

The Dark Night of Faith

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[0 : 00] I wonder if when John Bunyan was writing Pilgrim's Progress whether you remember the place where Apollyon attacked Christian and slammed him down.

! Let's read the notes 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 : 18] 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 is 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, 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.

[2 : 48] 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.

And 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 above them. Or in the fog, if the fog would suddenly vanish, you would see everything is as it was.

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.

[4 : 05] 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.

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?

[5 : 36] A clear 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. 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 has nothing to do with that. It's not the fear of the coward who dreads the prospect of being caught.

[6 : 48] 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. 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.

[7 : 51] 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. 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.

[8 : 53] 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.

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, then, and if we are fearful about this, then let us call upon him with confidence to give us that fear that is described here.

[10 : 03] 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 turn 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 voice of his servant has reference to someone who is equal with God and yet distinct.

He is the servant. There is dignity attaching to the turn of phrase. Who obeys the voice of his servant? Now, in Isaiah, we are just touching on this really.

[11 : 18] 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 the 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 have 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.

[13:32] To deny ourselves for his sake. 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.

[14:33] They walk in darkness. They know not the truth. And so on. They are 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. These things are true. But in this context, that's not what the prophet is dealing with.

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

[15:50] 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.

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 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.

[17:03] At that time, Abraham fell into an experience 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.

He was extremely distressed. You might say when 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 real spiritual blessing and nearness to the Lord, suddenly they go into a dark experience.

If you go back earlier 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 Psalter is Psalm 88.

[18:21] 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.

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 2 Corinthians 4 about his experience.

He talks about it later on too. But, in 2 Corinthians 4, he says, seeing we have this ministry, we don't lose heart.

[19:47] But then he says this, 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. 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.

[21:17] 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. It's true in missionary service.

It's true today that there are many missionaries in many parts of the world who have decided enough is enough.

They are bailing out. They are 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 have given up. They have given up. The dark night of faith has for a time deflected them from obeying the voice of the servant.

[22:32] 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 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 feeling that providence is against them has been too much to be.

You can see it if you reflect on church life in Scotland today. You can see it if you reflect on those who have labored and given stalwart service in Sunday school work, in youth work, in outreach 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.

[24:04] And they've perhaps felt the solution is simply to leave it. The point we're making in all this is the 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 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.

[26 : 38] They resort to things that are not straight and straightforward. They're not of faith. And that the Lord's people can do this, there's an abundance of evidence.

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 with sparks.

In other words, if 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 doubtful and questionable means to relieve themselves of this darkness in their experience.

[27 : 51] That's what we're on about. And if I can go back for a moment 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.

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. Elijah. He triumphed on Mount Carmel against the whole nation and against the nation's religion sadly then.

[29 : 03] Be a listen. He triumphed wonderfully over them. God honoured him. 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. 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 an ingenious device to protect ourselves.

To relieve our darkness and distress. There's doubt there you see. The thought is there that some of the Lord can't really do anything at this point.

[30 : 14] 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 the high priest. On the night in which Jesus was betrayed.

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 them. The point here is that we can. In our doubts.

[31 : 16] 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 put his name in him. And he is all. That that name means. That is a revelation of scripture.

[32 : 18] It 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. We will the more easily. Try to resolve our difficulties. Our own way. But we need to remind ourselves.

Ourself 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. That heals. That heals. The old. Turn of phrase. We are inclined now. To talk about the Lord.

[33 : 19] As Yahweh. But the old way. Was Jehovah. And he is Jehovah. Jehovah. Of Phekah. The Lord who heals. I am the Lord who heals. That is Jesus. They marveled at his power.

To heal. To heal. And in the first place. Our spiritual maladies. The things. That are wrong. Within us.

And where it is. Our physical. Diseases. He is Jehovah. Jehovah. The Lord. Who sees to it. Who provides.

That is his name. He is Jehovah. The Lord. Our shepherd. Our shepherd. Our shepherd. Our shepherd.

Our shepherd. And his shepherd. Care is assured. If we but trust him. You see. Let him trust. In the name. Of the Lord. That is Jesus.

[34 : 16] He is Jehovah. Nisi. The Lord. My banner. His banner. Over me. Is love. The wee chorus.

Isn't it? The name. The name. And it's a banner. That is. 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. 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.

[35 : 17] A place where we find. Healing. And help. Provision. Provision. A place where we find. A reminder to us.

Of his lamb. A place where we will have. Peace. And when we are afflicted. And when the accuser comes.

And pours scorn. On our poor and feeble faith. Let us use his name. Of his name. Of his name. Of his name. Of his name.

Of his name. Of his name. Of his name. Of his name. Of his name. Of his name. Of his name. Of his name.

Of his name. Of his name. Of his name. And the messenger says, The Lord rebuke you, Satan.

[36 : 24] 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. Amen.