

THE DARKNESS THAT IS LIGHT

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*(Expanded version of a sermon preached in the Mountain Brook Baptist Church,
Birmingham, Alabama, October 19, 2008.)*

Darkness is one of our most compelling metaphors for the human condition. It depicts that inward confusion when ignorance frustrates our ability to find the way ahead and we cry, “I’m in the dark!” It also describes that sinister environment in which foes lurk to do us harm under the cover of night. Ultimately it comes to denote that doubt and despair we call “the dark night of the soul” separating us from God himself and rendering inaccessible his kingdom of light.

Few experiences plunge us into inward darkness like a life-threatening illness that brings its victim to the brink of death. Psalm 88, for example, perhaps the saddest song in the hymnbook of the Hebrews, recounts what it is like to live on the edge of extinction. Notice how many of its images evoke what it is like to live engulfed in shadows: “at night” (v. 1), “the abyss” (v. 3), “the pit” (v. 4), “the grave” (v. 5), “regions dark and deep” (v. 6), “overwhelmed with waves” (v. 7), “eyes dim with grief” (v. 9). At the climax of this litany of woe, the psalmist anticipates what it will be like to die and inhabit the “darkest shades” of all (v. 10). So gloomy is his mood that he can only ask God questions that he assumes have no answers (vs. 10-12):

Do you work wonders for the dead?

Is your love declared in the grave?

Are your wonders known in the darkness,

or your saving help in the land of oblivion?

Fortunately, these profound musings received brilliant clarification in Psalm 139. There another psalmist tries to imagine if there is any way to flee from God's presence even if he were to make his bed in the abode of the dead (v. 8). All else failing, he finally wonders whether God would abandon him if he wrapped himself only in darkness, if what little light he had left were as black as night (v. 11). After all, why would the Almighty want anything to do with a pitiable creature who had nothing to offer him but misery and woe? Yet it is just here that the key insight emerges: *God is not dismayed by our darkness!* Indeed, it is not even dark to him but is as bright as day. Miracle of miracles, all of the darkness that we ever experience can itself become light when God is with us (v. 12). Paradoxically, it is precisely in our darkness that God's light shines brightly.

Like the psalmist of old, I was recently overtaken by darkness with the diagnosis of a life-threatening disease, the dreaded ALS. Many have joined me in the hope that it might somehow be controlled or even cured but, thus far, it has pursued its relentless course without any hint of miraculous intervention. We are quick to assume that God is with us when an illness is healed but, as the psalmist agonized, where is God when the illness grows worse? Even though God has not given me any good news to share with you regarding the remission of my malady, he has been with me even when bad news covered me like the night. Furthermore, he has been using that darkness to shed light on the meaning and purpose of what is happening to me (Ps. 18:28). So let us look now for his light in my darkness which may help you do the same when the lights seem to go out in your life.

The Sense of Threat

No one could have been more surprised than I to receive the diagnosis of ALS. I had never been seriously ill a day in my life. My wife provided a healthy diet with careful control of

calories, carbohydrates, and caffeine. No alcoholic beverages or tobacco products ever crossed my lips. I was a regular at the fitness center with a rigorous regimen of exercise. I showed up faithfully for an annual physical exam, took all my medications, and practiced preventive medicine. So what had I done to deserve so daunting a diagnosis that afflicts only one in 100,000 persons? Most illnesses can be blamed on an accumulation of bad habits, such as cancer on smoking, heart attacks on high cholesterol, and strokes on hypertension, but what could I blame for ALS?

As a pastor, I had made numerous hospital visits and knew well the many misfortunes that can befall the human body. It was only realistic to assume that one day I would endure my share of these pathologies. But ALS is different, for there is no known cause or cure. No bacteria or viruses invade the body, hence there is no external enemy to combat. Instead, nerve cells mysteriously begin to die, causing the muscles that they once activated to degenerate and die as well. Everybody loses a few neurons as they age, but not on the lethal scale of ALS, which is more like the body deliberately deciding to self-destruct. With my spiritual ancestors, the Hebrews, I had always sought to honor the body as God's good creation, rather than viewing it like the Greeks who, in their language, made a pun comparing the body (*soma*) to a tomb (*sema*) from which the soul is liberated by death. But now I felt threatened by my own body, an experience I had never known before, because it had unilaterally decided to commit suicide for no good reason that medical science can discover.

But God is using my darkness to shine light on the deeper meaning of this threat. I am beginning to realize that death is not accidental but deliberate, not optional but essential, not peripheral but central. After all, everything that lives also dies, whether plant, animal, or human, which must mean that the Creator ordained birth and death to be opposite yet inseparable sides

of the reality we call life. If we pray only for health, then finally none of our prayers will be answered for, as G. B. Shaw remarked, the ultimate statistic is that one out of one dies. Rather than being dismissive of death because we are young and strong, or in dread of death because we are old and weak, or in denial of death because we fear its consequences, the darkness that it brings is tutoring me to realize that death is an inherent and indispensable part of life, that dying is every bit as natural as living, that the grim reaper is not an alien intruder but a necessary scavenger of all that lives on planet earth.

Why, we ask, should our earthly story be bracketed so decisively by the bookends of birth and death? Is it not to remind us that this world is not an end in itself; or, as Paul put it, that “the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18)? God offered humanity a paradise in Eden with a way to avoid death (Gen. 2:17), but we had to learn to overcome pride and jealousy, revenge and violence before we would be ready for it (Gen. 3-4). So God used death to end our earthly journey, thereby defining life as an apprenticeship in how to build a better world after his own heart. By imposing temporal limitations on every life no matter how powerful and entrenched it might be, God enabled each new generation to build upon the past yet go beyond it, freed from tired traditions and their intransigent advocates determined to block progress for as long as they lived.

Let us push this inquiry one step further into that black hole called the problem of evil. ALS, like many other fatal diseases, not only kills its victim, but does so in gruesome fashion. Instead of disabling muscles at random, it attacks groups of muscles, two favorites being those of the throat and chest, leading either to death by strangulation because one cannot swallow or to death by suffocation because one cannot breathe. While medical intervention can mitigate some of these horrors, this is hardly a way to “go gentle into that good night.”¹ I raise the issue of

suffering, not to solicit your pity, but to ask if a cruel streak runs through the heart of God? Sherwin Nuland has described in vivid clinical detail how six of the most common disease categories take us to the grave, and none is a pretty picture.² Death itself is bad enough, so why should its prelude often be so painful? As the childhood prayer puts it, why can't we all just go to sleep some day and die before we wake?

In framing such scenarios, we tend to think of God as an all-powerful and all-loving sovereign who, starting from scratch, could have made us any way he pleased, so why didn't he do a better job in providing for our demise? But the Bible tells us that God began to create, not out of nothing, but out of a chaos with no "form" to give it order, with a "void" called "the deep" as its only foundation, and with a brooding "darkness" as its overarching canopy (Gen. 1:1-2). In creation God was doing the same thing he does in redemption, namely, making the best of a bad mess. That is why he continues to work on his unfinished creation (Jn. 5:17), having made us in his image so that we can partner with him in bringing it to completion (Gen. 1:27-28; Rev. 21:1).

Which is to say that my body is still a work in progress with vestiges of its original chaos lurking here and there that medical science has not yet learned to tame.³ Being created by God no more makes my body perfect than being redeemed by God makes my soul perfect. Meanwhile, God never gives up on what he wants us eventually to become through a long and painful process of physical and spiritual evolution. The cost to God in doing it this way was well expressed by Mimi Wiley in a beautiful letter: "with all my being, I believe God is the saddest of all that His good and faithful servant has to battle ALS but . . . He is there with you every step of the way."

Still we ask insistently, why didn't God just make our bodies perfect from the beginning, since he is perfect, thereby sparing us so much suffering? And the answer from Eden is that, when offered half a chance to be like God, even by a snake, we will break every rule to claim it, then begin blaming others for the vaulting pride that drove us to seize it for ourselves (Gen. 3:1-13). Think of the millions today who pay any price to belong to the cult of the body beautiful. We love to worship our own bodies and, even more, to have others worship them, on which hangs a huge fashion and cosmetics industry. If the Creator were to provide each of us with a perfect body, we would soon make it into an idol to be worshipped, then it would become the source of inordinate pride fostering a sense of superiority over others, finally making us feel that we are gods who can take destiny into our own hands. If it sounds a bit harsh to claim that we would act today just like Adam and Eve did in Eden, consider the strategy of eugenics and holocaust by which Adolf Hitler sought to create a superior Aryan race. God's ways of helping us cope with illness may seem slow and clumsy, but they call from him an unremitting love and from us an undying faith, which are the very responses needed to make us spiritually mature.

The Sense of Loss

I have never embraced the notion of retirement, a modern concept that emerged a century ago after Otto von Bismarck prepared the way for Social Security. I love my work more than leisure and would be miserable devoting myself to playing golf, taking cruises, and watching television. Therefore I had long planned for my senior years to be given to a number of reflective tasks, especially probing deeply and writing broadly about the central insights that have shaped my earthly story. Having spent many years in demanding leadership positions, I had no time for such pursuits when younger, but now I could give myself to this challenge without competing pressures, drawing on such maturity as I had managed to attain in three score

years and ten. The longer I lived, the more ambitious my agenda became and, having always been healthy, I hoped for at least ten or fifteen years to accomplish as much of it as I could. With all my heart I wanted this final chapter of my life to be climactic rather than regressive, a capstone era that would permit me to harvest the best of what had been growing in my soul for a lifetime.

As I launched this culminating phase of my career, every aspect of my work seemed to converge in support of these plans. My role as Research Professor at Samford and as Theologian in Residence at Mountain Brook Baptist provided an ideal balance between academic and religious life. My office associate, after more than a dozen years working together, knew exactly how to provide needed support provisions. At home I was able to utilize the entire third floor of our residence for a study that was the envy of every minister who visited it. The Hull Legacy Project launched jointly by Mountain Brook Baptist and Samford University offered abundant financial resources and skilled editorial services for whatever books I had ready to be published. It is not an exaggeration to say that I possessed the perfect setup for what I wished to accomplish. To this day I cannot think of a single thing that would have made my situation better.

But now, of course, it is all in ruins. Everything I do takes twice as long and leaves me twice as tired. I can seldom work in either of my offices and have had to drastically reduce my involvement in both campus and congregational activities despite the enrichment they afford. I have some 10,000 volumes in my home study but cannot climb the stairs to open any of them. I seldom write a single paragraph, much less an entire page, without needing a source that is beyond my reach. Less than a year ago I made a list of twenty books that I had already worked on sufficiently to consider revising for inclusion in the Hull Legacy Project, whereas now I will

do well to complete one or two of them. Only those who have lived the life of a scholar for many years can appreciate how deep is the darkness that I am here describing.

And yet my frustration over an unfinished agenda is nothing compared to the heartbreak I feel over relationships in danger of being ended. I mention only three, although the list is endless. First are the friends who have engulfed us with their loving care. They have written cards and letters numbering in the hundreds that not only pledge their prayer support but share with eloquent intensity their deepest convictions regarding those eternal realities on which we must ultimately depend. They have brought food to the door so delicious that it would make a gourmet chef envious. They have volunteered, even begged, to do anything day or night that would be of help, no matter how menial. I am simply astonished when I contemplate their incredible capacity for goodness.

Then there are our two children and their spouses who were well into their most productive years when my condition surfaced. Having claimed the best of the legacy that their parents left behind, they were now beginning to move into new areas well beyond anything that we could have offered them. Our grandchildren were reaching the end of a lengthy educational pilgrimage and were about ready to show us what they could do with their fresh approaches and newfound skills. The most interesting era for our extended family lay in the next decade that I was about to be denied.

Nearest and dearest in this circle of devotion is my wonderful wife Wylodine. Unlike some marriages that are allowed to stagnate under the weight of many years, ours has never been richer than now. As she put it, my diagnosis was like a dagger in her heart because we were both eager to spend all of our remaining years together. For more than a quarter-century Wylodine has been going progressively blind from low tension glaucoma, to which she has added a host of

other ailments including heart arrhythmia, bronchiectasis, arthritis, asthma, and diabetes. As my work load decreased and her many maladies increased, I gladly took on more household chores to accommodate her frailties. But now our roles have been reversed and suddenly she has been forced to become the primary caregiver. John Claypool used to joke that Wylodine would surely make it to heaven if she didn't overshoot the place. Never was that more true than now when, by the constancy of her devotion, she has shown me a love that surpasses even my highest notions of heaven.

The upshot is that I had approached this stage of my life with the best agenda I could conceive, the best resources I could assemble, and the best relationships I could form to help me accomplish it. Then ALS struck and said, I'm going to take it *all* away from you! Living with that overwhelming sense of loss is about as dark as it ever gets this side of hell. How could God possibly shed any light in that total eclipse of my hopes and dreams? He did it in two stages. The first was negative, clearing my thoughts of false assumptions. The second was positive, giving a whole new perspective on what was happening to me.

Negatively, I began to probe whether my problem was that the world was too much with me. Why grieve over giving up what it has to offer if I were about to inherit a better world in its place? Would not heaven provide an eternity to complete the agenda that I could not finish here on earth? Family and friends might not join me for awhile, but think of the great host of departed loved ones with whom I would already be reunited. Could I not just turn my back on this world of suffering and death in favor of that world of perpetual bliss described so luridly in the "Left Behind" series? Such an approach has doubtless offered solace to countless millions of believers, but it did not satisfy me. Heaven and earth are both God's domain, thus I could not set

them in competition with each other by creating an otherworldly religion of escapism. Somehow I needed to affirm my commitment both to this world and to the world to come.

Positively, I was able to resolve that dilemma by taking a closer look at the multitude of tender mercies being showered on me by so many. We live in a culture of cutthroat competition where winning is everything, whether it be the slash-and-burn rhetoric of the current presidential campaign, the compulsive greed that has brought Wall Street to its knees even as it grovels for the spoils of its own profligacy, or the bone-crushing mayhem of the latest football game. By contrast, every response to my plight has been characterized by loving concern, by a desire to help rather than hurt, by a willingness to give generously with no thought of reward. Instead of being avoided or even exploited because I am now vulnerable, I have been respected and valued as a child of God. On every hand I am the beneficiary of a win/win approach to life rather than the victim of a win/lose approach to life in which the victor takes all.

Once I grasped the stark contrast between these two lifestyles, the light began to dawn. Each Sunday we gather here to pray that the eternal realities of God be established “*on earth* as in heaven” (Mt. 6:10) and I have seen that prayer being answered in the lives of countless people I can call by name. For them, heaven and earth are not separate and competitive but are connected and made compatible every time they pray in the spirit of him who is Lord of both worlds. I have spent my ministry trying to convince people that Christ can bring heaven to earth, and now I am being repaid thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold as that happens (Mk. 4:8). My future is not uncertain, for I have already anticipated it in the here and now. When I learned that my days were numbered, I had no desire to binge-and-splurge on passing fancies that will perish with me. Instead, I want to claim that love of God that outlasts everything (1 Cor. 13:8), including death and life itself (Rom. 8:38). I am neither clinging to earth nor fleeing to heaven,

but am seeking to be God's partner in building both a new heaven and a new earth to replace the first heaven and the first earth that are passing away (Rev. 21:1).

The Sense of Hope

The ultimate issue, therefore, is whether we inhabit one world or two. Beyond all the kingdoms of the Caesars is there a kingdom of God? Is there a realm both of the natural and of the supernatural? Of the physical and of the spiritual? Of the temporal and of the eternal? Of the seen and of the unseen? When we pray, are we actually talking to someone other than ourselves? Whence cometh those whispers of conscience that prompt us to view some things as good and others as evil? Why do strange iconoclasts called prophets risk rejection and even martyrdom to demand a more just social order? Why are so many people incurably religious even when others are completely indifferent or downright hostile?

At present, the notion of two worlds is under fierce attack in the name of secularism, naturalism, and empiricism. Launching the charge in the nineteenth century were Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, all of whom viewed religious claims as wishful projections of the human imagination. Now we have the "new atheists" such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris with their aggressive efforts to ridicule the consistent witness of Scripture and the church for more than three thousand years. Even more serious is the contention of cognitive neuroscientists that we are hard-wired by evolution to think and act as we do. Brain-imaging studies are being used to locate the source of moral and spiritual values in genetics rather than in God. Underlying this sophisticated electroencephalography is a militant materialism, a conviction that everything arises from atoms, that neural firings shape behavior, that there is no such thing as a soul.⁴

What shall we say to this ultimate skepticism regarding a second world? The problem is that if religion is merely an expedient of our own invention, why is it so fiercely resisted? Why murder a long succession of prophets if all they did was tell us to obey our DNA (Mt. 23:34-35)? Which brings us straight to the utterly crucial issue of Jesus. For here was a person who lived simultaneously in two worlds every day of his ministry. He could take the most commonplace experiences of earth and, in a parable, show their affinity with the kingdom of God. For him that heavenly realm was “at hand” (Mk. 1:15), pressing into the most obscure corners of life yet not fully present in all its power. Because the two domains overlapped, as it were, he lived in earth’s present but out of God’s future and called his followers to do the same. Yet for what scientists might call an explosion of altruism all he got was a criminal’s death by a frenzied mob.

And so the choice is clear. If there are not two worlds, then Jesus was wrong in his most basic assumptions about spiritual reality as the modern skeptics allege. While pondering that issue, I attended the funeral of a friend at which the congregation was asked to sing “God Be With You” while the family departed the sanctuary. As the refrain repeated the phrase “Till we meet at Jesus’ feet,” I at first wondered if the song were hopelessly out of date in a day when we are so deep into autonomy and equality that we never think of sitting at anybody’s feet. But as I gradually gave myself to the message of the text, I realized that I know a great deal about what it would be like to sit at Darwin’s feet to discuss natural selection, or at Marx’s feet to discuss dialectical materialism, or at Nietzsche’s feet to discuss the will to power, or at Freud’s feet to discuss the ego and super-ego. By the time the song ended, I concluded that I would rather spend eternity at Jesus’ feet than with any of these other choices offered me in this life.

To express a preference, however, is not to prove a case. I can no more prove that there really are two worlds than the sociobiologists and neuroscientists can prove that there is only

one. So let me speak to the skeptics who cannot help but wonder whether Jesus might have been wrong. Measured by the unconditional love that he showed us how to share, by the community of radical grace and unlimited forgiveness that he called us to enter, and by the nationalistic passions feeding our global bloodbaths that he taught us to transcend, I would rather be wrong with Jesus than right with those who offer only a mechanistic and materialistic understanding of what it means to be human.

The scientists who go looking for meaning under a microscope do extremely valuable work that I fully appreciate. But their method, by its nature, is blind and deaf to spiritual reality, which is why they never write a Hallelujah Chorus or build a cathedral or get themselves crucified trying to tame the human heart. As George Steiner put it, “if one is at liberty to choose one’s company, that of the believers is of overwhelming distinction. To discard it . . . is to leave the greater part of our civilization vacant.”⁵ Which is to say that I am willing to bet that eternity will be like the heaven-come-to-earth that Christ has given you to share with me as I face that great Tomorrow.

NOTES

1. Adapted from Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas, 1934-1952*, (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1971), 128.

2. Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

3. The word for “darkness” used four times in Psalm 139:11-12 is elsewhere associated with the forces of chaos and death (Job 12:22; 17:12-13; Ps. 23:4, and especially Ps. 88:6, 12, 18).

4. A remarkably prescient introduction to the spiritual implications of this neuroscience as anticipated in E. O. Wilson’s work on Sociobiology is Tom Wolfe, “Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died,” *Forbes*. December 2, 1996, 210-223.

5. George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 181.