

JOY WAY

An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul

TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

DARKEST PLACES NEED THE BRIGHTEST LIGHTS - Philippians 2:14-18

"DARKEST Africa", said H. M. Stanley long ago. "Darkest England", said Booth more recently. Well -

LIGHTS ARE MADE FOR DARKNESS

You may live, or work, in a dark place. A home where, sadly enough, you are the only Christian; a workshop, factory or office where there is sheer indifference, amused contempt, or even active opposition to the things of GOD. You find it hard to maintain your principles, to keep up your end, to bear your witness. You know, don't you, that there is a reason for your being in such a place.

GOD couldn't trust everybody to represent Him in such inimical circumstances - but He chose you, because He believes He can rely on you to be faithful.

It is always a privilege to be trusted; but how high an honour to be trusted by GOD! "**We were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel**", I Thessalonians 2:4, says Paul; and you can almost catch a tone of proper pride in his utterance. He bore, and exercised, his trust in many a difficult and dark situation, as we all know; and so it is with you, in your trying conditions.

You can't imagine a lighthouse complaining of the hardness of its lot set out there all alone on that rocky coast amid the mountainous seas and the howling tempest. If it were a sentient being, it would console itself with the reflection that that was what it was for - to hold out the light of the Gospel message of comfort, safety and guidance to storm-tossed vessels battling with the hurricane and looking for the harbour.

That's what you are for: if you, by GOD'S good grace, are a light, you are just the one for a dark place. Don't disappoint His trust in you.

Take a look now at the situation of these Philippian believers, as Paul describes it. They are:

(i) "**In the world**" (15). It is a darksome place to live the Christian life in. At the best of times it has an unfriendly atmosphere about it; and it is, of course, along with the flesh and the devil, one of the three sources of our temptation.

In the New Testament, "**the world**" holds a moral significance, and, in this sense, is used to stand for all that is not of GOD. A worldly Christian is as a ship that has sprung a leak and allowed the sea to get in. All's well with the ship in the sea; all's ill when the sea is in the ship. The Christian is left here "**in the world**", John 17:11, 15: trouble begins when he allows the world to get into him.

That's how it was with one of Paul's erstwhile friends, "**Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world**", II Timothy 4:10. So, you see, the world is materially a location, but morally a lure.

Observe this further description of the Philippian church.

(ii) "**In the midst of a crooked and perverse nation** [generation]" (15) So these particular Christians were also in a dark spot. The spiritual life is not going to be easy for them either. I don't suppose your difficulties and problems are so exacting as were theirs.

A "**crooked**" people - they were not straight, they couldn't think straight, act straight, go straight. Proverbs 2:15, tells of people "**whose ways are crooked**".

The whole multitude of the Philippian neighbours was in that case - "**we have turned every one to his own way**", Isaiah 53:6, would be a perfect description of them. A "**perverse**" people - distorted, as the word means: they were not only out of straight, but out of shape.

Like this early Christian age, how distorted are our own times:

- the distorted view of GOD, as of a placid easy-going father who will not punish sin;
- the distorted view of Scripture, as of a book, very remarkable certainly, but only of human authorship and authority;
- the distorted view of moral values, as of things and thoughts now out-of-date in a free, promiscuous age;
- the distorted view of pleasure, as if speed, and "shows", and silver were the prime necessities of life.

"**Perverse nation**", says the Master, in Matthew 17:17; "**speaking perverse things**", says the disciple, in Acts 20:30. What a condition of things - men, and minds, and moments of darkness: just what lights are made and meant for!

LIGHTS ARE SUBJECT TO INFLUENCE

There are things that help, and things that hinder. Of course, if we are not "**sons of God**" (15), there is no light at all in our souls, and we cannot be as lights to others. Unless, and until, we have entered into the family of GOD we have not really begun to live in the Scriptural and

eternal sense, whatever our other accomplishments may be. That was what astonished Nicodemus at his night interview with JESUS.

This highly educated, civil and ecclesiastical leader, and good-living man, come to discuss the new doctrine of this New Teacher, is suddenly held up, at the outset of the conversation, and challenged with the devastating statement that he had not yet begun - "**Ye must be born again**", John 3:7.

It seems that he did thus begin that night - judging from his shy remark in 7:50, and his open action in 19:39.

Have you begun?

Well now, on *the Hindering side* - "**murmurings and disputings**" (14): the inward and the outward respectively, the veiled and the open, probably in relation to GOD; "the moral and the intellectual rebellion against GOD" says Lightfoot.

There is doubtless a reference here to the murmurings of the children of Israel, Numbers 20:2; 21:5. "**Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured**", I Corinthians 10:10. There can be no red light unless there is perfect alignment and adjustment with Him. Do you think there is some hint of this in the Master's saying in John 8:12 - "**I am the Light of the World, he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.**"

Let me suggest an allusion. On a clear night, you look up into the sky and say to your friend, "How brightly the moon is shining." You should say, of course, "How brightly the sun is shining", for the moon has no light of her own. She is only reflecting the light of the sun. You can't see it, for the sun has long since "gone down"; but the moon keeps her face to that light, and so walks in the light.

If she were, by a fraction, to turn her face away - any "**murmurings and disputings**" - there would be no light.

Transfer all this to our Lord's words. He is that Sun - "**the Sun of Righteousness**", Malachi 4:2; we are that Moon, a luminary in the dark place; as we "follow" in the Sun's track and orbit, with undeviating obedience, "**without murmurings and disputings**", we catch the Light and convey it to a darkling world.

Thus "**we all, with open [unveiled] face beholding . . . the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory**", II Corinthians 3:18 - Only let all the glory be ascribed, not to us, but to Him: not "How bright the Moon is", but "How bright the Sun is"!

Very well then, no "**disputings**" - no cross-purposes.

And next, on *the Helping side* - "**blameless and harmless... without rebuke**" (15). Plummer suggests that these three negative adjectives should be understood to mean:

- free from blame,

- free from adulteration,
- free from blemish.

The lights of Paul's day would be derived from oiled wicks; and if you are old enough to have had experience of oil lamps, you will remember how the light was dimmed and impeded by those excrescences that sometimes adhered to the wick - and how the light leaped to its proper brightness when the wick was trimmed.

To be free of all adhesions of the evil is such a help towards the bright light of Christian testimony.

Do you remember that wonderful picture of the living Lord "**in the midst of the seven candle-sticks,**" Revelation 1:13 - that is, the seven churches, most of whose wicks are seen, in chapters 2 and 3, to be cluttered with moral and spiritual accretions, dimming their light.

So we observe this "**one like unto the Son of Man**" trimming the lamps. That same Lord JESUS would so readily trim our light, too, if we gave Him the chance. What a help that would be - no impediments.

We have heard talk of spots on the sun: let there be no spots on you!

LIGHTS ARE BEARERS OF BLESSING

Where there are no lights there are always possible dangers, and often there is sin. Recall that startling disclosure of certain evil hearts, in John 3:19, "**This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.**"

Think of that horseriding messenger traversing an unfamiliar coast road with a most important communication, at dead of night, who, in a sudden flash of lightning, finds that he is on the very edge of a precipitous cliff - what a blessing was that brilliant light.

Think of that lonely, wounded soldier, returning to consciousness, miserably lost, out on the South African veldt: he has a compass in his pocket, but it is useless, because he can't see it in the black darkness; then he observes a tiny light seemingly approaching him; yes, it is a wee glow-worm, by whose light he is just able to read his compass and eventually to find his way to the English lines - what a blessing was that little light.

You and I, my reader, whether great or little lights, what a help we might be "**in the world**", if only we would shine - aiding some to see, and escape, the dangerous precipice of sin, aiding others wounded and lost in sin to find their way home to GOD. Oh, the joy of being a light like this.

Our Lord said, "**I am the light of the world**", John 8:12, as we saw just now. He also said, "**Ye are the light of the world**", Matthew 5:14. What a privilege! It is His light that we get into ourselves, and then give out to others. It isn't always easy; but what a happiness!

Our passage describes it as "**Holding forth the word of life**" (16) - which changes the metaphor, but not the meaning.

"**Holding forth**", or just as easily "holding out", as if offering a gift. What an offer is this that we are entrusted with; what a responsibility is thereby ours; what a mixed reception it will meet with; what a variety of ways in which it can be proffered.

This "**word of life**" is but another name for the light; for remember Psalm 119:105, "**Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.**"

On a certain ocean liner, a passenger was lying in his cabin seriously ill. One dark night he heard a cry "Man overboard", and while sensitive to all the excitement and hurry, he was too unwell to give any help.

One of the difficulties was that they could not see the man.

All of a sudden, however, a light shone out through the glass of a port-hole. It happened to fall full on the struggling man in the water, so that they were able to throw him a life-belt and then go to his rescue.

Whence came that light? From the sick man, who, feeling so distressed at his incapacity to help, managed to crawl out of his bunk, take the lantern down from the wall, and place it where it could shine forth.

Imagine his joy when he learned that it was he and his lantern that had saved the man. What a light was that man, what a light was that lantern. If we would be lights shining for souls drowning, not in the sea, but in sin, we shall do it best by knowing, by using, and by living the lantern of GOD'S word.

LIGHTS HAVE FIRST TO BE LIT

This is, I think, what lies behind the rest of our verse 16 - that Paul looks forward to rejoicing at the judgment seat of CHRIST, when the Christian's work shall be estimated, I Corinthians 3:13, that his own work shall prove to have been not as a lost race, nor as lost labour, that it shall appear that he had been GOD'S light to light these Philippian lights that were to "**shine as lights in the world**".

Paul had set them alight. That is generally GOD'S way: nearly always He uses human instruments. And some times it is lesser lights that light larger lights - matches ignite torches. What a torch Peter was: it was the smaller Andrew that set a match to him. John 1:42. What a torch Nehemiah became: it was the almost unknown Hanani that set him aflame, Nehemiah 1:2. Have you heard of that torch, C. H. Spurgeon?

Yes, but have you known the name of the match, that old lay preacher that winter's morning in the Colchester chapel? Have you ever heard of a Mr. Kimball? You should have, for his name is well known in Heaven - he was only a match, but he set a great torch alight, Dwight L. Moody. You will have heard of Maria Millis? No? Well, have you heard of the Earl of Shaftesbury? Yes,

of course - he was the torch, but she was the match: his childhood nurse, who sowed the seed, struck the spark, lit the flame.

We can't all be torches, but we can all be matches - though we ourselves are of such insignificant personality as a match, we can, if we are lit, set another ablaze for GOD as a veritable torch. Ah, and more than one. Have you ever played that parlour game, How many candles can you light with one match?

This was the employ that gave Paul the greatest joy of his life - to have led Timothy into the light, "**my own son in the faith**", I Timothy 1:2; or Titus, "**mine own son after the common faith**", Titus 1:4; or Onesimus, "**whom I have begotten in my bonds**", Philemon 10; or Philemon himself, "**thou owest unto me even thine own self**", Philemon 19; and many, many another, including the recipients of this Epistle, "**my joy and crown**", Philippians 4:1!

Make it your aim, my reader, to light as many candles as you can with your match, even if you suffer the burning of your own fingers. You were not lit for yourself alone.

Have you had a kindness ["the kindness", Titus 3:4] shown?

Pass it on !

"Twas not meant for thee alone,
Pass it on!
Let it travel down the years,
Let it dry another's tears,
Till in Heaven the deed appears,
Pass it on!"

Doggerel, did you say? Well, good sense, anyway - and even, spiritually, good manners.

Paul has in mind the idea of that last longer line, "till in Heaven the deed appears", when he speaks of his desire to "**rejoice in the day of Christ.**" May we, too, have that joy.

The late Dean Vaughan, bygone famous trainer of aspiring young ministers of the Gospel - who, by the way, were dubbed "Vaughan's doves" used, in his last lecture to them, to say, "Gentlemen, whatever else you are or do, make sure that you so order your life and ministry that when you get up yonder there shall be many a one who shall take you by the hand and lead you to the Throne and say, 'Lord, in Thy power, this man brought me here.'"

Yes, indeed, bliss for the soul-winner, the life-lighter, Here and Hereafter. But -

LIGHTS ARE SACRIFICIAL THINGS

Do you recall how that, when referring to that flaming torch, John Baptist, our Lord said. "**He was a burning and a shining light**", John 5:35 - there is no shining without burning. The rule is clearly evident in the disappearing wax of the candle - or in the consumption of the oil of the lamp; but it is true in all cases - there is no light without combustion. So the remainder of this

present passage is concerned with the sacrificial aspect of the Christian life.

The allusion of verse 17 is to a practice operating in both Jewish and heathen religions. We may assume that it was the latter that Paul referred to, inasmuch as the Philippian Christians would scarcely be familiar with Jewish ways; but, having themselves just come out from heathendom, they would at once catch the allusion to the pagan rites.

When certain annual sacrifices were made, the custom was to accompany the offering with a pouring of wine. Josephus tells us that in Jewish sacrifices this drink-offering, Numbers 15:5, was poured "around" the altar; whereas in the heathen rite, the libation was poured "upon" the victim.

It is "**upon**" that is used here, which I take to strengthen the suggestion that the apostle's reference is to the heathen practice.

This being clear, we may now conclude that Paul thinks of their sacrifice as the oblation and his bloodshedding, when it comes, as the libation. Listen to Lightfoot's summing-up. "The Philippians are the priests; their faith (or their good works springing from their faith) is the sacrifice; Paul's life-blood the accompanying libation." In this mutual self-giving, the apostle finds cause for mutual gladness - "**I joy, and rejoice**" (17); "**ye joy, and rejoice**" (18).

Darkest places need the brightest lights. How true!

Let us see to it that by GOD'S grace there shall be no damage to our testimony. that might cause shipwreck, alas, to any soul. May I repeat W. Y. Fullerton's great story?

One night, off the Florida coast, a tempestuous gale was blowing. The violence of the wind was so terrific that it stove in the glass of one of the sides of the lantern of the lighthouse set to guard that part of the treacherously rocky shore. The keeper had no other glass to cover the gap and shield the lamp, and doing his best, he fixed in a sheet of tin.

In the storm a harassed ship was beating up, trying to find harbour, and not finding a light that he knew should be there the captain got confused and ran his vessel on to the rocks, when boat and all hands were lost. Why? Because the lighthouse had one part dark!

I go straight to Luke 11:36, "**having no part dark**" - oh, the damage, even the shipwreck we may cause to another soul and life, if by some unjudged habit, some wretched inconsistency, some slack behaviour, some "**part dark**", obscuring the light, we bring loss to others.

Let us close our meditation with the prayer that we may be "**full of light**", and full of the "**joy**" of our concluding verses.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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