

## Installment #8

### Darkness and Light

Do you remember the day of Paul's conversion? I assume it was a bright, sunny day as he and his troupe made their way toward Damascus, stirring up dust behind them. It had not rained for a while and you did not want to be the last man riding. The way was well known and the size of his band on their disastrous mission was large enough to make thieves beware. A brilliant sun would make Paul's experience all the more incredible, from brightness that made your eyes squint to total darkness. If you have ever been in a large cave, like Mammoth Cave, with all the lights turned out you experienced total darkness; you can't see your hand in front of your face. It was that kind of darkness into which Paul was plunged on the way to Damascus, a darkness that totally changed his mission. It was no longer Saul and the Christians; it was Saul and God! It was Saul inside out! We get a chance to see his soul! The sun was shining but in his soul Saul was at midnight.

It was our Lord who said to the Pharisees, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*"<sup>1</sup> Yes, that day Paul was walking in darkness...deeper darkness. He could see the way to Damascus, but he could not see the way to heaven. Paul himself would later write,<sup>2</sup>

*What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written:  
"There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands,  
no one who seeks God."<sup>3</sup>*

It is a fundamental belief of Christian faith that **God is light** and sin is darkness. Toward the end of the Christian era, the Apostle John would write,

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: **God is light**; in him there is no darkness at all.<sup>4</sup>*

In Biblical language this is the same as saying that God is light (goodness, brightness, purity, too majestic to behold) and in Him there is **no sin** at all. Above my desk at home

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<sup>1</sup> John 8:12, NIV.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:9-11

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Eccles. 7:20.

<sup>4</sup> ! John 1:5, emphasis mine.

I have a picture of the devil confronting Jesus at His temptation.<sup>5</sup> Our Lord is robed and pointing skyward with His right hand. In His left hand is a scroll of the Old Testament. The devil, all black, is offering Jesus a small stone with his right hand and is pointing down into blackness with his left hand. The message is, turn this stone into bread and follow me to hell. Jesus, looking straight at the devil, points him to God and inexpressible light. The only trouble is that the black robed figure will never see that light.

### **ETERNAL LIGHT! HOLY LIGHT!**

In the Medieval Age, the idea of light and darkness played a major role in helping serious people understand their progression of grace in the Christian life. It went something like this.

1. The non-Christian life is dark at its center, too dark to see the path of life. If one dies in this darkness, the person spends eternity in an ever-darkening existence. But Christ has come, bringing the light of God to us! Therefore, the first step in becoming Christian is to recognize that with Christ our darkness may be changed into light.

2. The new light that comes with faith in the Lord Christ brings forgiveness, joy, and true hope. LIGHT! ETERNAL LIGHT! HOLY LIGHT! MYSTERIOUS LIGHT! Therefore, again as Paul said to the Christians at Corinth, "*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*" Therefore, the second step in becoming Christian is to open one's heart to the light that comes from God and be enabled by God, St. Paul said, to see "*with the eyes of our heart.*"<sup>6</sup>

3. Christians walk and run in the light of God. Ours is a new life, as Paul said: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*"<sup>7</sup> The new has come! Life is different, although it is difficult to tell others exactly what that means. There is a sense that God has come near; that sins have been forgiven; that it is a delight to help those in trouble. **If we stay in this new life** we have no reason to doubt that heaven is our home. However, some feel a tug at their heart to go deeper with the Lord. For some, the third step in becoming Christian is to realize that there is yet another level of wisdom. Some think it is speaking in an unknown language, others

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<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 4:1-11.

<sup>6</sup> See Ephesians 1:18.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17.

think it is a contemplative life, whatever one's vocation, still others believe we are spiritual infants. It is not that God is holding back on us, but it is rather that we drink milk, we do not yet eat steak! Although we are true Christians, we still live in a little darkness. What we want more than anything is to push on to perfection—to full maturity in Christ!  
WE WANT FULNESS OF LOVE!

4. Finally, as those medieval spiritual masters believed, we can step into the fullness of light—in this life. We have crossed into LIGHT as much as we can in this life. I am not saying we reach a place from which we cannot grow some more. We can always grow in the Spirit. This is difficult for me to say and make sense. I think the ancient fathers had in mind that we can be filled with God to the point that the light of heaven shines in our daily lives. We are no stranger to that wonderful, God-filled place. I think I had better stop for now and pick up this notion again a little later. But for the present, we can look at the general theme common to medieval thinking. See how much of what follows is part of your own experience.

So what was the general idea of movement in the Christian life?

1. The darkness of sin to the light of forgiveness. What a beautiful thing!
2. The gradual realization that the light of forgiveness is its own darkness,  
that is, it has its own limitations, plus the truth that Christians,  
against their will, sin against God.
3. Then movement from that darkness of limitation to the light of heaven,  
in this life!
4. Thus, Christian existence, however many years it takes, is seen like  
this: darkness to light,  
light to darkness (so to speak),  
darkness to light,  
light of life to heaven.

You would have a hard time finding anything like this in the writings of Paul. I think you do find something like this: without Christ in one's life, we live in the darkness of sin. With Christ we have a new life, one filled with joy, peace, and righteousness. It is possible for a Christian to slide backward, toward the old life but this need not happen. To be "in Christ" is for Paul to live triumphantly. However, if we sense ourselves losing

our grip on the Lord we can call out to Him for help and be completely restored. The focus of our faith is on Jesus Christ: His cross, His resurrection, and His coming again.

One text that highlights the several elements of our new life in Christ can be found in Paul's letter to the Colossians.<sup>8</sup> (*All Bible references here are to Colossians.*)

1. Paul says we are “raised” with Christ in our new life and that we are now called to seek “heavenly things” (3:1). These heavenly things are whatever will strengthen our walk with the Lord: prayer, witness, spiritual insight, helping others, spiritual gifts, etc.
2. Consequently, turning toward heavenly things we turn away from earthly interests(3:2-4). In fact, our lives are “hid” with Christ in God (3:3). This means that our present life has the seeds of eternal life in it. Think of it! We are already hidden with Christ, tucked away in the Father's arms. And when the glorious Christ appears at the end of time, we will be with Him “in glory” (3:4).
3. There, because of 1 and 2 above, we are to “put to death” those earthly attitudes that can cause us harm (3:5-9). Is this really possible? you might ask. Yes, in CHRIST! Too long we have been trying to turn our lives around by ourselves. Now it is time to let Him who is the Son of God do it for us!
4. Paul says that having put off the old self, we are to “put” on the new self, the mind of Christ. After all, our minds have been full of something or other and now it is more or less empty. If you have concentrated your life on making money and “in Christ” that desire is taken away, then you need something to fill that new void. What is it? Paul says it will be “the mind of Christ.” This means learning what the mind of Christ means for you. This will take prayer, reading, perhaps spiritual counsel.
5. Verse 17 contains this magnificent summary: *Do everything to the glory of God!* This settles the issue. Whatever we do or think we do it to the glory of God and doing that we are always on track.

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<sup>8</sup> 3:1-17. The five aspects can be found in Jerry L. Mercer, Paul: His Message About the Future, p. 28.

Is any of this confusing to you? If so, take a deep breath and reread this whole section. Take your time. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand what is necessary for the glory of God to shine through your life. Have another go at it!

### **A Look at Last Week**

*In fact it is precisely the problem for the proclamation of the gospel that the great claims of the gospel do not seem to be problematic or in question.*

Do you remember that line from our last lesson? What “great claims of the gospel” do not seem “to be problematic or in question” for today’s American culture? Well, let’s put it this way. According to their personal witness, wannabe presidents McCain and Obama, are professed Christians and look at the mud that is being thrown around at each other by them.. How can these men square their behavior with Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount? I would say that humility, loving others before oneself, and keeping “God” (not “country”) first are **all fundamental teachings of our Lord** and appear to be **minor** concerns by His people in politics (though I can’t say that for all Christian politicians). Put it this way: What are the implications of one’s baptism for a political career? For what one says about a colleague or even an enemy? Brueggemann is saying that Jesus’ teaching are generally approved but not put into practice on a regular basis.

### **Preparing for #9: “Hermes and the Jumping Man”**

1. Read Acts 14:1-20 carefully.
2. We are beginning Paul’s first missionary journey. Get a map of biblical lands or Paul’s journeys and locate the places that are mentioned in Acts, beginning with 14:1 and going as far as you can before our next installment.
3. We have noted the name of Barnabas in our discussion of Saul/Paul. Who was this man? What does the Biblical text say about him? For a quick overview of Barnabas and his ministry, read Acts 11:19-30. What do you learn about him in this section of Acts? Oh yes, what does the Book of Acts say about his name and what does that have to do with Paul? Next time I’ll give you my view and you can compare yours with mine.

--Jerry L. Mercer  
--September 22, 2008