

# First Baptist Pulpit

The Night, Light to the Saints of God

Psalm 139:11-12

## A Sermon

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"If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee." (Ps. 139:11-12)

In this great Psalm, the Psalmist David, a highly passionate and extremely emotional poet, finds himself in a state of deep depression with regard to the circumstances that surround him. In fact, many of the Psalms bespeak this sorrow of heart which David speaks so eloquently here. As David tries to summon every imaginable circumstance, he thinks about circumstances ranging from the time that he was in his mother's womb to the times when he felt farthest away from God, even to the darkest and worst times which he described as "nightlike"; David says, "Even there my God holds me in His right hand." All of us encounter some kind of "night", some serious adversity that clouds our lives and perhaps hides our hearts' eyes even from the face of God.

Very interestingly, several Hebrew words give us a glorious portrait of the meaning of night in the Old Testament. The Spirit's pen moves from the gentle tone of dusk to the dark hues of the blackest midnight. One Hebrew word suggests that first sense of breeze which we get in the evening as the sun begins to set. That breeze denotes a calming, pervasive influence that gradually but irresistibly swallows up the environment. So also is night; so also are our adversities that come surely as the night comes, that come uncontrollably as the night comes, that come totally as darkness which covers the face of the sky and shadows the earth in its blackness. In fact, another Hebrew word denotes the idea of a complete covering as when darkness completely covers the day.

A third Hebrew term is more active in its imagery, suggesting that not only does the night cover the day, but that there is also a positive, dynamic force that withdraws light. The rotation of our planet or the explosion and dying of stars in the universe creates a scenario of light and darkness throughout the world. Active natural powers operate to withhold light. The Hebrew scriptures frequently associate the active withholding of light with ignorance, sorrow, destruction, and, in the worst circumstances, death. Very interestingly, one Hebrew term describes night as a kind of twist or spiraling, not a spiraling of light, but a spiraling of darkness that surrounds one like the whirling force of a tornado that suddenly enshrouds the atmosphere in darkness. Interestingly, when Jacob lay down to sleep, a great darkness covered him. But suddenly there came a ladder, perhaps a staircase or a spiral of light to God. What a beautiful picture! Even in the darkest of circumstances, God makes ladders of light for the saints of God that His angels might descend and ascend in merciful missions to us.

Another quite terrifying sense of the word *night* is its association with certain kinds of dark-colored or night birds. In Deuteronomy, God tells us what animals are clean and what animals are unclean. The unclean birds which He mentions, such as certain owls, eagles, vultures and ravens, all have two things in common: a black wing and a bloody claw. The black wing denotes the vulturous, carnivorous, and carrion-eating nature of these hideous fowls. The bloody claw points out to us that they consume flesh and destroy life, even feeding upon the dead. So also are the adversities of life, like some shadowy, dark wing that comes suddenly upon us, and its claws find their way even to the very innermost recesses of our being, and pierce us with stinging adversities in such a way that our minds, hearts, and flesh feel the pangs of dark, nightlike circumstances.

But then, how merciful, the seventh Hebrew word for night denotes the necessity of a place to lodge. Thus we associate night with places for refuge and rest from darkness, danger, destruction or whatever other adversities come at night.

I want to suggest that there are five nights which frequently fall upon both the saints of God and the wicked, but in each of these nights a glorious light shines which sometimes not even Christians can see. The first night is the dark night of chaos, confusion and emptiness. Chaos means disorder, disrule - as if everything is frazzled at the end and coming unraveled in the middle. Frequently, as I drive on some busy highway in Dallas, I ask myself, "What am I doing in this place?" This is a very confused city. Madness is in the heart of the people who surround us as they pursue vacuous dreams. They go to jobs at which they are unhappy, and to homes where there is disunity and lack of genuine love. And in pursuit of the almighty dollar, they live lives which on the surface appear as orderly as geometric buildings, shiny automobiles, nice clothes, paperwork, computers and technology, but in reality men's hearts are failing them for fear. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was void and without form, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. So also is modern society dark, formless, chaotic, and empty. But God said, "Let there be light and there was light." May the Spirit of God quicken our hearts and minds to see the darkness of the world in which we live, its chaos and emptiness, and yet simultaneously open our eyes to see the only Light that has shone into this darkness, the Light of the world, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

Besides the dark night of chaos, confusion, and emptiness, there is also the dark night of adversity. In Exodus chapter ten, we have the story of God's command to Moses that he lift up his hand upon Egypt and invoke a thick darkness upon Egypt, a darkness so thick, says the Word of God, that men could feel it, "And Yahweh said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt. And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days." Have you ever felt such a darkness in your own life, when for whatever reason, your heart and mind felt the dark night of adversity? Think of the children of Israel in Egyptian bondage, poverty, and cruelty. They felt the darkness surround them on every hand. But look, "They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days: but all the children of Israel had light in their dwelling." Dark adversity also surrounds God's people today -- Ebola plague breaking out in terrifying unpredictability throughout Africa, the plague of Aids which will kill tens of millions, untraceable nuclear materials throughout the former Soviet Union that might explode any minute in a terroristic act in Europe or America, moral decadence on every hand, spiritual blindness and darkness even in the churches -- yet when darkness prevails, the same prophetic hand that covers our land in the black night of judicial wrath also kindles a candle in every Christian home. When I was a child, I remember driving in the dark night with my parents into Denver, Colorado, and seeing from the mountains, suddenly appearing, a majestic spray of a million different lights. Many times from an airplane, I've looked from the dark night upon the dark world, but in the houses below, the lights shining give light to all who are therein. So also it is with God and His people. As it was in the days of Egypt, the Israelites all had light in their dwelling. Light your candles, said Jesus, put them on a candlestick so that there may be light in your houses and so that others may see as well.

A third night which has fallen upon us is the night of moral degradation. One Tuesday afternoon about four-thirty I received an anonymous phone call. For seventy-two hours, I experienced one of the most wrenching counseling challenges that I have ever encountered. In that seventy-two hours I learned some of the most troubling information that I have ever heard about drugs in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The problem is wealth in quest of pleasure. If there were not wealth pocketed in the wealthier areas of our cities nationwide where yuppies and their children use drugs recreationally or addictively, the drug problem in the United States of America and in the city of Dallas would not be nearly as great as it is. Let me warn every parent. None of us is free from the dark danger of our children becoming involved with drugs. The very terrifying reality is that our children can be involved deeply with drugs without our knowing it. Drugs are only one problem of moral degradation in our society. Certainly, sexual promiscuity, dishonesty, thievery, violence, and many other kinds of vices add to the list. Jesus said that it is out of the human heart that these things proceed. Violence, drug abuse, and theft are not caused by sociological inequities, by economic despair, political punishment of the poor (though some of those things might contribute to these problems); no, Jesus said the source of sin is the human heart, "Out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts murders, adulteries, fornication, theft, false witnesses and blasphemy:" The human heart is a dark den of writhing serpents, full of deadly poison, that strike out at men and would even strike out at God in venomous rebellion and blasphemy did not God charm the cobras of Egypt. Where there is one dark recess of sin in the innermost recesses of our hearts, we are not right with God. Let us not cast stones upon adulterers, drug addicts, or the heathenistic pleasure-seekers of our generation if we have not first dug deep into the dark quarries of our own stony hearts and know of a certainty that gold can be mined there and not the hellish pumice with which hell's furnace can be heated seven times.

The saints of God, and the wicked as well, also face the dark night of psychological and spiritual depression as a result of trials and temptations. The older I get, the more I understand the books Ecclesiastes and Job. Man who is born of woman is of a few days and full of trouble; life is bitter even in the context of its sweetness, and "all is vanity and vexation of spirit." Quite frankly, much modern religion creates a mask for its proponents and its

converts - a mask of dark delusion which denies the evil reality of this world, a mask of denial with regard to the sorrow of this world in which we live, a mask of momentary pleasure, of economic success, of health and wealth promises by false prophets. Old Solomon said it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth. But we live in a society pre-occupied with mirth, whether it be the sports arena, the theater, or the party. We live in a society in quest of the comic mask that hides the tragic reality of the dark night of depression of spirit and mind. If we are so happy, why are our mental hospitals full, why are our counselors' lists long, why are there broken homes, and worse, why are there broken hearts?

On one occasion, David penned these words,

O, Yahweh, God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee:

Let my prayer come before thee: Incline thine ear unto my cry;

For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draws nigh to the grave.

I am counted with them that go down to the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength:

Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more:

and they are cut off from thine hand.

Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.

Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou has afflicted me with thy waves. (Ps. 88:1-7)

The false prophets of health and wealth would critique David as unspiritual, lacking in faith, and possibly demonically influenced. And what of the very Son of God in Gethsemane and throughout the course of His whole ministry, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief? As He left the three disciples, commanding them to watch and pray, He said, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death." Then He fell before God and began to sweat, as it were, great drops of blood. This phrase strikes me, "and being in agony, he prayed more earnestly," so that agony of spirit is often God's means to move us even closer to the throne of grace. Would that the mask of mirth could be ripped from our faces and we could stare, like Nietzsche, into the black hole of death and see if we can feel *that* darkness. All depression is a quickened anticipation of death. That's why depression consummates so often in suicide. Stare into the black hole. Feel the darkness. Grasp for the light. Kindle your own fire with no wood, no spark, and feel the helplessness of human fallenness, of human endeavor - that emptiness of human destiny without God. Only God can say, "Let there be light."

Then fifthly, there is also the night of divine judgment. Throughout the Old and New Testaments when God describes His intent to destroy the wicked, He does so with symbolic language. Now, make no mistake about it, God does intend to punish the wicked. For some reason, we have lost this minor (in the sense of that which is musically haunting - in the sense of that which is orchestrally terrifying) we have lost this minor chord in our thoughtless sing-songs about God. Beethoven's fifth symphony, when death stands at the door, comes with a violence that can be felt because it is so near and certain. So also is the certainty and nearness of God's judgment. David walked, always aware, that death was unpredictably near. He said, "There is but a step between me and death." One Friday evening my precious son Matt got in an automobile with two other young men and drove away from an athletic banquet. As he drove away, I said to my wife, "It's an amazing thing that we let our child go off in an automobile with other teenagers." I had a very strong sense of danger as I watched them drive out of the parking lot. Within three minutes, as they came through a green light, a car at about 60 miles per hour ran the red light, just missed Matt and his friends, and struck an attorney's car immediately behind them. I use that as an illustration to punctuate the reality that we always stand on the threshold of death. Death is God's judgment against sin. Humanity has sinned, representatively, in the first humans, and ever since then humanity has sinned individually. Everyone of us is a sinner - a very humbling thing, "All have sinned," says Paul, "and come short of the glory of God," - and the punishment of our sin - "the wages of sin is death." A dear woman, whom my father led to the Lord and baptized, had a little baby grandchild with asthma. The child awoke in the night and said, "Mommy, I can't breathe, take me to the hospital." Within five hours, the child was dead. And what about men in their full maturity, men and women in the latter ages of life who, chronologically, with every step draw nearer and nearer to the grave? I warn you, the wages of sin is death. The Bible describes God's judgment as the sun turning black as sackcloth of hair, the moon to blood, and the stars of heaven, like so many figs shaken by a rushing, mighty wind - falling, burning out in meteoric conflagration, one-by-one, so that finally the hollow sockets of dying eyes look into the black face of nothingness. Death is a certainty, as certain as night, but it is blacker, with no dawn on its horizon once you enter that darkness without the Lord Jesus Christ.

Apocalyptic metaphors in the Bible are quite terrifying, but the purpose of Divine poetry is to make us see the horror of the reality beyond. Death is not the only judgment which God levels against humanity. The Bible teaches a sudden and final apocalyptic moment, the Day of the Lord as a thief in the night, in the which the heavens and the earth shall pass away with a great noise. And the earth and the works therein, like a nuclear explosion, shall melt.

The material creation, the cosmos in which we exist, will be loosed at every subatomic level. And the forces of nature will make Hiroshima look like a faint spark in the bright heart of the sun.

God has promised to judge the world, and God has sworn that, besides physical death and cosmic death, there is an eternal death that waits upon the sons of men who love darkness rather than light. Jesus, Himself says, "This is the condemnation, that men loved darkness rather than life, because their deeds are evil, and they that do evil hate the light, and will not come to the light lest their deeds should be reprov'd." Jesus describes eternal death as outer darkness, a darkness beyond darkness, a darkness beyond the darkness of death, a darkness beyond the darkness of cosmic conflagration, outer darkness, total alienation from God where never there dawns the morning star, much less the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings.

So, may I remind you, that two thousand years ago, when the greater Sun would stand in full and radiant brightness at noonday, God shrouded Him in a darkness blacker than the Egyptian night, and in that darkness, God slew His Son. The very Morning Star of heaven was eclipsed by the black wrath of God. Him whom we call the Sun of Righteousness, whose eyes shine as flames of fire and whose countenance is like unto the sun when it shineth in its strength, Him, the very Light of heaven, God covered in moral degradation, with cosmic adversity, with every depth of depression, despair, and degradation that the blackness of hell and the human heart could conjure. And then He sealed that blackness with an even darker night, His own wrath against sin. There, in the blackest of blackness, God extinguished the Light. But the story of the Gospel is that the Light arose with healing in His wings.

I exhort you, by grace, as your heart is able, to look into the East - the Sun of Righteousness, Jesus Christ, dawns in the hearts of the saints of God. The eye of faith, however feeble, may look from dark Egypt and see Him in the East. Surely, as radiant beams rise on the horizon of our lives, there is a glorious Sun who shall come again, full in strength and grandeur, full in light and glory, to extinguish forever the darkness from the face of His people. In fact, in that city He has promised for us, there will be no need of the sun, neither of the moon, nor of the stars to shine in it - for the Lamb will be the Light thereof. Would to God that He would speak to your heart, "Let there be Light," show you the radiant glory of our Savior, and deliver you from the darkness of night.