

GOD'S STRANGE MINISTRIES

Part 3 – The Ministry of Darkness

How God ministers to us through our times of darkness

Isaiah 50:10-11

Introduction:

Read Psalm 88:1-9; 15-18

A personal experience

My current understanding

Many mature believers sincerely committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, heavily committed to serving Him in the world, very much involved with people, and even diligently practicing their Christian faith and the disciplines of prayer and Bible reading - at one time or another experience a time of darkness, despair and God's silence in their Christian life.

Oswald Chambers describes this situation as one in which God seems to ***“withdraw for a time His conscious blessing”***.

The sixteenth century mystic John of the Cross called this experience ***“The Dark night of the soul”*** and described it as ***“an important spiritual discipline whilst tortuous is a fruitful ascetic path to the goal of intimate union with God.”***

The “Dark Night of the Soul” described

The dark night or the night season is simply the transition we make from depending upon our own sight and our own selves to a total dependence upon Christ and His faithfulness.

Most of us do not jump for joy when faced with the prospect of brokenness.

There is a deeper and more abiding union – an experiential oneness with God

This darkness does not come from the enemy, but from God who loves us.

Jesus Had His Own Dark Night of the Soul

All throughout the New Testament, we are told that we are to keep our eyes focused on Jesus, because He is our example. The apostle Peter makes this fact very plain:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. (1 Pet 4:1)

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. (1 Pet 2:21)

1. On the Mount of Olives prior to His crucifixion Jesus experienced incredible darkness (Luke 22:42-44; Mark 14:34)

2. On the cross just before His death Jesus experienced total abandonment by His Father and the world around Him was plunged into darkness (Mark 15:33-34)

3. Isaiah 53 describes prophetically Jesus' "Dark night of the soul" (Isaiah 53:4-8)

The Fellowship of His Suffering

(Matthew 26:38; Philippians 3:10; 2 Timothy 2:11-12; Rom 8:17).

**How should we as Christians approach this "dark night of the soul"?
Turn your Bibles to Isaiah 50:10-11**

10. Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.

11. But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.

Isaiah 50:10-11

Here "darkness" is NOT sin, but rather "uncertainty/confusion/despair/stress". This passage does not address "lost" people, but those who very much fear the Lord. "Darkness" refers to "absence of light". When a person who fears the Lord, obeys His voice, acts in reverence to God, suddenly finds themselves walking in darkness - it means that the light has been withdrawn.

Compare the two possibilities:

1. *Walking in the light:*

- I know where I am going
- I have vision
- I see the way
- I can size up the situation

2. *Walking in the dark*

- I cannot see
- I bump into obstacles
- I have lost vision
- I have no perspective
- God is silent
- I struggle to evaluate properly

This is the inevitable experience from time to time for every Christian...

However, without these challenges we are weak, shallow...

Isaiah 50:10-11 suggests three (3) guidelines:

- Keep on walking
- Don't light your own fire
- Find a staff to lean on

1. *Keep on walking – Isaiah 50:10*

Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.

What is God teaching here?

It is certainly easier to praise God, pray, share, read the Bible, and witness when everything is going well, but what about our strength of faith, over and above circumstances. How do we go in these dark times?

The reason God lets us go through the dark is that He wants us to discover that there is something better than LIGHT! Yes! It is the Lord!

2. Don't light your own fire – Isaiah 50:11

But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.

Examples of lighting our own fires

Moses, Abraham, Peter

It is very tempting to light your own fire and so help God. There are two reasons why we should avoid this action:

- Darkness is ordained by God as much as is light - Isaiah 45:7 - the purpose of God in creation of the earth and us was to use light and darkness for our growth
- Man-made light is deceptive, Constant exposure to man-made light lead to a decline in health

Faith can only be developed in darkness.

So don't light your own fire.

3. Find a staff to lean on – Isaiah 50:10

Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.

rely = trust = lean on as with a staff/rod

cf. Psalm 23 and Proverbs 3:5-6

Psalm 23 NIV - A Psalm of David.

Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV

Application

What is being said is this:

When God seems a long way away.....

When your prayers seem unanswered and hit the ceiling.....

When you read your Bible and it fails to speak.....

When your desires for obedience, witness etc. fade and the darkness is intense....

When there is no emotional peace, no confirmation - what should you do?

- keep walking

- don't light your own fires for light
- lean on the Lord

God wants us to prove the trustworthiness of Himself at these times...

(Hebrews 11:1, 6 ; Romans 1:17; 14:23; Romans 14:23)

Faith is not a luxury but a necessity.

God gives us times of “darkness” so that we

- *trust in Him rather than our security*
- *trust in Him rather than His blessings*
- *trust in Him rather than the light*
- *trust in Him rather than the results*
- *trust in Him rather than our feelings, wishes, needs and prejudices*
- *to melt away the hardness of our heart and produce brokenness*
- *to destroy anything in our lives that is useless or unproductive*
- *to reshape us and make us more pliable for use*
- *to make us more like Jesus aligned with God's will*
- *to endow us with more power*
- *to experience for ourselves “the fellowship of His sufferings”*
- *to teach us how to mentor and help others, by learning more about ourselves and our responses to these night seasons and develop compassion for others*
- *to increase our need and desire for God*
- *to learn more about the importance of the cross, God's grace and mercy, God's ways, God's love and His word.....the list goes on.*

Let us thank God for His strange ministries...especially that of darkness. It is a necessity pathway to greater intimacy with and trust in God.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Think back through your life as a Christian. What were the most faith-strengthening events in your life? Did they involve times of darkness? In what way?
2. Carefully go back through the note outline to understand the three aspects of advice given in Isaiah 50:10-11 when faced with a time of darkness.

keep walking

don't light your own fires for light

lean on the Lord

In your own words describe each element.

3. As a Christian, in your times of darkness, have you ever tried to work your way through such times by adopting a pathway without reference to God? How did this work out for you?
4. Go back over your experiences as outlined in Q1. Did you ever apply the advice given in Isaiah 50:10-11 when faced with times of darkness? Did the outcome work for you and was it faith-strengthening in God? In what way?
5. What advice would you give others when they face times of darkness?
6. Spend time in prayer and God's Word reflecting on the truths of this teaching.