

December 10th, 2017

THE GOSPEL IN THE GRAVEYARD

John 19:31-42

As I was looking ahead to this passage last week, I was tempted to move very quickly over this section and go straight to the Resurrection. And the reason is because on the surface there seems to be zero hope in these verses. We begin in **v.31** with Immanuel's corpse nailed to the cross. Jesus is hanging between heaven and earth, not being fit for either—rejected by humanity and cursed by God. And then **v.42** ends with the blackness of the tomb. All we see is death. This is the one section in John's entire gospel where Jesus Christ—the light of the world—has gone dark. He is nowhere to be found on planet earth.

Can you even fathom what the disciples must have felt? You must not let your knowledge of His resurrection seep in here. They didn't believe He was going to rise from the dead. **John 20:9** says “they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” When the first reports came back of his resurrection, **Mark 16:11** “when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.” **v.14** says that their hearts were hardened. **Luke 24:11** says that the news of His resurrection “seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

The noose of disappointment hung around the disciples' necks, and now their worst nightmares hunted them down. ‘We've wasted our lives’ was perhaps what Thomas said to his brother disciples. I imagine Peter was nowhere to be found. At least at first. Skulking around in the darkness of this night before the Sabbath. Weeping. Suicidal. Monica and I had a dear brother that we loved very much. He was our first Bible study leader that we had as a married couple. Tragically, he committed suicide when he faced some very difficult personal struggles. Can you imagine Peter? I can't fathom that the thought of taking his own life was not a serious option for him. He had cowardly deserted Jesus. While Jesus was protecting His disciples in front of Annas, Peter was cursing Him in his denials. And now Jesus is dead. From his perspective, there is no way to make this right. How do you ask forgiveness

from a corpse? But these feelings of abject hopelessness certainly belonged to all the disciples. The revolution was over. They put all their stock in Jesus, and the market crashed on a bloody cross. Hope committed suicide. You can hear this in the conversation with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus said “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (**Luke 24:21**) That hope is now over. Jesus is dead. The wicked high priest in the Sanhedrin are celebrating with the demons, and the disciples and those women who followed Christ are wept until they ran out of tears.

That’s what **v.31-42** looks like on the human level. And that is what some of your lives look like right now. If not now, soon. Nobody escapes this life without gulping down pain from the slough of despond. **Job 14:1** “Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.” Or as Agur said it in **Proverbs 30:15** “The leech has two daughters: Give and Give.” The leeches that the fall of mankind loosed say “Give and Give” until the very marrow of your soul feels like it has been sucked dry.

Where is the gospel when everything looks like the grave? If our gospel can’t answer that question, it is not a strong enough gospel. A pea shooter gospel will not stand up to the atomic blast of your depravity, the devil and death. You need a gospel that says ‘though hell and Satan and my own sin accuse me, yet I shall not die but live¹—for Someone has “dealt death its death blow”² And His name is Jesus Christ. Yes Jesus is in the grave in this passage. But do you know what this means? Jesus is saying “To hell with you hell.” Yes Jesus is in the grave, but He’s saying though the prophet Hosea “O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction:” (**13:14**)³. Yes Jesus is in the grave. But do you know what that means dear believer? Jesus has turned

¹ Psalm 118:17

² Douglas Taylor, *I Shall Not Die, But Live: Facing Death With Gospel Hope*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), pg. 37

³ KJV

death into a friend.⁴ Death has been abolished. **2 Timothy 1:10** says that “Christ Jesus [has] abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,” Douglas Taylor has asked of this precious truth “Why has this not featured on the television news or in the newspapers? Why has no one been talking about it on the social networks? Ah, it is because it has not been done by men or by Parliament or by Congress, or by any human agency, but by our Savior Jesus Christ.”⁵ Beloved, this is our gospel in the graveyard. Jesus Christ has tasted death for us, and that means that no matter what crippling darkness you are facing, it has already been defeated. When that rock was rolled in front of the tomb, hell was forever sealed. This is our gospel in the graveyard.

The Big Idea...

When Jesus went to the grave, He sent hell to hell for all who believe on Him

- ☆ When Hope Commits Suicide (v.31-37)
- ☆ When God Says “Let There Be Dark” (v.38-42)

I. When Hope Commits Suicide (v.31-37)

Passover and pretention

Let’s begin in **v.31** “Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they

⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 12-21*, (Chicago, IL.: Moody Publishers, 2008), pg. 362

⁵ Douglas Taylor, *I Shall Not Die, But Live: Facing Death With Gospel Hope*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), pg. 37

might be taken away.” Our passage is bookended with this phrase “the day of Preparation.” We’ve already seen him allude to it in **v.14**. John wants us to know that Jesus’ death was happening during the Jewish observance of Passover. Passover was first instituted in **Exodus 12**, when God instructed the Israelites to slay a male lamb, one year old without any blemish and smear the blood over their doors (**v.5-7**) When the angel of death came through Egypt, wherever he saw the blood, he would passover that house and no death would come (**v.13**). All of this pointing forward to the true Passover lamb Jesus Christ. **1 Cor. 5:17** says “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” We are going to see a couple allusions in our passage.

It’s currently Friday night, and tomorrow would be the Sabbath—the high Sabbath of Passover. And because of this the Jews ask Pilate to have the legs of those crucified broken. This breaking of their legs was actually an act of mercy, because they would die very quickly from suffocation, because they would no longer be able to push themselves up to breath. Now these Jewish leaders were not motivated by mercy, but by their own self-righteousness. They wanted to be considered pure by following the law. **Deuteronomy 21:22-23** says “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, [23] *his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day*, for a hanged man is cursed by God. *You shall not defile your land* that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.” So they reasoned that if these men were taken down and buried, that there would be no curse on the land and they would be clean.⁶ Against their self-righteous motives, God was in fact orchestrating these events, that the curse might be truly buried.

No mercy to Jesus, He laid down His life

Picking up in **v.32** “So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him.” This process known as *crurifragium*—the soldiers would take an iron bar or mallet and smash the legs

⁶ Additionally, alluding to the paschal lamb Exodus 12:10 “And you shall let none of it remain until the morning;”

of the victims.⁷ However the most violent aspect of this process was the actual severing of the spirit from the body. I was in Don Sullivan’s room when he passed away, and I’ll never forget that moment when he took his final breath. It is an unnatural spiritual violence. At this moment when these men’s legs were broken, their eternity was sealed. The one man who saw Christ as His only hope, who said “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42), immediately entered paradise. The other sunk down into eternal darkness.

And then they came to Jesus who was in the middle. **v.33** “But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.” Two things are significant here. **First**, breaking the legs was a merciful act to hasten death, but Jesus had to swallow all of the Father’s wrath toward’s sin, unmmixed with mercy. **Second**, Jesus was in control of when He died. He said in **John 10:18** “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” Jesus was not a victim on the cross, He was the victor over the cross.⁸

The blood and the water

But the significant thing here is that John takes great pains to emphasize that Jesus was in fact dead. Look at **v.34** “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.” Now there are medical reasons—some of which are contested⁹—as to why blood and water came out. However, what’s key here is not the medical science but the theological science. You see, when John wrote this several years later, the heresy of docetism was on the rise. (Greek, δοκέω *dokeō* = “to seem”)¹⁰ Docetism taught that it only *seemed* like Jesus had a body, but really He was

⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pg. 622

⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 12-21*, (Chicago, IL.,: Moody Publishers, 2008), pg. 363

⁹ See D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pg. 623

¹⁰ Source: <https://carm.org/docetism>, accessed December 9, 2017

apparition, or phantom, which denied His humanity. This thinking was inherent in gnosticism which taught that physical matter was evil and only the spiritual realm was good.¹¹ Islam, like docetism, takes this view in the Qur'an, Sura 4. 156: 'they did not kill him [Jesus], neither did they crucify him; it only *seemed* to be so.'¹² John stresses the flow of blood and water here to show that Jesus—in fact—came in the flesh (**John 1:14**), and He died in the flesh. There can be no salvation for anyone if Jesus Christ who is "God of God...begotten not made"¹³ didn't put on flesh and die as a human being for other human beings.

However like what we have seen thus far in John's gospel, there is also a deeper meaning. Why blood and water? Why in that order? How would have the early Jewish Christians understood these elements with the 39 books of the OT behind them? John is going to make a big deal of of this in his epistle. **1 John 5:6** "This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood." These two elements—blood and water contain everything necessary for our salvation. Blood—the one thing, the only thing, that can remove our sin (**Hebrews 9:22**¹⁴), and give us the sure pledge that we have been reconciled to God. And water—for washing, that we would be cleansed and made holy before Him. Justification and sanctification flowed from the fountain of Jesus side. And in that order. Blood then water. Unmixed.

As F.W. Krummacher said "The blood flowed separately from the water; justification must not be mingled with, much less exchanged for, personal amendment. That which again recommends us to the love of God is solely the merit of Christ, and by no means the work of our own virtue. Certainly, union

¹¹ 1 John 4:2-3 "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, **3** and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God."

¹² See D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), fn.3, pg. 623-624

¹³ Nicene Creed

¹⁴ "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."

by faith and life with Christ is requisite on our part, but in Christ's righteousness and in that alone, do we receive the absolution from deserved punishment;"¹⁵
And so the faithful sings those words from Rock of Ages:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee
Let the water and the blood, from Thy wounded side which flowed
Be for sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure¹⁶

The most important testimony in all history

John interrupts this narrative in v.35. These historical realities have a purpose. John doesn't want us to think that he is reporting these details as a *mere* historian. He says "He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe." Two things to catch here. **First**, John the Apostle was an eyewitness to these events. This isn't some idle tale. Jesus Christ commissioned the apostles—John included—to be witnesses to the world¹⁷ that these things are true truth. The fact that Jesus Christ died is an incontestable fact, and the most important testimony in all of history. Boys and girls

Belief vs. personal trust

But **secondly**, John has a purpose for stating these facts. End of v.35 "that you also may believe." If you don't believe, you will never see heaven. What must you believe? You must believe that Jesus is who He says He is. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (**John 14:6**). And the Spirit of the Living God labors to persuade you of this point above all other points—that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world. Dear unbeliever, you can be the most brilliant person in this room.

¹⁵ F.W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), pg. 434-435

¹⁶ Augustus M. Toplady (1740-1778)

¹⁷ Acts 1:8 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

You can multiple PhD.s. But if you haven't come to know Jesus Christ as your only comfort in life and in death, all your accumulated knowledge will not save you on the day of wrath. You must believe in Jesus Christ. Not believe in Christ like you believe that George Washington was the first president. Many have that kind of faith and it will not save them. No must be deeply persuaded in your heart that your soul only has refuge in Him. Saving faith is helplessly falling into the arms of the Savior.¹⁸ "Look to Christ. Bind yourself to Christ... Say to Him, "I'm yours. Save me. I am yours Lord, save me."¹⁹

God ordains the hardest events in history and our lives

John ends this section in **v.36-37** "For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." **37** And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced." Two things to see here. **First**, John points to the fact that these things were prophesied about for hundreds of years. Jesus' legs were not to be broken. Why? Because the passover lamb was not to have it's leg's broken (**Exodus 12:46**).²⁰ And Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (**John 1:29**). The second scripture comes from **Zechariah 12:10** where the pre-incarnate Christ says "they look on me, on him whom they have pierced," This is significant because John in **v.37** uses the pronoun "they" not "he." It was a single soldier a "he" that historically pierced Christ. But John switches it to "they." Why? Well most immediately it means the Jewish nation who handed Jesus over to be crucified. But it's application is to us. It was our sins. In keeping with the prophecy of **Zechariah 12:10**, it was the sins of God's people that pierced Jesus. You put Him on the cross. Dear congregation, this should

¹⁸ "The trust then which we put in God, is an evidence of our helplessness." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XXII*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 68

¹⁹ Source: <https://trulygodsgrace.wordpress.com/2009/06/09/i-am-yours-save-me-martin-luthers-prayer-psalm-11994/> accessed December 9, 2017

²⁰ Also cf. Numbers 9:12 They shall leave none of it until the morning, nor break any of its bones; according to all the statute for the Passover they shall keep it." And Psalm 34:20 "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken."

shatter all the self-righteousness in your heart. Joni Eareckson Tada once said that if you were the only sinner on planet earth, Jesus loves you so much that He would have still died for you. But then she turned it around. But if you were the only sinner on planet earth, Jesus would still have to *die* for you.

The **second** thing we see is this phrase in **v.36** “these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” God wanted these things to happen. He did not simply foreknow that they would happen and then have them inscripturated. “God knows the future because He has planned it...there is no such thing as foreknowledge independent of foreordination.”²¹ God foresees those things which He ordains. **Psalm 135:6** “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does,”²²

When hope commits suicide?

Which means this, dear congregation: the disciples were grieved to the point of despair over the death of Christ, and God ordained it. Perhaps the main human reason for their despair was because the disciples had a wrong view of Jesus. They thought that Jesus was going to be the conquerer of their enemies —namely Rome. They thought He was going to free them from their earthly oppressors. You see, they thought their real problems were circumstantial and outside of themselves. And on that basis, their hope in Christ committed temporary suicide. They didn’t realize that their real problem was themselves. Beloved, you are your real problem. You are the main problem in your world, because you are a sinner. Your problem is not your circumstances. It is your natural born alienation from God. Jesus did not come so that you could set up your personal kingdom on earth. He came so that you could be welcomed into His everlasting kingdom. Hope did not commit suicide when Jesus died. No. Hope was born when Jesus died.

²¹ *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, Ed. Joel Beeke, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), pg. 1630

²² cf. Daniel 4:34-35; Acts 15:18; Eph. 1:11

II. When God Says “Let There Be Dark”

The first fruits of death

Please look with me to **v.38-39** “After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. [39] Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.” Two men: Joseph (from the town of Arimathea) and Nicodemus, both it seems were members of the Sanhedrin—the great religious council that ruled against Jesus. However we know that Joseph did not consent to the death of Christ. **Luke 23:50-51** says that Joseph was “a good and righteous man, [51] who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God.” Yet he had not openly said that he had followed Christ. **v.39** says that he was “a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews.” Nicodemus likewise had only come to Jesus under the darkness of night (**v.39**) so that no one would know.

The reason for this was because the Jews had a standing order of excommunication for anyone who claimed Jesus was Lord. **John 9:22** “the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, *he was to be put out of the synagogue.*” You lose your standing, your family will shun you, and you will be an outcast if Jesus is your Messiah.

But something happened to these two men. Jesus is dead. The venom that the Jews had toward Him had not been abated.²³ And yet, Joseph and Nicodemus are coming out of the darkness and into the light. Where did this courage come from? They are the first fruits of Jesus death! Jesus had said in

²³ We know this because we read in Matthew 27:62-66 “The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate **63** and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’

64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” **65** Pilate said to them, “You have a guard[] of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” **66** So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.”

John 12:24 “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” The Spirit of the Living God opened their eyes and the fruit of salvation was born.

Joseph asks Pilate for the body of Jesus. To grant this request would have been unusual, because normally only the next of kin could receive the body. Only, Jesus’ unbelieving brothers are no where to be found. But God’s hand was in this and we will see why in a moment. But consider how Joseph would have answered the other council members who witnessed he and his servants take away the corpse of Jesus. ‘Joseph, *what* are you doing?’ perhaps right at the moment as they carefully were removing the nails from his hands and feet. Joseph answers ‘I am burying my Lord, my King, the Prince of Peace.’²⁴

Meanwhile, Nicodemus is securing the 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes needed to prepare Jesus’ body for burial. This probably cost him a fortune. ‘Nicodemus, who are you buying that for?’ ‘Jesus the Christ’ he answers, now completely unafraid to claim Him as His own. These two friends, perhaps unbeknownst to them, had been already purchased by that flow of blood and water.

Jesus was buried with the rich

Look with me at v.40-41 “So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. [41] Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.” Normally the Romans would have let the vultures chew on the bodies on the cross for days until there was nothing left. The Jews would indeed bury even the crucified but it would be outside of the city because they were criminals. But God’s hand is in this. Jesus would be honored in His death. This tomb that Jesus was brought to was Joseph’s own tomb (**Matthew 27:60**). Again another fulfillment of Scripture. **Isaiah 53:9** “And

²⁴ F.W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), pg. 437

they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.” Of course, all the things were happening, while everyone was totally unaware. In fact, the care that Joseph and Nicodemus and all their servants took in wrapping Jesus according to Jewish custom tells us that they were oblivious to the resurrection that would soon take place.

When God says “Let there be dark”

Finally we read in v.42 “So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.” Nicodemus and Joseph quickly performed these actions for two reasons. **First**, on the human level—the Sabbath, which began at sunset, was upon them and the law required them to cease from work. And **secondly** on the Divine level—Jesus had to be buried before sunset in order to fulfill what He had said in **Matthew 12:40** that “...the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” This has confused some, because it doesn’t appear that Jesus spent three days in the tomb. But as John MacArthur points out “The Jews counted any part of the day as constituting a day (cf. 1 Kings 12:5 with v.12; Est. 4:16 with 5:1)”²⁵ Therefore because Jesus was buried before sunset on Friday, He spent Friday,

²⁵ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 12-21*, (Chicago, IL.,: Moody Publishers, 2008), pg. 362

Saturday, and part of early Sunday morning in the grave.²⁶ And thus chapter nineteen ends, in the darkness of the tomb. Jesus is dead.²⁷ The disciples are in despair. And all the universe holds its breath to see what happens next.

²⁶ **“He descended into hell”** Where did Jesus go? There has been confusion on this point because the Apostle’s Creed says “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell.” Did Jesus descend into hell when He died? The short answer is no. There is a question as to whether or not that line was originally in the creed. (see R.C. Sproul, *St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary: John*, (Orlando, FL.,: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), pg. 376). But that aside, it’s not an illegitimate phrase if understood correctly. Jesus did suffer hell, but it was hell on the cross. He descended as it were under the full weight of the Father’s wrath. So the first part of the creed speaks of His physical suffering, while the latter part speaks of His spiritual suffering. Jesus took hell on the cross for us. His spirit did not go to hell after He died for at least three Biblical reasons. **First**, Jesus said in **John 19:30** “It is finished.” Which means the work of atonement was complete, paid in full, accomplished and no further work —like His spirit descending into hell for further punishment—was necessary. **Second**, Jesus said in **Matthew 23:46** “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” Jesus didn’t commit His spirit to hell, but to the Father. When His human spirit left His human body, it went directly to the Father, while His Divine nature was both united to His human spirit in Heaven, and His human body in the tomb. **Third**, Jesus told the thief on the cross in **Luke 23:43** “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” This is unambiguous. When the thief breathed his last, he would wake up and see Jesus in glory. Jesus did not go to hell when He died, He went to paradise. These three Biblical reasons couple with the theological argument above should hopefully satisfy the reader as to the meaning of the phrase “he descended into hell.”

²⁷ F.W. Krummacher say on this point: “Christ crucified must be the object of our affections... Detach Him from the accursed tree, and deposit Him in your hearts as your only consolation in life and death. That is the real saving love to Jesus which burns within us, and not a mere caricature of it, may be best ascertained by its being first enkindled by the sight of Him, bleeding and dying on the cross, and then embracing Him as the ever-living One. He on the contrary who runs away from the dead Christ, and imagines that the living Christ, going about doing good, teaching, and setting an example, suffices him, miscalculates, and on the day of His coming, notwithstanding his greeting of ‘Rabbi! Rabbi!’ will hear from His lips the awful words, ‘I know not whence thou art, I never knew thee!’ F.W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), pg. 441

Application

Our Doctrine: Why does God ordain the darkness?

This week I encountered three people from our congregation who are no doubt facing the trial of their lives. For some the trial has just begun. For others, it has drug on for years. Why does God ordain such darkness? The end of this chapter is absolute darkness for the disciples. I want to offer you five reasons for such seasons.²⁸

First, God often ordains the darkness so that we can learn “to be willing to be anything or nothing so that God would be glorified.”²⁹ God’s glory is ultimate in this universe. Jesus died *ultimately* that His Father would be praised (**Rom. 3:25-26**) And we often live our lives, and make choices as if God’s glory and His honor mattered very little. Do you serve Christ for His sake? God gives us seasons of darkness so that we could say with the Apostle Paul “it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.” (**Phil. 1:20**)

Secondly, God often ordains the darkness so that would discover how much remaining sin still dwells within us. We are often so blind to indwelling sin until something crosses our wishes. Paul Tripp once gave this simple but brilliant analogy. He asked what would happen if he took his full coffee cup and started shaking it? The coffee would spill. But he asked, ‘what is the reason the coffee spilled?’ Because the cup was shaken. He says no. When you shake empty cups nothing comes out. Beloved what happens when life violently shakes you? Sin comes out. It is affliction and darkness that reminds us as the Apostle Paul says “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my

²⁸ So much debt is owed to our brother John Newton who gave this advice to his younger pastor friend John Ryland Jr. in *Wise Counsel: John Newton’s Letters to John Ryland Jr.*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2011)

²⁹ *ibid*, pg. 87

flesh” (**Romans 7:18**) Our great Physician prescribes affliction not because He takes pleasure in our pain, but so that we can cling to grace alone.

Thirdly, God often ordains the darkness so that we would learn to show mercy. You were born selfish and self-centered. You would be a merciless person if you never experienced affliction. Our dear departed sister Marilyn Sullivan often struggled with anxiety. Many times over the smallest things. When visiting her during the last few months of her life, I know that I would have had zero patience for such things if it wasn’t for the fact that God had appointed a thorn of anxiety in my heart. I never experienced anxiety like I have in the past year and a half. And I was able to be patient with her just as God has been patient with me. **2 Corinthians 1:4** says that God “comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Fourthly, God often ordains the darkness so that we would discover the disappointments of earthly things.³⁰ When the bottom falls out, what brings you comfort? More hugs? Don’t get me wrong, I love hugs. I love family. I love the church. But there is a pain that runs so deep that none of these things will help. As John Newton once said “Without [Christ] a palace [turns into] a dungeon.”³¹ So God gives us the gift of affliction so that we could say with the Psalmist “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (**Psalm 73:25-26**)

Fifthly, God often ordains the darkness so we can share in the sufferings of Christ. Have you been betrayed? Jesus was betrayed by one of His closest friends. Have you felt racking pain? Jesus was whipped until He wasn’t recognizable and then nailed to a tree. Have you felt despair to the point of wanting to commit suicide? Certainly Jesus tasted that temptation. **Hebrews 4:15** says that He has been tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin.

³⁰ Newton says here: “Whatever we can see with our eyes, and touch with our hands, shrinks upon trial, and will not fully answer the expectations which the prospect raised. It quickly ceases to be new, and then we secretly say to ourselves, Is this all?” *ibid*, pg. 127

³¹ *ibid*, pg. 172

Here's the point, suffering is the holy grail of this life, because in suffering we come to know *experientially* what our Lord went through to redeem us. That's why the Apostle Paul said "Indeed, I count everything as loss (including his comfort and health and prosperity) because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings," (**Phil. 3:8,10**)³²

That's our **doctrine**: 5 reasons why God ordains the darkness.

Our Delight: Jesus' grave overcomes our deepest darkness

But what happens when reason can no longer penetrate your heart?³³ What happens when the darkness continues to stalk you? When deep depression hunt you down like wild prey? Your gospel must be able to answer those questions. William Cowper, was plagued with severe depression.³⁴ He was that great hymn writer of the 1800's. We're going to sing his song "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood" after the message. By the time Cowper was 36, he had already attempted suicide three different times. He was then institutionalized and by God's grace was born again in a mental hospital. But his depression never left him. John Newton befriended him and became his pastor for thirteen years. But there were still repeated attempts at suicide. And his ending was not happy. In early 1800, a month before he died, he told his doctor

³² Newton has several other reasons that God ordains the darkness scattered throughout his letters: So that we can learn that God's timing, not ours is the best. There are no such things as delays (pg. 93); So that we can see that when God crosses our wishes it is always for mercy (pg.99); So that we would open our hearts with thankfulness to what we do have (pg. 124); So that we would marvel at His wisdom—"The skill of the Pilot is best evidence in a storm" (pg. 153); So that we would not be ruined (pg. 177); So that we learn that our sharpest trials often come from our choicest comforts. (pg.138)

³³ John Newton once said "My soul is like a besieged city; a legion of enemies without the gates, and a nest of restless traitors within." *ibid*, pg. 88

³⁴ The info on William Cowper's life provided by John Piper's *When the Darkness Will Not Lift: Doing What We Can While We Wait for God—and Joy*, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2006), pgs. 71-75

“I feel unutterable despair.” Cowper experienced darkness until the end. He did not go out singing. His end reminds me of some of the lines from **Psalm 77** “I cry aloud to God...You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.“Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” Selah³⁵

Where is the gospel here? Where’s Cowper’s hope? Where is the hope of those who *only* feel darkness right now? It’s in the tomb. Chapter nineteen is not the dark brooding chapter in John’s book. It is our great hope. Jesus was forsaken by His Father (**Matt. 27:46**) so that the Father would never forsake you. Jesus was buried in the tomb, so that no tomb could ever hold you.³⁶ When Jesus went to the grave, He sent hell to hell for all who believe on Him. And that is true whether you are in a season of delight or in a season of despair. Cowper wasn’t saved because He cleaned Himself up before He died, Cowper was saved because Jesus took all of his brokenness on the cross. Oh beloved, Jesus said “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (**Luke 5:31-32**) If you are sick and despairing, or burdened under the weight of sin, you meet the qualification for the saving grace of Christ, because it is people like you—the sick, the broken that He came for.

That’s our **delight**: Jesus’ grave overcomes our deepest darkness

Our Duty: Stop listening to yourself and start talking to yourself

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones that great English preacher of the twentieth century preached a series of 24 sermons on spiritual depression. I believe what he says about depression has a broader application to many of the dark seasons in life. He said this “The main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our

³⁵ v.1, 4, 7, 8, 9

³⁶ “Yet God my King is from old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.” Psalm 74:12

selves...take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you...The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you must address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself.”³⁷

Lloyd Jones gets this idea from Psalm 42 where the Psalmist preaches to himself in v.5 “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation.”

Notice the Psalmist stops his self from speaking to him, and he takes over. He drowns out that voice that seeks to drag him into despair. Jones continues “then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledge Himself to do.”³⁸

Dear congregation this is different than simply thinking about God, or thinking about Bible verses. This is proclaiming to your soul the truth like you would proclaim a truth to any other human. And oh how powerful it is, because it silences the opposition.

‘**Soul**, this season of darkness will not last, Christ defeated death when He said “It is finished.” ‘**Soul**, because God forsook His Son for you, He promises that He will never forsake you.’ ‘**Soul**, even when you sin, God feels no wrath in his heart against you, because Jesus bore every ounce of it on the cross.’ ‘**Soul**, God can not be more pleased with you, because He doesn’t look at your righteousness but at the righteousness of Christ covering you.’ ‘**Soul**, nothing could ever be uncovered about you that would disqualify you from the Father’s love. It is impossible that He could love or accept you more than He does. You are free to fail, because Jesus already bore all your failures.’

So hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

³⁷ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), pg.20-21

³⁸ *ibid*, pg. 21