

The Hidden Triumph

Luke 23:44-56

Series: The Climax of the Cross (Luke, Spring 2020)

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Worship: The Greater Triumph

Key Sentence: Jesus's victory was hidden in death

Outline:

I. The Victory (Luke 23:44-46)

II. The Witnesses (Luke 23:47-49)

III. The Burial (Luke 23:50-53)

IV. The Waiting (Luke 23:54-56)

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⁵⁴It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

The Hidden Triumph Luke 23:44-56

Before modern communications news of a victory or a defeat, was often delayed. The people at home often didn't know a battle was taking place, only that their loved one had gone away into peril. Hundreds of examples could be given from history, those waiting for news from the battles of Gettysburg, Crecy or Troy. The word marathon came from a famous battle in which victory was announced by a young man who sprinted 26.3 miles back to Athens, and died.

One of the most moving descriptions of this waiting for the news of a far away battle is found in the final chapters of 'The Lord of the Rings.' Without even knowing the story, you can feel the tension and despair in these words, and a great parallel to the hours when Jesus hung on the cross, and after. "Over the city of Gondor doubt and great dread had hung. Fair weather and clear sun had seemed but a mockery to men whose days held little hope and who looked each morning for news of doom. Their lord was dead and burned, and the new king that had come to them in the night was gone again to a war with powers too dark and terrible for any might or valour to conquer. And no news came."

"'We wait for the stroke of doom.' Faramir said to Eowyn. And it seemed to them as they stood there upon the wall that the wind died, and the light failed, and the sun was bleared, and all sounds in the City or in the lands about were hushed, neither wind nor voice nor bird-call nor could be heard. The very beating of their hearts was stilled. Time halted. And still they waited, for they knew not what. Then, presently, it seemed to them that above the ridges of the distant mountains, another vast mountain of darkness rose, towering up like a wave that should engulf the world, and about it lightnings flickered; and then a tremor ran through the earth, and they felt the walls of the city quiver. A sound like a sigh went up from all the lands about them. 'Do you think that the darkness is coming?' said Eowyn. 'No,' said Faramir, 'I do not know what is happening. The reason of my waking mind tells me that great evil has befallen and we stand at the end of days. But my heart says nay, and all my limbs are light, and a hope and a joy come to me that no reason can deny.'"

I wonder if there were any in Jerusalem, followers of Jesus who felt that way about his death, felt an unreasonable hope and expectation? Some may have. Most I'm sure didn't. But as we study these verses, Luke 23:44-56, we know they are only the time of waiting, that a great hidden victory has been won, and soon the resurrected king himself will bring word of victory to his loved ones. Let's look at the events of that time, starting with the victory itself.

Luke 23:44-46 *It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.*

When Luke says it is the sixth hour, he means it's about noon. Hours were counted from dawn, and the daytime divided into twelve parts. By the way, whatever the cause of the darkness, it was not the result of an eclipse. Jesus was crucified at Passover and Passover always occurs at a full moon. You can't have a solar eclipse during a full moon. It was simply an act of God.

What was the meaning of darkness? In Scripture darkness is often associated with evil, as in John's Gospel where He calls Jesus the light. John 3:19 "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." Darkness also stands for ignorance, light for knowledge. Paul tells the Corinthians that God has given us: "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Finally, darkness can evoke awe and terror of God. When God spoke to Moses, Mt. Sinai was cloaked with darkness. Psalm 18 says: "He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. He made darkness his covering."

So darkness is a metaphor for evil, for ignorance, and for awe of God's power, and all three are present here as Jesus battles toward death. There is tremendous evil here. Satan and his minions, both demonic and human, rejoice to see the suffering and death of the Son. There is tremendous ignorance here, as these who don't know what they are doing, carry out the most horrible punishment ever inflicted on an innocent man. And there is God's power here, the brooding presence of the Lord, Father and Holy Spirit, witnessing the sacrifice of their own. The darkness reveals the magnitude of the battle being waged.

Luke does not record, but Matthew and Mark do, the cry of desolation which Jesus uttered in that darkness: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is a quote from the 22nd Psalm, describing crucifixion in prophetic detail. In that time God the Father himself away from the Son, Paul writes: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us. Isaiah says "Your sins have separated you from your God, and your iniquities have hidden his face from you." So in this moment God the Father and God the Son were separated by the sin that the Son had become, our sin. How this could be is a mystery. That it was is a plain fact. Yet, not a defeat. This was a hidden victory, a victory won beyond the sight of those watching.

C. S. Lewis wrote, in the words of a demon, in *Screwtape Letters*, “our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do his Father’s will, looks around him upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.” If Lewis is right Satan’s cause was in cataclysmic danger in the moment when Jesus cried out. For having been forsaken, yet he obeyed, and in so doing he won the victory.

Luke alludes to this when he says that the curtain of the temple was torn in two. The curtain represented the separation between God and man. Beyond the curtain was the Most Holy Place, and the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God had promised his presence would dwell in a special way. And no one, not priest, not Levite, not king, was allowed into that presence of God, except once a year on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, Even then only the high priest would enter. It was dangerous to step into the presence of a Holy God. The Jews developed a tradition of tying a cord to the ankle of the high priest, so that if the presence of God destroyed him, his body could be dragged out.

For sinful people like us to come into the presence of God meant death. Just as darkness cannot remain in the presence of light, so the holiness of God dispels the darkness of sin. But now Christ has won the hidden victory. That which separates God and man has been destroyed. Christ experienced the separation and paid the penalty for every sin you and I have committed. In doing so he has given us the gift of righteousness before God. Peter says “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” Paul says “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” If you, today, accept that on the cross Jesus died for your sins, and believe that in him alone is found the way to God, you too can have that freeing, freely given righteousness. In this righteousness we now draw near to God. Hebrews says “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.”

It is in this hidden victory, won for you, that Christ utters his last words “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Jesus quotes from Psalm 31:5, a Psalm of trust in God, who is a refuge and strength to all who hope in Him. These words are evidence that the price has been paid. The eternal fellowship, so piteously parted, is regained. The unbreakable chain, intentionally snapped, has been reforged. As Jesus also says in John’s Gospel, “It is finished.” The abandoned one is now accepted, the darkened one brought into the light.

The hidden battle, far more momentous than anyone could imagine, has been well and truly won, and the victor is at peace. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” The soul of Jesus, both human and divine, now goes to be with the Father, waiting until the time when soul and body are reunited for all eternity.

This is the victory. But it is hidden, and those watching will have to wait until the third day before he brings them news of his success. Let’s spend a few minutes looking at those who are waiting, without even knowing they are waiting, for the good news of his triumph. First, we see the witnesses to his death. Luke 23:47-49 *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.*

We now move from the battlefield where the victory was being won, back to the wall of the city, back to those at home waiting for news of the battle. For most this did not look like a victory. But to this Roman centurion, it inexplicably felt like a victory. Luke tells us when this centurion saw what had happened, he praised God. It is likely this Gentile, like many, had heard of, and respected, the God of the Jews, one true God in contrast to the many idols of his native religion. This kind of Gentile was called a God-fearer. We know of others like this in the Gospels and Acts. So, it’s not surprising to find a Gentile praising God even at the foot of the cross.

What is surprising is his insight. “Certainly,” he says, “this man was innocent!” The word means “righteous.” There is no evidence of righteousness or innocence at the foot of the cross. Jesus appears just like the guilty criminals on his right and left. The evidence is in what he says and in this inexplicable darkness. But for a God-fearer like this centurion, that was enough. In fact, Matthew and Mark record this centurion as also saying, “Surely this was the Son of God.” I believe he said both things. In recognizing Jesus as the Son of God, he recognized the uniqueness of this moment. This was no ordinary innocent man dying. This was in fact the perfect Son of God, himself divine, dying innocent.

The centurion had true insight into this hidden victory. Others there couldn’t see it as clearly. They knew something awful had happened but didn’t see beyond the awfulness. As Jesus died, they wailed and beat their breasts. They saw the horror of that death, but didn’t see any of the victory beyond the death, the victory earned by the death. Even those who came with Jesus from Galilee could only see the reality of the dead body in front of them, though they had heard him prophesy both his death and his resurrection victory

The women, Luke says, stood in stunned silence, watching, grieving. I think you can put yourself in their place. Many of you here have lost a loved one. If you can stand to, recreate in your mind the feelings and thoughts just after you learned of that death. Did you endure waves of disbelief, anger and numbness? That's what these women, those who knew him, were feeling. There was no hope even in his hopeful words, for the one who had uttered them was dead. They don't know that they are waiting for word of a hidden victory. They are simply grieving. Praise God that on this side of the resurrection we no longer need to grieve that way. Even in the grieving we can cling to his promises fulfilled. There eternal life, there is Spirit's presence, there is the promise of endurance.

Those who have lost a loved one also know that there are things that must be done. There must be preparation, there must be interment. There is a certain comfort in the undertaking of these things, a necessity that carries you through the first hours of grief. In this case there was also a good deal of urgency. It was late Friday. The Sabbath would begin at sundown, a rest from all labor, even funeral labor. So those who wanted to claim and then bury the body of Jesus needed to do it quickly. Luke 23:50-53 *Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man,* ⁵¹*who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God.* ⁵²*This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.* ⁵³*Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid.*

Scanning these verses we can learn several things about Joseph of Arimathea. First, he was from the town of Arimathea, which unfortunately we know nothing about. Second, he was a member of the ruling Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. Third, he was a good and upright man, not corrupt like so many in power. Fourth, as a good and upright man, he had not gone along with the sentence of the Sanhedrin against Jesus. In fact, he probably didn't even make the meeting. The Gospel of Mark says they were unanimous in their call for Jesus' death. Fifth, and most important, Luke says he was looking for the kingdom of God. This makes it almost certain he was a follower of Jesus. In fact, John tells us he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews.

Yet as a prominent member of the council, he alone was in a position to go to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. Mark tells us that Pilate first made sure Jesus was really dead and then released the body to Joseph. Along with Nicodemus, another secret believer, Joseph took his body down, wrapped it in linen cloth, and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock. The other Gospels tell us that this tomb was close to the place where Jesus had been crucified, and that it belonged to Joseph of Arimathea.

Now - in haste, in haste - the body is wrapped in linen. There is no time to do a complete job of embalming. Only part of the traditional spices and anointing were applied to the body of Jesus before it was wrapped in the linen shroud. This outer cloth would have been very much like the famous Shroud of Turin, which is why that shroud, with its image, has inspired such great debate. Do I think the Shroud of Turin was this very shroud? I'm not convinced. But with my skepticism of dating methods, I'm also not convinced its not.

So in these few hours, the hidden victory has faded into robotic grief. What we have here is a body. The dead body of a loved one, treated with as much respect and dignity as time will permit, but with no hint of hope that his body will rise again, no hint of even a subconscious conviction that a victory has already been won. The people, Joseph, Nicodemus, the women, are mourners, and though they are waiting for something, it's not news of a victory. They are simply waiting for the time when they can honor the body with a decent burial. Luke 23:54-56 *It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning.* ⁵⁵*The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid.* ⁵⁶*Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.*

The Sabbath now was about to begin. But rather than head back into the city, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and watched as he laid the body in the tomb. They were crucial witnesses that this particular dead body was laid in this particular tomb. Who were these women? We will hear on Sunday that among them were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. Luke 8:1 tells us that Mary Magdalene was one from whom seven demons had been cast out. Joanna was the wife of Cuza, manager of Herod's household. Mary was the mother of James and Joses, a way to set her apart from all the other Marys. Mark tells us that another woman, Salome, was also there. Ancient literature doesn't normally have these descriptions and names. Just as with Simon of Cyrene, there is a real effort to identify the eyewitnesses. The testimony of women was not usually considered acceptable in court, by Jewish law, but it was good enough for God.

These saw where he was laid, but they could not stay to grieve. The Sabbath was beginning. They had to go back into the city. So they went back and did something that they could do. They could honor the body. They could prepare to properly bury it. Grief is often made bearable by action. It is the inaction that disables you. So, as they waited they prepared the spices and perfumes, to complete the traditional Middle Eastern process of embalming. These preparations were apparently legal on a Sabbath, and after them they rested through the night Friday, all day Saturday, and through Saturday night.

The Sabbath rest had been commanded by God, and these faithful women were not about to violate the command, even for so important a matter as caring for this body. In fact they probably could not have gone to the grave, because their actions on a Sabbath would have been noted and even stopped. So they waited. They didn't know they were waiting for news of a hidden victory, but that was true. They were waiting for Sunday morning, waiting for a sunrise that would be a Son Rise, waiting for darkness to pass and light to dawn in their hearts.

Jesus once illustrated this concept of hidden victories through the use of a seed. He said in John 12:24 "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." The kernel of wheat is a hidden victory. It holds within it the promise of new life, of resurrection life. Michael Card's grandfather was a preacher named F. F. Brown. He once said in a sermon: "I hold a grain of wheat within my hand. It is small, and hard and narrow and self-contained. Yet in its heart there sleeps the mystery of life." So it is with the tomb of Jesus. It is small, it is hard, it is narrow, it is self-contained. It is cold and barren. Yet in its heart there sleeps the mystery of life. The victory is already won. All that is left is the celebration, the evidence of life from death.

In your own life, there are hidden victories that God has already won, and he wants you to wait until they are revealed. It might be the three days that Jesus was hidden in the grave. It might be three weeks, three years, three decades. But God does intend to be glorified in what he has done, and he will show it to you, now or in eternity, that you might appreciate the magnificence and subtlety of his work. He has simply hidden the victory until its time.

It's Friday, but Sunday's coming.