

Getting Used to the Dark

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School of Prayer

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I stumbled into the dimly lit dungeon, fell over a chair and mumbled that I needed a flashlight to read the menu. When the food came I ate it by faith and not by sight. Gradually, however, I began to make out objects a little more distinctly. You know how it is if you sit a while in a dark room. And my friend remarked, “Funny, isn’t it, how you get used to the dark.”

And I said, “You have given me a new sermon subject, getting used to the dark.”

For one thing, we are living in the dark. We are living in the closing chapter of an age dominated by the prince and powers of darkness. And men do love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. The night is far spent and the blackness is more extensive and more intensive and more excessive as it deepens just before he dawn.

Mammoth Cave is not limited to Kentucky. It is universal today. We are all in it. Strangely enough we never had more artificial illumination, never had less light than we have tonight.

[?] walks around in unprecedented brilliance, but his soul dwells in unmitigated darkness. He can release nuclear glory that out dazzles the sun, but he has gotten so far with his head that his heart has been out distanced. And with his head he plans his own destruction. He can put satellites in the sky, but left to himself he is a wandering star for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.

The depths of present day human depravity are too vile for any word in our language to describe. We are not seeing ordinary moral corruption these days. These terrible things you are reading about in the paper, this is not ordinary meanness. We have always had that. We are seeing a double distilled and compounded demonism in weird and uncanny combinations and concoctions of iniquity that were never heard of a generation ago. And this putrefaction of the carcass of civilization waiting for the vultures of judgment is not peculiar to skid row. It shows up in the top brackets of society.

There are plenty of prodigals today living morally among the swine although garbed in purple and fine linen. Bishop Kilgow of the Methodist Church used to say, “There is no difference, in reality, between the idle rich and the idle poor. The crowds who loaf in gorgeous hotels and the crowds who tramp the land in rags, no difference except in the cost of their wardrobes and the price of their meals.”

The Scriptures speak of gross darkness. Well, the English language is a little tricky sometimes. Gross can mean 12 dozen. It can mean intense, concentrated darkness. We had a country preacher in my part of the country who said, "Gross darkness is 144 times darker than ordinary darkness."

Man lives in concentrated night and even his nuclear flashlight can't pierce it.

In the second place, not only do we live in the dark, but we get used to it. Christians get used to it. I want to warn you tonight the best way I know how of a slow and subtle and sinister brainwashing process that is gradually desensitizing all of us to evil.

You are not aware of it. That is the trouble. Little by little sin is made to appear less sinful until the light within us becomes darkness and how great is that darkness. Our magazines are loaded with sordid crimes, the newsstands with corruption and we are engulfed in a tidal wave of pornographic filth. Television has put us in the dark more ways than one with Sodom and Gomorrah in the living room. We get used to it. We get acclimated to it. We accept it as a matter of course, its language and its art and its literature and its music. We learn to live in it without an inner protest anymore. We don't hate evil. We don't abhor that which is evil. We don't abstain from the very appearance of evil. We get used to the dark.

You remember Lot. He was a righteous man and you never would have known it if it hadn't been for the New Testament. But he moved into Sodom, lived in it, became a city councilman. I know that his righteous soul was vexed from day to day with their unlawful deeds,¹ but he lost his influence with his family and had to flee for his life, died in disgrace.

I have met a lot of Lots in the last few years and it was in the days of Lot so shall it be and so it is.²

And they tell us now even in some evangelical circles that we ought to hobnob with Sodom and get chummy with Gomorrah in order to convert them. And the argument is that old one that the end justifies the means forgetting that the means determines the end. A few years in unworthy means you have already spoiled the objective before you get to it.

And these dear people are not turning the light on in Sodom. They are just getting used to the dark.

I heard of an Irishman who came over here and stayed a year and then his wife came over to join him and after a few days she said, "Don't they talk funny over here?"

He said, "You ought to have heard them a year ago when I came over."

¹ See 2 Peter 2:8

² See Luke 17:28

Do you see what I mean? We were talking just as funny as ever, but he was used to it.

Now the worst of all is this, that we get to where we think it is getting brighter just as if you sit in a dark room long enough you think it is brighter. Men may dwell so long in darkness that they think the day is dawning. I believe that is what some people call the birth pangs of a new age are just the dying gasps of this one.

Scientists perform many wonders. We have split the atom, gone to the moon, but the scene is not getting brighter. We are just getting used to the dark. We call it broad mindedness, tolerance, peaceful coexistence it really is with evil. And in an effort to establish communion between light and darkness this process reaches out in all directions even in evangelical Christianity. It is possible to fraternize with unbelievers until false doctrine becomes less and less objectionable, until we come to terms with it and incorporate it, eventually, into the fellowship of truth.

Some begin by opening the doors to borderline sects and cults who believe almost like we do. And then others want to make a crazy quilt out of all the religions. They call it a syncretism. That's just a high falooting word for has. I never eat hash away from home because I don't know what it is made of and I never eat it at home because I do know what it is made of.

And these theological shifts today are mixing all kinds of Mulligan stews. They fancy that the darkness is lifting. They're just getting used to it.

Now the same danger exists in the world of doctrine and conduct. You can live in a twilight zone in your conduct and in conditions of low visibility until you find the practices of this world less repulsive than you did. You think it is your mind broadening when it is just your conscience stretching. And you renounce what you call Pharisaiism and the Puritanism of your early days. You have a good word for dancing and smoking and cocktails and all the rest of it. And instead of passing up Vanity Fair you spend your vacation there maybe. You prefer the borderline to Beulah Land.

When young people have question and answer periods so many times they usually ask about the same questions and it generally boils down to this with a lot of them: How much like the world can I be and still be a Christian? How much of this world can I enjoy and still go to heaven? How near to the precipice can I walk without going over?

Instead of asking how much like the Lord can I be and how little like the world, it amounts to this although they and old people are the same way. They would never put it that way. The point really is: How much of the world can I incorporate into my program and still get to heaven.

You remember Bunyan's immortal prose when he told us about the Christians at Vanity Fair. I love this old way of saying it. "And as they wondered at their apparel so they did likewise at their speech for few could understand what they said. They naturally spoke

the language of Canaan, but they that kept the fair were men of this world so that from one end of the fair to the other they seemed barbarians to each other.”

And now we don't seem like barbarians to this world today. We are too much like them. The operators of Vanity Fair today wouldn't see much difference in clothes, conversation or conduct, the average church member today.

Now this sort of business doesn't come on us all of a sudden. You remember those immortal lines of Pope, “Vice is a monster of such frightful mien as to be hated needs but to be seen, yet seen to oft familiar with her face, we first endure then pity, then embrace.”

If the proprietors of the modern Vanity Fair had watched the average church member, if those old fellows back in Bunyan's day would behold the modern professing Christian, especially in the summer time wearing in public a garb which he should never have come down the stairs at home. They wouldn't look like barbarians.

I am always glad when fall comes and the saints get back in their clothes if not in their right minds. Now here is how it works. The other day a secular journal—this is not a religious magazine—said, “The desensitization of 20th century man is more than a danger to the common safety. There are some things we have no right ever to get used to. One is brutality and the other is the irrational. Both have now come together and are moving through the dominant pattern.”

Now there was a time when sin shocked us. It would have to be pretty bad to shock most people, most Christians today. As the brainwashing progresses what once amazed us only amuses us. We laugh at the shady joke and unfortunately tragedy has become comedy in America. We are laughing at things today we ought to cry about. It is the strategy of tolerance and acceptance and this permissiveness that you have been hearing about here this week.

Dr. [?] that prince of preachers said to preachers, “We are tempted to leave our noontide lights behind in our study to move among men with a dark lantern which we can manipulate to suit our company. We pay the tribute of smiles to the low business standard. We pay the tribute of laughter to the fashionable jest. We pay the tribute of easy tolerance to ambiguous pleasures. We seek to be all things to all men, to please all. We run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. We have become victims of illicit compromise. There is nothing distinctive about our character.” And then he spoke about ministers wearing gray when they mix with the business men at a congregation and talking gray in conversation with them. Nothing is definite. Everything is fuzzy today. Black and white have become smudged into indefinite gray.

The housewife who moves out to suburbia and wants to get along with the group spirit of the community faces that same problem, the organization man at the bosses party, the student on a pagan campus. All kinds of new techniques are being worked out now on how to socialize in Vanity Fair. But Bunyan's Pilgrim's had the right idea. We are not here to learn how to live in the dark. We are here to learn how to walk in the light.

It is hard to find an old fashioned sinner anymore. They are scarcer than whooping cranes.

Adultery is free love. The drunkards is a respectable alcoholic, Sodomy, homosexuality has been elevated into good society. The murderer is temporarily insane. Parents say, "What is the use? I can't use discipline. Nobody up and down the block uses it." Pastors quit preaching on sin. These things are here to stay they say. Might as well accept the status quo and live with it.

There was a time when ministers spoke forthrightly and named things. We don't name anything anymore. Many have a sermon on how to preach so as to convert nobody. He said, "Preach on sin, but never mention any of the sins of your congregation." That will do it. They will all go out and say sin is bad, but they won't get under conviction.

But you name something. Somebody may get mad, but it is better to go out mad than just go out. Anything is better than nothing.

The woman at Jacob's well did not get under conviction as long as my Lord talked about the water of life or where was the best place to worship. And those are good topics. She got under conviction when he said, "Go call thy husband."³

Uh, oh. She had had too many of them already. And she went back and said, "Come see a man who told me about, what?" The water of life? No. The best place to worship? No. "All things that ever I did. Is not this the Christ?"⁴

We need some more of the preaching that names something, that particularizes instead of generalizes. It is not popular. I found that out a long time ago. But it is Scriptural.

Now we see this communion between light and darkness in all directions, TV programs are 30 minutes of foolishness and then they sang a hymn to give God a tip at the finish. "He has got the whole world in his hands," sung to jazz tempo. Teenagers dancing to *God bless America* and *A Mighty Fortress is our God* followed by a beer commercial. Hollywood portraying the Bible and Hollywood is no more qualified to handle Scripture than a gangster to lecture on honesty.

I didn't expect many amens from that remark.

Now let me warn you as I warn myself a little. There is a slow and subtle brain washing by which we are gradually merged into this age, homogenized into this faceless mess, world church, world state ready for antichrist.

I don't know what is coming. When Mr. Churchill was over here in 49 oh up at...over at M.I.T. somebody spoke on thought control and said the day may come when there will be

³ See John 4:16

⁴ See John 4:29

thought control. And Mr. Churchill said he hoped that he wouldn't live to see a day like that. I don't know about that, but I do know that we are being smudged into gray.

When the Lord's sheep are a dirty gray, all black sheep are more comfortable. Will you remember that? If you are one of these gray Christians all the black sheep take comfort in your condition. You have become a thermometer registering the prevailing temperature instead of a thermostat to change the temperature. And when the salt loses its savor be become neither/nor in a world that is either/or, experts at the art of almost saying something.

You can go along way in the ministry today if you learn that. A lot of folks won't know the difference anyhow. Come right up to it and then execute a neat detour and you get right up here.

“That was a lovely sermon.”

Charlie Wilson was in Eisenhower's cabinet, you know. Wilson came from General Motors. He didn't know anything about how to be a politician. He didn't know any better than to just say what he thought, which is rare in Washington. And he said, “The next time I get a secretary I want a one armed man.”

And they said, “Why?”

He said, “I am so tired of on the one hand this and on the other hand that.”

There is an awful lot of preaching that way today, parroting mild and innocuous platitudes so that we become not only blind leaders of the blind, but bland leaders of the bland.

Now the world is in the dark tonight. And do you know why it is in the dark? Well, I wish everybody knew the next verse in John three after John 3:16.

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.⁵

Now 19. “And this is the condemnation.”⁶ This is the test by which men are judged. The word, really, in the original is crisis with a K, spelled with a K. That is the only difference. This is the crisis. You talk about the crisis tonight. It is not Vietnam. It is not the next election. Here is the crisis and always has been:

That light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth

⁵ John 3:17-18

⁶ John 3:19

the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.⁷

The crisis is that Jesus Christ came to this world and precipitated a crisis because everybody has to take sides about Jesus Christ. There isn't any such thing as doing nothing about Jesus Christ. "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."⁸ And this light shines in the Savior. "I am the Light of the world."⁹ It shines in the Scriptures, "Thy word is a lamp, a light to my path."¹⁰ and it shines in the saints, "Ye are the light of the world."¹¹ In the Savior, in the Scriptures, in the saints.

But verse 20 tells you why some people don't go to church. "For everyone that does evil hates the light."¹² I had a country church way back in the late 20s and I remember a little woman whose husband brought her every night to the Sunday night to the services. He was an old sinner. He never came in. He sat out there in the dark in more way than one in the car. And she'd sit over here to the right.

And I thought about this verse many a time. The trouble with that old boy was—and this verse describes him—"every one that does evil hates the light"¹³—he knew if he came in there the light would be turned on and he would squirm and twist live perfectly miserable. But his wife wanted all the light she could get.

It's a pretty good way to test your Christianity tonight. Do you honestly want all the light you can get? Or do you want this thing shaded down and arranged to suit your whims and prejudices.

Did you ever walk across a field and turn over a large stone and the moment the sunlight struck underneath all the creeping and crawling things began hurrying and scurrying for cover? That is what happens to your heart when the light of the world, Jesus, is turned on. It makes you uncomfortable. You don't know what is down in a dark cellar until the light is turned on. You don't know where all the lizards and the snakes and the toads and all the rest of it are until the light is turned on. And you don't know the state of your heart until the light is turned on. No wonder some people live in the world all week and sit up Saturday night at the late, late, late, late show and come bug eyed to church on Sunday morning and wince. They have got photophobia, fear of the light.

Our business as Christians is to let the light shine "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather [expose] them."¹⁴ Turn the light on them. Not

⁷ John 3:19-21

⁸ Matthew 12:30

⁹ John 8:12, 9:5

¹⁰ See Psalm 119:105

¹¹ Matthew 5:14

¹² See John 3:20

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ephesians 5:11

merely in pulpit denunciation, although that has a place. But by the contrast of godly living.

I know the old proverb, "Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." I know you can't shovel darkness out. The only way you can get it out of a room is to turn on the light. But there is some things that keep your light from shining and Jesus used such simple illustrations. He said one was a bushel and the other a bed. And is your light tonight under a bushel, the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the cares of this life?

I was with a pastor some time ago in meetings. We met one of his delinquent members down the street and the pastor asked him why he hadn't been to the services. And he said, "Well, you know, I've got a business."

And I felt like saying, "Yes, you have got another business, too, if you are a Christian. If you don't have a turning to God you won't have any business one of these days."

And then the dead, resting at ease in Zion. Old William Law used to say, "Who am I to lie folded up in a bed late of a morning when the farmers have already gone about their work and I am so far behind with my sanctification?" I love that. That has refreshed me again and again. I don't know how you feel about it tonight, but I am frank to admit I am way behind with my sanctification.

Steven Alford and I have been in a number of evangelistic conferences in the south, that men by the power of God get people under conviction and one time I won't forget a flock of preachers out there that were flattened by his preaching, terrific preaching. And the preacher told me, he said, "I am eliminating certain TV programs and getting up earlier to meet the Lord."

I could take it easy. I am at the age when I am supposed to be on Social Security in a rocking chair reminiscing about the good old days that weren't so good after all. I can't take it easy. And any preacher and any Christian who can take it easy today is not worth the salt in their bread. I can't understand the preacher in good health who quits preaching. Boy, as long as I can get into a pulpit, I am going to keep it up until they build a ramp to get me up in there.

Because I have got something to say I'm at the book and so is any preacher. And I don't intend to water it down. There is no time to beat around the bush. I don't have long to go. When your money is running out you had better spend the rest of it carefully. When time is running out the same way, but you may go before I go. Buy up the time. The days are even.

I started out in western North Carolina as a little boy to preach, 12 years old. Got up in the church when I was 11 asked them to license me to preach the gospel. Those dear old farmers...I know you are not to lay hands suddenly on anybody, but they did it. They said, "I believe the Lord's got his hands on you." I started out.

The first sermon I ever preached was over at a place called Hickory. There's a [?] folks here tonight from Hickory, North Carolina. I'm the hick from Hickory. That is my own title.

They asked me to come over there and talk on a Wednesday night. They had their 100th anniversary not long ago and they had me back to preach. And my father, we were just country folk. Oh, we were poor folks. I didn't know much. My, my, not only I didn't know any thing, I didn't even suspect anything.

And we got a farmer to take us in an old Ford over to Hickory. I never will forget it. One of those old models with the bulb horn, 30 horse power and 20 of them dead. I got over to Hickory. I've been in bigger places since, never been to one that looked any bigger. It looked like a mile down to the pulpit. And I went down there and they told me to stand in the chair and the pastor of the church stood on one side and the state evangelist stood on the other and I did the best I could. And I have been trying to do that ever since for 57 years and that is all that God ever asked anybody to do. Just be faithful.

And you can't get around that, friend. It is required just that you be faithful.

My old daddy used to go with me when I was a little boy. And then when I was able to go by myself he would me in the little town over there in that old Ford. And I can see him in that old blue surge suit. It hadn't been pressed since the day he bought it.

And I would go up to him after I had got off the train. He would always ask me, "How did you get along?"

It has been a long time. One of these days I intend to roll into glory. I expect to see him there, not in the blue surge suit. It never was a glory and I wouldn't be surprised if the first thing he'd ask me would be, "How did you get along?"

And I would say, "Well, thank you, because you held up a standard."

All that God ever asked you to do was to be faithful. Just let your light shine. We are untouched by the need of our own hearts in this world. We spend more money for dog food and for chewing gum than for world missions. We need to get that candle out from under the bed of ease and lazy indifference. Take that shade off.

You don't have to tell everybody you are a Christian. They will catch on if you have guided them. They'll catch on.

You don't have to go around with a great big button, "I'm a Christian," carrying a Bible big as a Sears and Roebuck catalog. Just be one. Let it shine.

We need to get our candles out from under the bushel and the bed and take off the shades. This is the crisis. But I warn you as I close, friends, watch it.

You think maybe that you are sort of the cream of the crop back at your church that [?], but watch it. Good people today don't like to be reminded of it, but unconsciously we are all being swayed by the subtle trickery in this age. You don't measure a thing these days for what it is in itself. You sound like a nitpicker if you mention something today and some folks don't want you to mention anything that some say, "Don't believe that kind of separation." I do. It is always something.

This is what I know is that is a symptom of a disease that you sometimes have to deal with symptoms, too.

And so whatever it is tonight, the devil has a thousand devices to get you used to the dark when you think you are so over it. I have gotten over my [?].

Now you can overdo with this the other way. I know that. But watch it. We have never lived in a time that is as tricky as this. God grant that you may not get used to the dark.