

Darkening skies

Mark 15:33-39

Tomorrow, Americans will travel from all across the country to a seventy-mile wide band of territory between Oregon and South Carolina to experience darkness in the middle of the day. Small towns in the path of the eclipse will mushroom overnight, and who knows how they will be able to accommodate the 7 million visitors expected to converge on them.

Well, something kind of like this happened in our passage, as darkness descended over the whole land of Israel for three hours during the crucifixion of Christ. Was this another solar eclipse?

In a word, no. Since modern astronomers understand the movements of the planets, it is possible for them to calculate when solar eclipses will happen in the future and when they have occurred in the past. And there wasn't any total solar eclipse visible from Jerusalem anywhere around the time of Jesus' death.

And the fact that today's passage doesn't record a solar eclipse should also be obvious to us from the length of time the darkness fell – 3 hours. Solar eclipses are nowhere near that long. Tomorrow, if you are standing along the path of the total eclipse, you will be able to see it for less than 3 minutes. And given the speed of the earth's rotation, it will only take the moon's shadow 90 minutes to travel all the way across the country tomorrow. No, there's just no way a total solar eclipse could hover over Jerusalem for 3 hours.

But there's an even more important reason the darkness at the time of the crucifixion couldn't have been a solar eclipse – simply put, the moon was in the wrong place.

Look, a solar eclipse happens when the moon blocks the light of the Sun from earth, right? So, that means the moon and the Sun have to be on the same side of the earth, and that only happens when the moon is new. In contrast, Jesus was crucified at Passover time – and according to the Law of Moses, that only takes place when the moon is full. During a full moon, the earth is between the sun and the moon, so there's no way the moon could have blocked the sun's light at the time of the Crucifixion.

So, given our modern understanding of astronomy, we know that those three hours of darkness at mid-day during a full moon had to have been something supernatural, something that God did. It thus looks a lot like God was trying to tell the people something through this striking phenomenon.

So, what could this divine message be? Well, since Jesus had predicted His own crucifixion, we ought to start by seeing if He had also mentioned the sky becoming dark. And it turns out He did. If you turn back a few pages to Mark 13:24, Jesus says, "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory." In other words, Jesus ties the darkening of the Sun to the Day of the Lord, the day when He will return to judge the earth. So Jesus' disciples would have understood the darkening of the sun as a sign of God's judgment.

But Jesus wasn't the only One Who made such a connection. Joel says something similar in chapter 2 of his Old Testament prophecy. He also connects the darkening of the sun with the Day of the Lord, the coming judgment of God on the world. In verse 10, Joel says, "The earth quakes before them,

the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness. The Lord gives voice before His army, for His camp is very great; For strong is the One Who executes His word; For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; Who can endure it?" And in verse 31 of the same chapter, Joel says this: "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord."

Isaiah makes much the same connection in chapter 13 of his prophecy: "For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; The sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity." In short, for Jesus, for Joel, and for Isaiah, the darkening of the sun was a sure sign of God's judgment on the world.

But of course the clearest example of a connection between darkened skies and judgment was not a prophecy but a historical event, like the one that happened at the crucifixion of Christ. Way back at the time of Moses, when God was sending plagues on the Egyptians for refusing to let the Israelites go free from their slavery, the ninth of these plagues was darkness, a darkness that lasted not for 3 hours, but for 3 days, a darkness so thick that it could be felt, a darkness so complete that none of the Egyptians could see anyone else.

So, what does all this mean? Anyone with any passing knowledge of Scripture at the time Jesus was crucified would have made a connection between the sun being darkened and God's judgment being poured out on the world. In other words, the message God was sending was pretty clear – judgment was coming.

And didn't those people deserve the judgment of God? After all, they had just committed the most heinous crime we can possibly imagine. By crucifying Jesus, they had carried out a most personal sort of attack on God. As they nailed Jesus to the cross and left Him to die, they were considering God to be nothing more than a common criminal. Surely, the people who saw the sky darkened for 3 hours deserved everything that Joel and Isaiah said was coming to them.

But over the last few weeks, as we've studied the book of Ezra, I hope we've come to understand that none of us are really that much different than they were. After all, Ezra wept and mourned when he discovered that many of his people had married outside the covenant community. Because of that, Ezra said that their sins had risen higher than their heads, and had grown up to heaven. Because of that, Ezra admitted that God had a right to be angry enough to consume His people, leaving them no remnant or survivor.

In short, whether people choose to marry pagan wives or stand with the Jerusalem mob on Good Friday, or march with hate-filled crowds today, or just commit all the day-to-day sins we'd very much like for God to overlook, whenever any of us sin, we are forsaking God, and thus we deserve to have God forsake us. Whenever we, like wayward sheep, choose our way over God's way, we are adding to the reason Jesus had to die on the cross. And that means we all deserve the judgment announced by the darkened skies over Jerusalem.

Now, when the skies darken over America tomorrow, we don't need to panic, as our prehistoric ancestors probably did. We know that a total solar eclipse isn't a supernatural message from God. But given what we've seen in today's passage, as about 80% of the sun's rays are blocked from our mid-day

skies tomorrow, it wouldn't be out of place for us to take the darkness as a reminder to search our souls, to ask God whether we, either individually or as a people, have done something to deserve His judgment. It thus wouldn't be such a bad idea to look inward instead of upward tomorrow, to spend some time in confession and repentance, even as we marvel at the intricate way in which God designed the heavens.

Of course, tomorrow's darkness won't last long – not three days, not even the three hours as recorded in today's passage. But given the words of Jesus and Joel and Isaiah, and given the terrible sin committed by the people of Jerusalem, another question logically presents itself: why did the darkness pass from them so quickly? And why didn't God's Day of Judgment come right then, just as the prophets said it would?

Well, when you think about it, it sort of did. For what did Jesus say right before He died? He cried out the opening lines of Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Now, the people at the time misunderstood Him completely, and Mark describes a rather comic scene of folks looking around to see if Elijah was coming back.

But of course, we know what was really going on, even if we don't fully understand it. We know that somehow in the crucifixion, God the Father was rendering His judgment, imputing or crediting the sins of all of Christ's people to Christ Himself, pouring out His wrath on Jesus instead of on us. Isaiah put it this way: "He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." In short, since Jesus received the judgment of God that all of us deserve, Good Friday was Judgment Day for Him, and for all who trust in Him.

But because Jesus was willing to die for sinners like us, something else happened on that day – the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. That was another supernatural sign from God, but instead of pronouncing judgment, its message was quite the opposite. For the veil of the Temple was a symbol of God's separation from His people. It indicated that the way to God was closed and had been ever since Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. But when God tore the veil from top to bottom, He was saying that the way to a relationship with Him was now opened. Because Christ died in the place of sinners like us, we can thus be sure that all those who trust in Him will receive peace and healing instead of judgment, welcome instead of condemnation.

And you know what? It was at the ninth hour when Christ died, and when the veil of the Temple was torn in two, that's when the darkness lifted. So maybe that's the message we need to take away from this passage, the most important truth we can learn from these darkened skies. Yes, the darkness shows us that we all deserve God's judgment. The darkness reminds us that judgment day will indeed come.

But we also learn that the darkness was fleeting. Because Jesus died for sinners like us, we don't need to fear the day of judgment, for He has already paid the price our sins deserve. And if we trust in His perfect sacrifice offered for us, we no longer need to go on walking in the darkness. Instead, like that pagan Roman centurion, our eyes can also be opened, and we too can confess, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

So as we Americans experience darkened skies tomorrow, let us be reminded of how much we deserve God's judgment. Let us search our souls and repent of our sins. But as the darkness departs so quickly, let us also remember that because Jesus Christ, the light of the world has come, the darkness of sin and death will not, cannot last. As John put it in his first epistle, "The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." And so as the skies brighten around us, let us be ever more firmly convinced of God's mercy, of His steadfast, faithful covenant love for all who trust in Christ.