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:33, and Luke 23:44. What do all three say happened? What is the spiritual significance of this event?

In the Bible, darkness is a symbol of evil, of separation from God, who is Light and in whom “is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). In fact, Jesus talked of “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12, 22:13) as an expression for hell. In a sense, Jesus at the cross went to hell for us; that is, He suffered the penalty of sin that those in hell will have to face themselves.

Look up these few texts. What do they say happened at the cross that could help explain the meaning of this supernatural darkness that appeared during the crucifixion of Christ? *Isa. 59:2, 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13.*

The darkness, then, is an outward symbol of the spiritual darkness that was surrounding the Son of God as He bore the full brunt of God’s righteous wrath against sin. With the accumulated sin of the world not only falling on Him but being punished in Him there at the cross, with the Father, who is light, hiding His presence from Jesus—it’s not hard to see why the darkness would sweep over the land as a powerful manifestation to the world and to the universe of what was happening at the cross, of the great punishment that Jesus was taking upon Himself in order to save humanity from the condemnation that sin would otherwise have brought. “The dense blackness,” wrote Ellen White, “was an emblem of the soul-agony and horror that encompassed the Son of God.”—*The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 3, p. 164.

At times, who hasn’t felt oppressed by spiritual darkness? What caused it? How did it go away? And what advice would you give to someone who says that he or she feels enveloped in spiritual darkness?

The Father Hidden

“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? What could Jesus—who had said “I and my Father are one” (*John 10:30*) and that “Yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me” (*John 16:32*)—have meant by those words? Was not this the same Jesus who stood on the banks of the Jordan when the Father uttered, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (*Matt. 3:17*)? Was not this the same Jesus who had prayed “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee” (*John 17:21*)? Was not this the same Jesus who had prayed to the Father, “Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world” (*vs. 24*)?

Of course, it was. What, then, could He have meant by that cry?

Go back over the texts from yesterday’s section (*Isa. 59:2, 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13*); read them in the context of Christ’s lament. **How do they help explain what is happening here and why He uttered what He did?**

However difficult for us to understand, Jesus—who had been One with the Father since eternity—now felt the complete separation from God caused by sin. God’s wrath, which would otherwise fall on us, fell on Him so that none of us would ever have to face it ourselves.

“It was necessary for the awful darkness to gather about His soul because of the withdrawal of the Father’s love and favor; for He was standing in the sinner’s place, and this darkness every sinner must experience. The righteous One must suffer the condemnation and wrath of God, not in vindictiveness; for the heart of God yearned with greatest sorrow when His Son, the guiltless, was suffering the penalty of sin. This sundering of the divine powers will never again occur throughout the eternal ages.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 924.

Have you ever met someone who felt forsaken by God (or perhaps you have felt that way yourself)? What happened to Jesus on the cross that offers you, or anyone, a way out of the seemingly bottomless pit? Why, because of the Cross, should no one ever feel that God has abandoned him or her?

“It Is Finished!”

Christ did not die in defeat but as a conqueror over sin—a spotless sacrifice of perfect innocence and virtue, infinite in moral power and love. His words “It is finished” signified not merely the termination of His human life but the consummation of His sacrifice and assurance of its success. Nothing could negate the completeness of the provision thus made. That which had so long been prophesied was now an accomplished fact of history. Henceforth His paramount task, and that of all heaven, would be to apply the saving merits of His sacrifice to the sin-stricken inhabitants of earth till the close of probationary time.

Those words, “It is finished,” uttered by the One who created all things by His word, echoed throughout the universe, ensured that the stability of its moral order and the joyous harmony of its fellowship are forever guaranteed.

How does Christ’s cry “It is finished” shed light on what happened to the veil of the temple at His death? *Matt. 27:51.*

Every animal sacrifice—from the one offered by Abel (*Gen. 4:4*), up through the beasts slain in the temple precincts on the day of Golgotha—pointed to Christ’s death. The rending of the temple veil, then, betokened the accomplishment of that death. It symbolized the end of the old Hebrew system and pointed to the inauguration of a new and living way into God’s presence through His torn body (*Heb. 10:19-21*), once and for all ending the need for any other animal sacrifices (*Heb. 9:26*).

What do the following texts say that relate to the veil being torn at Christ’s death? *Pss. 49:7, 15; 51:16-19; Heb. 10:1-5.*

No animal could ever atone for sin. Just look at the havoc that sin has wreaked upon our world—the suffering, the misery, the loss, the disappointment, the death. And to think that all it would take to atone, or to pay, for all this suffering would be the death of a goat, or even of a thousands goats?

No wonder the veil was torn. In the end, it was a symbol, a picture, and thus in and of itself it couldn’t save one soul any more than staring at a picture of a salad could fill an empty stomach.

“God Was in Christ”

“To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Cor. 5:19).

We can look at the world all around us and see, the cost of sin. Every one of us, to one degree or another, faces its sad results.

In what ways has sin (not just your own but sin in general) impacted your life and brought you sorrow?

Yet, it is only at the Cross that we can see just how terrible sin really is, because it took something as extreme, something as incredible, as the Cross to atone for it. The seriousness of the remedy is a way to judge the seriousness of the offense. If someone had to do five hours of community service as a punishment for a crime, you could guess that whatever that crime was, it wasn't too bad. In contrast, if that person faced death, you'd assume that whatever he or she did, it was deemed serious. Thus, nothing has revealed the horror and gravity of sin like the Cross, where God, “in Christ,” suffered the ultimate consequences of sin so that we don't have to ourselves.

Read prayerfully and carefully 1 Peter 2:24 and 2 Corinthians 5:19 in the context of Philippians 2:6. How do they help us understand how bad sin is?

The gulf caused by sin between humankind and God was so serious that it took God's inflicting the punishment of sin upon Himself in order to save us from sin, in order to reconcile us to Him. Whatever the mysteries of the Godhead, we must never forget that “God was in Christ” on the cross, bearing in Himself the penalty of sin. Sin is so bad that it took this, the Cross, in order to save us from it. The debt that the world owed God because of sin was so great that only God Himself could pay for it.

How have you experienced personally the reconciliation talked about in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that has come through “God . . . in Christ”? What does this reconciliation mean on a practical level? How does it impact your view of yourself and others? How should it impact every relationship you have?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 741–764; *Early Writings*, pp. 177, 180, 209, 253; *The Great Controversy*, pp. 348, 503; *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 304.

“When our Redeemer consented to take the cup of suffering in order to save sinners, His capacity for suffering was the only limitation to His suffering. . . . By dying in our behalf, He gave an equivalent for our debt. Thus He removed from God all charge of lessening the guilt of sin. By virtue of My oneness with the Father, He says, My suffering and death enable Me to pay the penalty of sin. By My death . . . His grace can act with unbounded efficiency.”—Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 69.

“Christ felt much as sinners will feel when the vials of God’s wrath shall be poured out upon them. Black despair, like the pall of death, will gather about their guilty souls, and then they will realize to the fullest extent the sinfulness of sin. Salvation has been purchased for them by the suffering and death of the Son of God. It might be theirs, if they would accept of it willingly, gladly; but none are compelled to yield obedience to the law of God. If they refuse the heavenly benefit and choose the pleasures and deceitfulness of sin, they have their choice, and at the end receive their wages, which is the wrath of God and eternal death. They will be forever separated from the presence of Jesus, whose sacrifice they had despised. They will have lost a life of happiness and sacrificed eternal glory for the pleasures of sin for a season.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 210.

Discussion Questions:

1 In our place Christ experienced His Father’s wrath against sin. Explain how divine wrath against sin is perfectly consistent with God’s character of love. If God had no wrath against sin, what moral climate would that create for the perpetuation of rebellion? *John 3:16-21, 36; Rom. 1:16-19; Eph. 5:1-8.*

2 Why is the idea that we can somehow earn our salvation an idea that subtly degrades the Cross? How does the Cross prove the futility of our works to save us?

Returning To God

by Arnold Serole

I grew up in an Adventist family. My grandfather was a pastor, and when people asked what I wanted to be, I told them a pastor. It was the natural answer. And for a short time I really did want to be a pastor, but I had no real idea what it meant to be a pastor.

But when I entered secondary school, I wandered away from God. I stopped attending church and took up some pretty bad habits. I grew dread locks and wore jewelry. I knew my family was worried about me, but they never forced me to go to church.

One day Mom told me about a youth retreat the young people were planning. She said if I wanted to go and would attend church every week until the retreat, she would pay my way to the retreat. I agreed, thinking a few weeks' worth of church services was a small price to pay for a great adventure.

I went to church, but outside of church I did not change. However, my mom kept her promise and paid my way to the youth retreat.

Even at the youth retreat I found ways to get into trouble. I slept through most of the devotional meetings and spurned a group of young people who I learned were praying for me. I didn't care. But the youth kept praying.

After the retreat I went to stay in our family's home village. With time on my hands, I began reading some books my grandfather had left there. The Holy Spirit used these books to change my life. I realized how the devil had deceived me, and I gave my life to God.

My parents visited me in the village. They were not at all sure I was serious when I told them that I had given my life to God and wanted to become a minister. But when they saw the changes in my life, they rejoiced.

I want to follow Christ and resist the devil's temptations. I am determined to become the minister I believe God has called me to be. God led me to Tanzania Adventist College to study. I want to be where God wants me. I've learned to listen to Him and follow Him.

ARNOLD SEROLE is a student at Tanzania Adventist College.