

"Overcoming the Darkness" (part 1)

THE DESPAIR OF DARKNESS

Some of you may know that my wife, Kathleen, is a second grade teacher at St. John's Lutheran School in the town of Wheatfield. Earlier this week she received word that the mother of one of her second graders past away after a long battle with cancer. The girl's mom was only 47, and also leaves behind a nine year old son. The little girl had been talking with my wife every day for many weeks and Kathleen would often pray with her.

If there was ever a time for a miracle it would be for that girl's mom. But such a miracle never came. And when we hear of such things we ask, "Why?" There have been many tragedies in recent months, and certainly every year brings different stories of heartache. In our own parish family, we can think of Jonathan Cote last year and the untimely deaths of Larry Lakeman and David Brinkerhoff the year before.

Such tragedies affect believers and nonbelievers alike. In fact, sometimes we, as God's people, do go through a time of deep darkness, a time when we can't see ahead, a time when nothing seems to make sense. And the question that always arises is "why?" Why did this happen? Why me? Why now? Why can't I beat this cancer? Why did I lose my suddenly job of half my retirement? Why did my spouse leave me? Why did I carry my baby full term only to lose the child? Why is my son or daughter not walking with the Lord? Why? Why? Why?

HOW WILL WE RESPOND?

But I have found that while we may want to ask why in those dark times, the more important question is "How?" How will we respond? God can only answer the why but we can and must answer the how? And so what do we do when the lights go out, when nothing seems to make sense?

Well, there is a Scripture that gives us the answer, a passage that probably few know or can recall. It is found in the Book of Isaiah and it tells us not only what to do in those times of darkness, but how to overcome the darkness. Please turn with me to **Is. 50:10**: ***"Who is among you that fears the LORD, that obeys the voice of His servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God."***

DARKNESS COMES TO BELIEVERS, TOO

Now notice who is in the dark! Isaiah is not talking to an unbeliever or someone who has wandered far away from home, but someone who fears the Lord. Fear here doesn't mean a cowering fear but a reverential awe and respect for Almighty God. The fear of the Lord is love on its knees. And the one who fears God is the one who obeys God. So the person Isaiah has in mind here is the person who is walking with the Lord. And yet this is the same one who is in the darkness and has no light.

I think that sometimes we can get the idea that if we become a Christian that everything is going to be great. There will be no more sickness or sorrow and we will just go through life on an ever ascending ladder of good health and success, only to die a sweet old age followed by a glorious exit into heaven. But you know, as well as I do, it generally doesn't happen that way. It would be nice but usually that is not reality. You see the fact is that there are millions of saints who fear and obey God but who walking in darkness. The truth is we will face times of darkness. The Bible and life itself teaches us that those of greatest devotion often know the deepest darkness. Think about that for a moment: *those of greatest devotion may know the deepest darkness.*

Do you remember Job? The Bible says Job was an upright man and that he feared God. But Job suffered tremendous loss, he lost his children, he lost his wealth, he lost his health, his wife told him to curse God and die and at one point he said concerning the Lord, **“I shout for help, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, And he has put darkness on my paths.”** (Job 19:7b-8) Now who has done that? – God. And Job is saying, “Lord I just don’t understand it.”

Or how about John the Baptist? Was John the Baptist a great man of God? Jesus said, *“There was not a greater man born of woman than John the Baptist.”* And yet John the Baptist found himself in a dungeon, alone in the darkness. He didn’t understand. In fact, he got so perplexed that he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, *“Are you really the Messiah, or should we look for someone else?”* Now that wasn’t a wicked man who said that, that was a righteous man, but one who was in darkness.

Or how about the Apostle Paul? Probably not a greater Christian than Paul, and yet what did he write in **2 Cor. 4:8**? Concerning all the difficulties he was going through, Paul wrote, **“We are perplexed.”** You might think Paul must be backslidden, he must be wandering off. He wasn’t backslidden. Paul wrote **“we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair.”** In other words, even though we don’t understand it doesn’t matter. Paul knew that darkness need not put him in despair.

The truth is that even outside the Bible, if you read about the lives of the saints through the ages there is hardly a one that has not gone through what is often called the “dark night of the soul,” a time when it seems as if God has forsaken them. And even Jesus experienced such a time, when He yelled from the cross, **“My God, my God, Why has thou forsaken Me?”**

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW THE DARKNESS?

And remember we are not talking about people who are in the dark because of their sin, these are folks who fear and obey the Lord. Those of greatest devotion often know the deepest darkness. Why? Why does God allow this? I’ll give you a couple reasons why. You see good and bad happens to the people of God and the people of the world alike. We are not exempt. And one of the reasons why we are not exempt is to show the world that there is a difference between those who follow the Lord and those who don’t. A believer should respond differently than the nonbeliever to the trials and tragedies of life, because the believer has a faith and a hope that transcends this world of ours.

And the truth of the matter is that the faith that is born in the light is often developed in the dark. I mean think about that for a moment. When have you grown the most spiritually? When everything is going well? When all is sunlight and roses? Or when there was darkness and difficulty and uncertainty. Are those not the times when you have grown the most? Someone has said, *“Faith like film, is developed in the darkness.”*

Let me give you three examples, three men named John who demonstrate this truth. Christian author, John Milton, was blind and yet he wrote, *Paradise Lost*, one of the greatest books of the Christian faith ever written. He was literally in the dark, but that didn’t keep him from using his gifts for God.

Or how about John Bunyon? He was put in Bedford prison. He suffered and languished there in darkness and despair. But John Bunyon in this darkness wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Another great book of the Christian life that has blessed the world.

And then there is the Apostle John who was exiled to a remote island because of His faith and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. But it was while he was in exile that the Lord gave him the visions of the end times which John wrote down in the book we call *Revelation*. You see God wants to develop our faith. And one of the ways He develops our faith is through the dark times of our lives.

That’s why a wise man once said, *“Never doubt in the dark what you have learned in the light.”* You see your faith born in the light grows in the dark. And the test of your character is what you do in the dark. The test of your character is not what you are doing in this worship service but it is what you do when no one else can see you.

So we need to understand there is a purpose to the dark times of our lives. We may not know all the whys, but we can know that God will use the darkness to develop our character and faith, if we allow Him to, if we respond the way Isaiah tells us. Look again to v. 10. What does Isaiah say? **Is. 50:10:** *“Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”*

LOOK TO THE LORD

“Trust in the name of the Lord.” I’ll put it another way, Look to the Lord. When all is crashing in around you, when you can’t see clearly, when nothing seems to make sense, look to the Lord! Don’t look to your feelings, don’t look to your circumstances, don’t look to the world, but look to the Lord. You see when you look at someone or something your focus is on that person or thing. Everything else is secondary. And when we look to the Lord, it means not looking to our circumstances but looking to His Example and His Word. Jesus went through the valley of suffering for us. He endured the cross, He despised the shame, and He did because He loved us. He said on the night before He died, *“The servant is not greater than His master.”* He told us that we too we have difficult days. And that is why we also need to look to His Word. **Romans 10:17** says, *“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”* Bible teacher and author, Warren Wiersbe, has said, *“We live by promises not by explanations.”* I like that. Where are God’s promises? In His Word. We won’t remember God’s promises unless we are in His Word.

But there is something else we need to realize. God is under no obligation to explain himself to us and even if He did, many times we wouldn’t be able to understand. God says in **Isaiah 55:** *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways...For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts higher than your thoughts.”* So God doesn’t have to explain Himself to us.

And yet, we need to remember that in those dark times of our lives, just because it doesn’t make sense to you, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t make sense. And just because it doesn’t make sense to you now, doesn’t mean that it won’t make sense later on. But the key is to trust God. The old Puritan, Thomas Watson said, *“Where reason cannot wade, faith must swim.”*

So if you find yourself in darkness and you don’t know what to do, Isaiah says, *“Trust God.”* **“Let him trust the name of the Lord.”** This is the highest pinnacle of faith. Faith doesn’t come when you can see a way clearly, faith comes when you don’t see your way clearly, when you don’t understand, and when it doesn’t make sense. That’s the place Job came to. When he said in **Job 13:15,** *“Though He (God) may slay me, yet will I trust Him.”*

And what’s the sign that you’re looking to the Lord? Obedience. If you trust the Lord, then you will obey Him. That’s the sign that you’re trusting. But do you know what happens? So many people when they get perplexed, they just stop serving God until everything gets all straightened out again. But that’s not trust, that’s not looking to the Lord. Are you praying but things are going wrong? Keep on praying. You say, well, I don’t feel like praying. Well, pray anyway. Pray when you don’t feel like it, and pray until you feel like it, just keep on praying. God doesn’t hear your prayers because of your emotions. Just pray. Are you a giver? Are you a tither? But you have lost your job or retirement. Keep giving. You say I don’t understand. It doesn’t make any difference God tells us to give. You give, just keep on giving.

Have you been praising God, but you say, “Well, I've been praising God but my life is getting worse. What should I do?” I'll tell you, Keep praising! In fact, keep going to church, keep praying, keep obeying, keep giving, keep looking to the Lord. It doesn't make any difference whether it makes sense to you or not, when you're in darkness and you have no light, **“let him trust in the name of the Lord.”** What is the second thing? Not only do we need to look to the Lord – His Example and His Word, but we need to lean on the Lord.

LEAN ON THE LORD

Isaiah says let the one who is in darkness **“trust in the name of the Lord”** and then he says, “and let him, **“Rely on his God.”** Now the Hebrew word, we translate, “rely,” is from the same root word that the Hebrew word, “shepherd's staff” is taken from. Do you remember that wonderful verse from **Psalm 23: “Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou, O Lord, are with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”**

Now, what was a staff? A staff was something that the shepherd leaned on, it supported him. It also allowed him to feel ahead when he was walking near a ledge. Just imagine for a moment a shepherd in a dark valley leaning on his staff to keep him from falling. That's what David had in mind when he said those words in Psalm 23. A staff is something to lean on to give you comfort in a dark valley. So when the Word says **“let him rely on his God”** what it literally means is let him lean upon that God for support. Let him lean upon that God. And God sometimes puts us in darkness that we might learn to lean on Him!

You see God is not in the business of giving us reasons, He is in the business of giving us Himself. Life is not about getting a reason, it's about getting a relationship. God wants to bring us to Himself, and they're times when He will take everything else away from us so that the only thing that we'll have is Him, alone. God doesn't want us to lean on the things of this world, not on some religious dogma, or procedure or formula, not on our family, health or bank account, not on anything or anyone else, but Himself. Why? Because He is ultimately all we've got. Job said it well, **“Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will return.” (Job 1:21).**

So where are you getting your joy from? From the Lord? How do you know you're not getting it from your family? Take away your family and see if you still have that joy. How do you know you're not getting your joy from your business, your wealth, or your health? Take them away. How do you know you're not getting your joy from your reputation and your friends? It may be that you'll never know that Jesus is enough until Jesus is all you have. You see? That's what God did to Job. I mean, God just took it all away. God took away his health. God took away his wealth. God took away his family. God took it away, all of it, and yet, Job still had the Lord and he trusted in the Lord and he said **“Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him.”** and he saw the Lord Jesus through the eyes of faith.

Now sometimes God brings us to the place where he brought Job not only to show us that God is necessary, but that God is enough and we learn to lean on the Lord. You see it's not the why, but it's the Who that counts. It is not a reason, it is a relationship. It is not an explanation, it is the promise. And when we come to the place where the Lord is all that we have left, that's when we truly see Him for who He is. For the darkness may come and the darkness may hide, but it cannot divide. Jesus is there in the darkness standing somewhere in the shadows. And like a shepherd He will lead us out to the other side.

“Who is among you that fears the LORD, that obeys the voice of His servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.” Look to the Lord and lean on Him, it is the only way to overcome the darkness. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!