THE SIX MIRACLES OF CALVARY

Unveiling the Story of the Resurrection

UPDATED IN TODAY'S LANGUAGE
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The miraculous darkness

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour; for the sun stopped shining. (Luke 23:44-45 NIV)
The mid-day darkness is the first of the six miracles of Calvary. It is the beginning of the divine procession of signs that heralded the death of Jesus Christ. Second came the supernatural tearing of the curtain of the temple. The third miracle was the earthquake and the splitting of the rocks, while the fourth miracle was the opening of the graves. The fifth miraculous sign was the condition of the empty tomb, and the last miracle was the resurrection of many saints who had died.

These were the six miracles of Calvary, all of them linked directly to the death of Jesus Christ. Some of these miracles occurred in the heavens, others under the earth, yet they all established a unique class of miracles. Each of these signs attached themselves irrevocably to Christ’s eternal act of redemption. Each miracle, in its own special way, elucidates the meaning and purpose of the depths of our Savior’s suffering. Together, all six surround Christ in His death, guarding carefully the truth of our deliverance through His blood.
The Scene Described

By the time the darkness descended, Jesus had already hung on the cross for three hours, from nine o'clock to twelve noon. Luke tells us that at noon, the "sixth hour," darkness blanketed the land.

This darkness was of a very special kind. First, it was "over all the whole land," or as Matthew states, "over all the land" (Matthew 27:45). No one can say for sure whether this extraordinary darkness covered half the earth, as darkness would normally do in the absence of the sun. But if this phenomenon was limited only to Judea, it was more amazing still, for it would then be an example of the kind of concentrated darkness that God sent upon Egypt for three days. In that case, only Goshen, where the Israelites lived, had light (Exodus 10:21–22). In any event, we know with certainty that darkness extended over the whole of Judea.

But this was a supernatural darkness. It was not the kind of darkness that preceded the earthquake that occurred at Naples in A.D. 79 when Mount Vesuvius became a volcano. That was a natural phenomenon in which smoke and ashes shrouded the sun's light from the earth below.
But this darkness extended far beyond the mount of Calvary, where the earthquake originated which was to follow it.

**Not an Eclipse**

It may be tempting to believe that an eclipse of the sun coincidentally occurred at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. The difficulty with that is that this darkness continued unabated for three hours. This removes any possibility of a solar eclipse, since the longest eclipse of the sun lasts only for a few brief minutes. Moreover, this darkness occurred during the festival of the Passover, which was always celebrated during the time of the full moon, when an eclipse of the sun is impossible.

And yet, in some inexplicable way, the sun was darkened. This was no normal eclipse. The light, in some supernatural way, simply failed. Nor was the darkness caused by the natural rotation of the earth shielding the sun's rays from half the planet, which causes night. It was dark at noontime, when the sun was at its zenith. This was a supernatural phenomenon, because darkness recoils at the first rays of sunlight. Yet here, the reverse occurred.
In nature, darkness, being the opposite of light, always succumbs to the more powerful rays of light. But here, the darkness at Calvary was so intense that it smothered the light. This is an amazing thing to consider. What a tremendous testimony to the almighty power of our God!

Did the darkness occur gradually, as the light slowly faded away, or did it come more suddenly? From Luke's words, "darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining," we can conclude that the darkness began abruptly and ended abruptly at the end of the three hours. Suddenly the natural light failed, and three hours later, just as suddenly, the light returned.

Yet that is not to say that the darkness did not grow gradually deeper as the Savior's suffering on the cross grew ever deeper. The darkness is connected to the suffering of the Messiah on the cross. This seems to be corroborated by the cry of Christ at the close of these three hours. His silent perseverance ended at the conclusion of these three hours, as His sufferings had reached a climax and the darkness was banished.
Exactly how deep or black was this darkness? We are not specifically told, and yet, there is enough said to indicate that this was not simply a twilight fading of the sun, but an all-encompassing, frighteningly sudden and abysmal darkness.

The Three Hours

Up until the very moment the darkness began, what a busy three hours had passed on Golgotha! Our suffering Lord was busy, if we may use that term to describe His activity. He was deeply involved in the events swirling about Him. In those hours He spoke words of forgiveness to His crucifiers, and listened to the cry of the thief on the cross, granting him the assurance that this very day he would join Him in paradise. At the same time He recognized His mother, and assigned John to be the executor of His last will and testament concerning her care.

The soldiers were also busy watching Him, mocking Him, dividing up His clothes among them, and gambling for the seamless cloth. All the while the chief priests were busy criticizing Pilate’s inscription on the cross, and venting
their anger and indignation at Jesus. The priests, rulers, and crowd passed by Him in a wicked parade, making fun of Jesus, throwing sarcastic statements at Him, ridiculing, challenging, and cursing Him. All the raging waves of sin surged unchecked against Him, pounding against Him furiously and continually.

The Somber Silence
But what happens at the sixth hour? Silence. Sudden and somber silence. The very narrative speaks the word “darkness” and then itself goes silent. The hours between twelve o’clock to three o’clock are a blank page in the story, and the reader feels the solemn silence of the event. The evil, cruel taunts, the sarcastic comments, all are hushed now.

When these three hours of darkness ended and the light returned, all was busy and noisy again. Jesus ends this time by speaking, and the crowds begin to move around again. But during those three hours, we see only darkness, and hear only the sounds of silence. The divine Sufferer is silent, as if beneath that horrible darkness some huge horror shadowed His own soul. And everything is quiet. The taunts and insults stop. The
crowds are distracted by the darkness. The dripping of His blood is deafening.

The darkness is frightening, and as the crowds experience this supernatural darkness, they tremble at the mysterious connection of this event to the crucifixion of Jesus.

The gospel writers do not make this connection for us, recognizing it is totally unnecessary. The darkness speaks for itself. The little they do say is like a parenthesis between what came before, and what follows that one little word — *darkness*. The darkness itself casts a shadow of silence over the whole three hours, giving the reflective reader time to appreciate how awful this foreboding gloom was. This was a dark, three-hour, divine pregnant pause, designed to arrest our attention.

And as a final exclamation mark on this incredible scene, the gospel writers close the story of the crucifixion and its incredible wonders. They do so by sharing the response of those who had experienced all these things. We read that the centurion and those who were watching “were terrified” (*Matthew 27:54*), and “beat their breasts and went away” (*Luke 23:48*).
The Reliability of the Record

Now that we've read the text, can we rely upon its historical accuracy? Yes, because God inspired the historians who wrote these words. Furthermore, we can add to their testimony that of the non-Christian historians who have referred to it, especially Celsus, the famous opponent of Christianity in the third century. The ancient church father Tertullian, at the close of the second century, was bold enough to proclaim to his non-Christian 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 we rest in what the gospel writers have shared. I, for one, need no further corroboration of their testimony. Darkness did cover the earth, and with a cultivated Christian imagination we can sense the oppressiveness that miracle must have produced, as though we ourselves were feeling it.

How Do We Explain the Mystery?

What kind of event was this sudden darkness? It was a miracle, a visible suspension of the natu-
ral order of the universe. So we can see God at work in that darkness, because He, the great First Cause, is the only One who can interfere with the natural order which He established. In this miracle, He stepped out of the shadow of natural causes and displayed Himself to us as a living, involved, personal God, standing separate from His creation with “darkness under His feet” (2 Samuel 22:10 KJV).

Yet, while this was happening, the beautiful harmony of natural order remained intact in every other way. There was no natural cause which could have produced this darkness. God’s natural order became the background for this miracle of darkness. The miracle did not send shock waves through the natural order, disturbing everything else, because the author of all creation Himself determined that it would create no disharmony. Despite the seeming discordance in the natural order caused by the miracle, not one aspect of the vast symphony of creation was strained, and not a note in the tune of creation went flat.

It was God’s specific purpose to draw attention to Himself and His actions by performing a miracle that was contrary to all the laws of
nature, all the while upholding nature by His great power.

When we think about how exclusively the darkness was connected to the death of Christ, we are given the most decisive proof of divine design. He was putting Himself on display. Jesus, the Son of God, was dying, and God the Father was making an appearance. The darkness became the background to the cross. He was both authenticating and interpreting for us the death of His Son.

**What It Teaches**

This miracle teaches us several things.

1. *This miracle of darkness was God's confirmation of Jesus' character and mission.*

When Jesus told people that He came to save them from their sins, they were offended by Him. When He said, “I am the Son of God,” (Matthew 27:43) they took up stones to stone Him. “Show us a sign from heaven” (Matthew 16:1), they demanded. Now, the very thing they had demanded had been given to them, but their rejection of His person and purpose made the sign a terrible one. The heavens did give a sign—in fact the very order of nature bowed in
reverence before the crucified Sufferer on that place of a skull. Even the Roman centurion exclaimed, “Surely He was the Son of God! (Matthew 27:54).

2. The miracle of darkness magnifies the awesome significance of the death of Jesus Christ. There is no other reason that God would highlight the death of His Son in such a supernatural and impressive way. Jesus had claimed that the purpose of His imminent death was to save us from our sins. He claimed that purpose for it on the night before He suffered, and many times before. Pardon from God and peace with God, on which our eternal life hinged, could be secured for us only through His blood and by His death on the cross.

And if that is true, was there ever anything of greater significance than this event in history? What could you compare this moment with? The universe, time itself, and all earthly concerns pale in comparison with this one event.

Was Jesus Deceived?
Jesus had always claimed that His death would have great significance, and He emphasized that all the way to the cross. He knew what the
purpose of the cross was. He would pay for our sins, and bear our griefs and sorrows. Jesus told us, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!” (Luke 12:50). This was the primary motivation of His earthly life. And although there was a joy set before Him upon the completion of His suffering (Hebrews 12:2), and that joy gave Him strength to face and endure what was coming, the cross was His consuming passion. This consuming zeal for the cross was what marred His beauty to us. It plowed the furrows of trouble into His face, and made Him the “Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3 NKJV).

Did Jesus make a mistake regarding the significance of His death? Was His consuming interest nothing more than fanatical self-deception? God the Father answered that question when He parted the thin veil that separates this earthly world from the spiritual world, and visited Calvary with sudden darkness. The darkness was God’s announcement, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

3. The miracle of darkness symbolizes the inconceivable suffering of Jesus Christ in His death.
The sudden darkness was God's miraculous testimony to what Jesus was both experiencing and accomplishing because of our sins. The darkness expressed the sufferings that He was placing upon His Son. It was God who placed our sins upon Jesus, and the same God cast darkness upon the land about the cross of His Son and upon the hearts of those who witnessed this event. What the darkness communicated was that Jesus was "stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted" (Isaiah 53:4).

God the Father had to wound, bruise, discipline, and lash His own Son. Christ suffered not merely from the physical crucifixion, but from the judgment and separation from His Father and the anguish He experienced in that separation. The perspiration "like drops of blood" that he sweated in the Garden of Gethsemane was created by the pressure of His Father's hand long before the harsh touch of the soldiers had ever been laid upon His holy body. The three hours of deathly darkness He suffered on the cross at Calvary perfectly illustrated the heaviness of His Father's hand upon Him.
No Longer Endurable

It was appropriate then, that before the period of darkness had completely passed, when the Son could no longer bear the Father's judgment against sin in silence, that He, with a startling voice and a sense of total wretchedness, looked into heaven and cried "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Yet the Father was there in the darkness, though for the time being He had been forced to forsake His Son in order to satisfy His perfect righteousness. The abandonment Jesus experienced, the punishment He received as the Sin-bearer, was perfectly represented in the deep, dreadful, total, and sudden darkness.

Christ bearing our sins in His body was not a fanciful story. It was a dreadful and awful reality Jesus had to experience.

Hid from Human Eyes

The darkness shrouded our Lord, and at the moment when He suffered the most extreme agony, His suffering was hidden from all human eyes. The impenetrable secrecy of those last hours is what enables us to imagine and appreciate the inconceivable suffering He endured. In His pre-
vious hours of suffering. He had been exposed to view. But human eyes were never intended to see Him in His supreme anguish. There is no way we could ever do justice in describing that horrible time, so God hid it from us.

If Jesus' experience as the Sinbearer revealed itself on His face, as Isaiah seems to indicate in his fifty-third chapter, and if it affected His appearance that men should take no notice of Him, then those last hours in which His sufferings climaxed must have impressed themselves on Him in unequaled severity.

Gethsemane is described for us in Scripture, but we read nothing about the last half of Calvary. Peter, James, and John were given an audience to His private suffering in Gethsemane, but at Calvary, God drew the drapes of darkness around Him to hide Him from human eyes.

Oh, the mysteries of that suffering! No man's eyes should ever see them. All that man was permitted to know of His suffering was to hear the terrible cry of incomprehensible pain and torment. Yet in that cry was the sound of certain victory for the mournful cry, "Why have you forsaken me?" follows only upon the heels of the confident shout, "My God, my God."
What Does It Prove?

All the inconceivable sufferings of our Redeemer were symbolized by that terrible darkness. However, while the darkness was the symbol of the Father’s righteous anger, it was also a proof of the Son’s perfect righteousness. Only someone perfectly sinless, having no sins of His own to atone for, could be made responsible for sinners. So while He was indeed stricken of God, He was also the Beloved of God. He had indeed been appointed to suffer for our sins. But the depth of the suffering appointed to Him only mirrored the depth of the Father’s delight and approval of Jesus’ perfect life.

This serves to demonstrate the horrible evil and curse that is man’s sin, since the only way to be saved is through infinite Love. At the same time we are shown that God’s love is far stronger to save us than our sin is to destroy us.

Though the salvation Christ accomplished for us is glorious and brings us great joy, yet it was bought at great price. His birth foretold the grandeur of His coming work for us, and was appropriately announced by a shining light. But at His death, when the focus was on the staggering cost of that work for us, the light became darkness.
Redemption Accomplished

When the darkness was finally finished, because He Himself had passed through it, Christ was able to say; “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Redemption had been accomplished! Then, after crying aloud once more, but now in the voice of a conqueror so powerful that it split the rocks and opened the graves in anticipation of His own resurrection, He softly said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). In childlike trust and assurance He gave Himself into His Father’s arms, surrendering His human life.

What It Pictures

The darkness of Calvary illustrated the doom of those who were crucifying Christ. It was the Father who had taken the Son’s life in judgment, and the Son would have died even had the Jews not crucified Him. But for the same reason that it was just for God to judge Him in our place, since He is perfectly righteous, it was evil for them to crucify the Lord of Glory. “For they have persecuted him whom Thou Thyself hast smitten, And they tell of the pain of those whom Thou hast wounded” (Psalm 69:26 NASB).
Amos relates a remarkable prophecy concerning the future suffering of the Jewish people. "In that day,' declares the Sovereign LORD, 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight'" (Amos 8:9). What an exact description of the scene on Calvary! Amos’s prophecy relates to a future time of suffering for the Jews. But the darkness on Calvary was a sign, or a type, of that darkness to which Amos refers.

Concerning this prophecy, as Jesus was journeying toward His future crucifixion, He said, "For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'" He added, "They will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:29-31). In other words, if they do these things to Him, the green tree, the fruit-bearing vine of which His people were the branches, what shall God do to them, the dry tree?

By the momentous consequence of Christ’s crucifixion, all those who reject Christ will be lost.
Fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, the darkness of Calvary is gone, and the true Light is now shining. “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (Proverbs 4:18). On that future full day, the light shall never fail, and the days of our sorrow will be ended.