

The Dark Night of Faith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 September 2010

Preacher: Alex Cowie

[0 : 0 0] I wonder if when John Bunyan was writing Pilgrim's Progress whether you remember the place where Apollyon attacked Christian and slammed him down, whether he got his ideas from this psalm.

We are going to turn now to Isaiah 50, the passage we read from, and we will focus our thoughts on verses 10 and 11.

Who among you fears the Lord? Who obeys the voice of his servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God.

Look all you who kindle a fire, who encircle yourselves with sparks. Walk in the light of your fire and in the sparks you have kindled. This you shall have from my hand. You shall lie down in torment.

I want us to think about this subject, an important subject it is to us, and that is the dark night of faith.

[1 : 1 7] The dark night of faith. You can see from the beginning of this passage where the prophet poses the questions. He defines those and we look at that.

Who among you fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of his servant. Then he says, who walks in darkness and has no light. That's clearly a burning issue in this context.

The dark night of faith. Now what I want to do here by way of illustration to start with is just to remind you that things are not always as they seem.

And when in our experience we feel very much in the grip of a dark night of faith and we have no clarity on where we are with the Lord and indeed where we are in our own experience.

It doesn't follow that things from God's perspective are the way we think they are. And you can see that I suppose that most of us here have been up in a passenger plane.

[2 : 2 9] We've flown within the UK or beyond. And you know yourself that if it's a cloudy day when you take off, it often is in Glasgow isn't it, and you fly and once you get up there above the clouds, everything's different.

Everything's clear and bright. Or if you've been, as I certainly have been, caught walking a distance away from home and suddenly the fog has come down.

And it's come down really thick. And you can't see very far at all. It's not a pleasant thing. And stories are told and are known by us of people who got caught out in a thick fog and they were for a time lost.

They lost their way. Because they simply couldn't see. They lost. They were disoriented. But you see, apart from the fact of the clouds and the fact of the thick fog, nothing else has really changed.

Everything else is there. Just, it's not apparent. It's only when you go through the clouds you see what it's like up above them. Or in the fog. If the fog would suddenly vanish, you would see everything is as it was.

- [3 : 46] The dark night of faith is not unlike that. It was William Cowper, wasn't it, who had that experience when he felt that he had had enough.
- And he went away to take his own life. So depressed was he. Do you remember how in the fog he eventually returned home?
- And he penned those wonderful and well-known words. God moves in a mysterious way. His wonders to perform. And he tells us how that God is not to be judged simply by feeble sense.
- But we are to trust him in his grace. Because behind a frowning, we might say a cloudy providence, he hides a smiling face.
- But the problem for those to whom Isaiah spoke and succeeding generations of the Lord's people is that we don't easily see things the way the Lord sees them and the way the Lord would have us see them.
- [5 : 04] And so we want just to ponder this passage, the dark night of faith, and learn something from it for our good. Let's consider first then, the believer's character.
- Because I think that is brought out in the first two questions in verse 10. Who among you fears the Lord? That's the first thing.
- Second thing is, who obeys the voice of his servant? And clearly our starting point, therefore, in considering the believer's character must be that he fears the Lord.
- This is in fact a favourite Old Testament expression that tells us about those in whom the Lord was at work.
- They feared the Lord. It's a turn of phrase that occurs again and again. It's in the Psalms. It's all through the Old Testament. The fearers of God, those who fear the Lord.
- [6 : 10] And it refers to an attitude of heart and mind, which holds God in great esteem. We revere the Lord.
- We humbly submit ourselves to him. This has nothing to do with that dread of God. The fear of him as an ogre-like figure who would smash us to pieces.
- It's nothing to do with that. It's not the fear of the coward who dreads the prospect of being caught. He knows that if there's a God in heaven, he's found out, but one day he's going to pay.
- It's not that slavish dread. That fear. That cringing fear. That cowering fear. No, rather it is the fear that's born out of the love of God.
- The love that God puts in the heart of his people. And it's the fear that's born out of love for God. As our saviour and friend.
- [7 : 19] And even in the distant days of Isaiah, those who feared the Lord were like that. They had a sense of belonging to him. Of being his own.
- And so he begins by asking the question, who among you fears the Lord? They are characterized by this kind of attitude to the Lord in heart and mind.
- It's the fear that moves us to regard him highly. And to be careful lest we needlessly and thoughtlessly and selfishly offend him.
- It's the fear that moves us to depart from evil. Some of us learned that when we were children.
- The fear of the Lord makes people depart from evil. It's that kind of fear. We hold him in high esteem.
- [8 : 22] We are concerned lest we carelessly offend him. This fear guards the believer, therefore, from fearing the worst.

And from sinking away from God altogether. We were singing in that psalm that he was concerned lest the enemy, the arch enemy of our souls, would at last prevail against him.

Providence was dictating that things were going really seriously wrong. And he was afraid lest at last the enemy of his soul, that old serpent, the devil, and his minions, would gain the upper hand.

Then would my enemy declare, at last I've laid him low. So he was afraid of that. But in his heart he feared God.

And he was guarded from fearing that he would at last utterly fall away. And therefore if we fear him like this, let us be glad about it.

[9 : 36] Let us rejoice in it. Though we may feel that we are in a season of darkness, as we shall see shortly. And if we are not in that position, and if we are fearful about this, then let us call upon him with confidence to give us that fear that is described here.

Who among you then fears the Lord? This is a characteristic of the Lord's people. The second thing we notice is he obeys the voice of his servant.

And this is a very interesting term of phrase. In fact, it's a sermon in itself, because the servant of the Lord in Isaiah is a big subject, and it has reference to Jesus.

Of course, prophetically, it was talking about him. But it is undeniable when you take all the references that are to this great servant.

This servant who is to be obeyed. And you see, the turn of phrase, the voice of his servant, has reference to someone who is equal with God, and yet distinct.

[11 : 03] He is the servant. There is dignity attaching to the turn of phrase. Who obeys the voice of his servant? Now, in Isaiah, we're just touching on this, really.

But in Isaiah, the servant is spoken about in very august terms. Isaiah 42, Behold my servant, my elect, in whom my soul delights.

I have put my spirit upon him. And so on. And clearly, the reference is to the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. And he is contrasted with Israel.

He is the true Israel. He accomplishes what Israel, the people, failed to do. He is a great servant. In Isaiah 49, he is referred to as the chosen one, the true Israel, to bring back Israel and Jacob to the Lord.

So he is seen as a true Israel. And he is so superior to the nation. And indeed will bring the nation back to the Lord.

[12 : 21] Isaiah 52, 13, Behold my servant, he shall deal prudently. He shall be exalted and extolled and so on.

The great servant of the Lord. And you see, what is looked at here, as to the character of those who are the Lord's, is, one, yes, we've seen it, they fear the Lord.

Two, they obey the voice of his servant. And, in New Testament language, we obey Jesus. You remember what the Father said from the excellent glory from the cloud at the top of the holy mount, whether it's Tabar or Hermon or somewhere else, Merion.

He said, this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Go on listening to him, to listen to obey him.

And to obey the voice of the servant is simply to obey Jesus. To put him and his kingdom first in our lives. To deny ourselves for his sake.

[13 : 36] And to do things his way, even when it's difficult for us to do that. And as we shall see, we can be in the dark night of faith, and still be characterized, as those who fear the Lord, and those who obey, the voice of Jesus, in the word.

The second thing I want us to look at then, is the believers seasoned of darkness. We'll elaborate on that, we'll explain that in a few moments.

He walks in darkness, and has no light. Now there are one or two things we've got to deal with, before we get into this, and just briefly to deal with them.

Some have referred this, to unbelieving people. They walk in darkness, they know not the truth, and so on. They're children of darkness, and not of the light.

Now it is true, of course, that the Bible describes those, who have not the faith, in the Lord Jesus Christ, as in darkness. They walk in darkness, they don't have light, on the way.

[14 : 55] These things are true. But in this context, that's not what the prophet, is dealing with. He's dealing with those, as we've seen, who are characterized, by the fear of the Lord, and obedience, to the servant, to Jesus.

And so we must put that to the side. The context doesn't allow us, to lean to dwell, on the ungodly, at this point. Another take, that we need to put aside, is the emphasis, on the Lord's people, being children of the light, and of the day.

Therefore, they couldn't be in darkness. They've been brought, out of darkness, into the marvelous light, of Christ. Christ. Now, that, too, is true.

But, it's not, taking away, from the issue, that, Isaiah is dealing, with here. Of course, it's true, that the Lord's people, have been brought, out of darkness, into the marvelous light, of Christ.

They are, children of light, and of the day, and not of the darkness, and the night. We know these things. But that doesn't, prevent us, you see, from, saying, that believers, in the Lord Jesus Christ, enter into seasons, of darkness, in their experience.

[16 : 22] That's the point. They do. And not only, is that true, since, the days of, the apostles, and so on.

It was true, in the past. It was true, of, even of the father, of believers. Abraham, you remember, is called the father, I will make you a father, of many nations. That is, of believers, from many nations.

And Abraham, himself, when he, was, confronted by God, who came to him, who appeared to him, and who was there, to encourage him.

At that time, Abraham fell, into, an experience, of, of deep darkness, and horror. You find the reference, in Genesis 15, verse 12.

God was actually, confirming the covenant, to Abraham. And just, at that time, or perhaps, immediately after it, Abraham fell, into a deep, darkness, a horror.

[17 : 28] He was, extremely distressed. You might say, when he, he ought to have, been lifted up. We haven't, time to develop this, but it can be shown, that, often, the Lord's people, after times, of, of real, spiritual, blessing, and nearness, to the Lord, suddenly, they go into, a dark experience.

If you go back, earlier, than, than, Abraham himself, you can, see that, in the life, of Job, who, was most, sorely tried.

Job himself, talks about, God has made me, to dwell in darkness, and not in light. Perhaps, one of the most, gloomy Psalms, in the whole, of the Psalter, is Psalm 88.

And the writer there, talks in the same language, a believer, writing by the Holy Spirit, and he talks, about his experience, of darkness, you, talking to the Lord, you, have laid me, in darkness, and in the depths.

Point making here is, there are seasons, of darkness, that come upon believers, in their experience. Jeremiah, writing in Lamentations, chapter 3, and at the beginning, of the chapter, says this, God has led me, and made me, to walk, in darkness, and not, in light.

- [19 : 10] Lamentations, 3 and verse 2. Now, we could, of course, develop this, in the New Testament, as well, but time is going on, and suffice to say, that Paul himself, who was, probably one, of the most, tried, of believers, though he was, a gifted apostle.
- He talks in, 2nd Corinthians 4, about his experience, talks about it, later on too, but, but, but in, in 2nd Corinthians 4, he says, seeing we have this ministry, we don't lose heart.
- But then he says this, we, he says, he talks about himself as, about cast down, but not forsaken. Cast down, was no mere, superficial experience.
- He talks about, despairing, but not in utter despair. The English version, is a wee bit soft on it. Despairing, but not in utter despair.
- The point again, we're making is, that, that believers, in the Lord Jesus Christ, those who fear the Lord, and who obey, the voice of Jesus, in the word, friends, they can, enter into the dark night, of faith.
- [20 : 32] John Calvin, commenting on this, subject, says that, this is a condition, of, misery, and adversity, in the afflictions, by which, the children of God, are almost, overwhelmed.
- Christian biography, is writ large, with many, such experiences. And, I think, it's true to say, that, contemporary, Christian experience, will, abundantly, back that up.
- Christian, can become, so despondent, for all, sorts of reasons, because, they have been, brought into, the dark night, of faith. Their expectations, may be, contradicted, or appear, to be contradicted, by divine providence.
- Things, haven't worked out, the way we hoped. It's true, in Christian service, generally, it's true, in ministerial service, true, in missionary service.
- It's true, today, that, there are many, missionaries, in many parts, of the world, who, have, decided, enough, enough.
- [22 : 01] They're, bailing out, they're, leaving it, because, of the, difficult nature, of the way, of the darkness, and discouragement, or perhaps, of years, of walking, in darkness.
- And, they've, given up. The, dark night, of faith, has, for a time, deflected, them, from, obeying, the voice, of the servant.
- We have, our visitor, in the reverend, Ken Cameron, and he'll not mind, me referring to him, but, he was, a missionary, for years, in South Africa, and he, to me, he stands out, as one of those, together, with his wife, Joan, who, abundantly, testify, to the very opposite, to the ability, to keep going, and to serve, faithfully, but, there are, too many, today, sadly, who simply, give up.
- The dark night, of faith, for them, has proved, too much. That doesn't mean, they've abandoned, the faith. It doesn't mean, that, God won't, bring them, to see, things his way.
- It means, that for a time, the, the, the feeling, that providence, is, is against them, has been, too much, to be. You can see it, if you reflect, on church life, in Scotland, today.
- [23 : 35] You can see it, if you reflect, on, those, who have labored, and given, stalwart service, in, in Sunday school work, in youth work, in outreach, to, to, to, people generally, to, other faith communities, people, whose, experience, has proved, really difficult, and the dark night, of faith, has endured, for, not months, but years.
- And, they've perhaps felt, the solution, is simply, to leave it. The point, we're making, in all this, is a dark night, of faith, is real, and real, in Christian experience.
- But, we need, to consider, God's solution, to coping, with this. Yes, indeed, to triumphing, in the dark night, of faith.

We need, to learn, or to relearn, what God, is like. I remember, years ago, coming across, actually, I was reading, something, written by, George Philip, but, I came across, the words of a hymn, and, they stuck with me, and, they're interesting, and relevant here, workman of God, lose not heart, but learn, what God is like, and in the darkest, battlefield, thou shalt, know where, to strike.

And, you see, the darkest, battlefield, can be within, ourselves. And, we need, to, to, look, at God's solution, and it's not, losing heart, but, strengthening, ourselves, in the Lord.

[25 : 30] And, our last point, therefore, is, his best course, in its, dark night. In a word, we begin, by saying, don't try, doubters, dire course.

Look at it, all you, who kindle a fire. Look, verse 11, or consider, all you, who kindle a fire, who encircle yourselves, with sparks, walk in the light, of the fire, and the sparks, you have kindled, and this, you shall have, from my hands, says the Lord.

You shall lie down, in torment, not in peace, but you'll be, tormented. So, we're not, to try, doubters, dire course.

Those, who seek, solutions, to their, difficulties, and darkness, of soul, by merely, human devices. They resort, to things, that are, in themselves, of, doubtful, integrity.

They resort, to things, that, are not, straight, and straight forward, they're not, of faith. And, that the Lord's people, can do this, there's an abundance, of evidence.

[26 : 53] But, this is not, the way forward. You see, he says to them, if you do this, if you kindle a fire, if you encircle, yourselves, the sparks, you use, the methods, you use, are not, God, honoring, then, you'll have, no rest, about it.

The result, will be, torment, in your experience, not peace. Now, I know, very well, that, there are, those expositors, who apply this, to the unconverted.

And, doubtless, it can be applied, in a general sense, to the unconverted. But, here again, this is not, the context. It's, that, the godly, sometimes, resort, to, to doubtful, and questionable, means, to relieve themselves, of this darkness, in their experience.

That's what we're on about. And, if I can go back, for a moment, to, to the father of believers, to Abraham, he did that himself. I know, and you know too, there are many arguments, to suggest, that when, Abraham said to Sarah, say to Pharaoh, and to his officials, you're my sister.

There are many, who have tried to argue, that that was true, genuine, no lie. But, the truth of the matter is, it was, a deceitful, way of behaving.

[28 : 26] Abraham resorted, to it again, with Abimelech, when he got up, into Canaan. Same thing, went back, to his old, devices.

He didn't rely, on the Lord. He said, there's no fear of God, in this place, therefore, I'm going to do this. Not, good, policy.

You see it, in the life of Elijah. He triumphed, on Mount Carmel, against, the whole nation, and against, the nation's religion, sadly then.

Be a listen. He triumphed, wonderfully over them. God honoured them. Ha! Then Jezebel said, tell him, I'm going to have his head.

I'll kill him. And what did Elijah do? Elijah legged it. He got as far away, from Jezebel, and everything in the land, he went away, down to the south, to the Negev, to die.

[29 : 36] I've had enough. I want to die. And you see, the point here is, this is what the prophet, is on about. This is what Isaiah, is on about. It is, encircling ourselves, with sparks, making fires, to protect ourselves, using, what we think, is ingenious device, to protect ourselves, to relieve our darkness, and distress.

There's doubt there, there's doubt there, you see. The thought is there, that some of the Lord, can't really do anything, at this point.

He hasn't the capacity, to act this quickly, and decisively, to help. You see it, in Simon Peter's experience. Actually, he was literally, at a fire, warming himself, in the courtyard, of, of the high priest, on the night, in which Jesus, was betrayed, and, and he was there, among the servants, and the soldiers, and somebody said, you're one of his, you're one of Jesus.

I don't know, what you're saying. What else, can I do? I've got to resort, to encircling myself, with fires, that will protect me. I've got to use, my own devices.

Don't know, what you're saying. And three times, he disowned, his Lord. I don't know the man.

[31 : 12] The point here is, that we can, in our doubts, and our feelings of darkness, we can, resort so easily, to methods, that are unbecoming, and unholy.

And therefore, we finish, with the best course, for the believer. It's there, in front of us, and it's there, back in verse 10. Let him trust, in the name, of the Lord, and rely, upon his God.

We're to trust, in the name, of the Lord. Now, we haven't time, today, to look at this, but the expression, the name, of the Lord, is, an expression, that applies, to the servant, of the Lord, to Jesus.

God, God put his name, in him. And he is all, that that name means. That is a revelation, of scripture, that pleased the Father, that in him, all the fullness, should dwell.

And therefore, when we are despondent, in heart, and we feel, perhaps, drained, either physically, or emotionally, or both, when we feel, exhausted, or perhaps, clinically depressed, we will not, easily trust, in the name, of the Lord.

[32 : 46] We will, the more easily, try to resolve, our difficulties, our own way. But we need, to remind ourselves, friends, that his word, can meet us, where we are.

His word, can not only, come as power, to us, but empowering, to us. It can lift us up. It is a word, that heals.

The old, turn of phrase, we are inclined now, to talk about the Lord, as Yahweh, but the old way, was Jehovah. And he is, Jehovah, Ophekah, the Lord who heals.

I am the Lord, who heals. That's Jesus. Jesus. They marveled, at his power. To heal. And in the first place, he heals, our spiritual maladies.

The things, that are wrong, within us. And where it is, as well, our physical, diseases. He is, Jehovah, Jehovah, Jehovah, the Lord, who sees to it, who provides.

[33 : 55] That's his name. He is, Jehovah, Roy, the Lord, our shepherd. shepherd. And his shepherd care, is assured.

If we but trust him, you see, let him trust, in the name, of the Lord. That's Jesus. He is, Jehovah, Nisi.

The Lord, my banner. His banner, over me, is love. The wee chorus says, isn't it? And it's a banner, that is, as it were, written on with lamb, with the blood, of the everlasting covenant.

And that makes him, Jehovah, Shalom, the Lord is peace. See, what we're doing here, is we're taking all these great names, and we're bringing them together, in the name, above every name, the Lord, Jesus Christ.

And when, therefore, we walk in darkness, in our experience, and we feel, we have no light, let us remember, the name, that is a high tower, a secure place, a place, where we find, healing, and help, provision, a place, where we find, a reminder, to us, of his lamb, a place, where we will have, peace.

[35 : 35] And when we are afflicted, and when the accuser, comes, and pour scorn, on our poor, and feeble faith, let us use, his name.

It's a wonderful passage, in Zechariah 3, with which we finish. Joshua, the son of Josedep, represents, represents the people of God, and he's standing, before the Lord, and beside the Lord, is the son of God, the messenger, of the covenant.

And beside Joshua, is standing Satan, to accuse him. And the messenger, says, the Lord, rebuke you, Satan.

is not this, a brand snatched, from the burning? We have in him, one who is worthy, of trusting, even when we walk, in darkness, for a season, and have little, or no light.

May he speak, to us, his peace, and assure us, that we will have light, on the way from him. Let us trust, in the name of the Lord, and rely upon him, our God.

[37 : 06] Amen.