

The Purpose of Night

by Ward Fenley

Night is half of our experience. Day is the other half. This may seem like an elementary observation, but does it tell us at least something of how we should intellectually deal with night's existence—not just night as a physical experience when the sun is not shining, but the dark times which seem to come at regular and irregular intervals? "...and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Genesis 1:4); "I form the light, and create darkness" (Isaiah 45:7). God has obviously seen fit to create the darkness. Let's briefly answer why and this will help us move ahead with the acceptance of night as something with purpose and benefit.

It has been said that darkness is merely the absence of light. But is this really the case? Isaiah tells us that God forms the light and creates darkness. Therefore we must conclude that darkness requires creation. God is light and in Him is no darkness. So then, darkness is not simply the absence of light. Before anything, there was only light, for there was only God. Darkness cannot exist unless God creates it. When it was only God, it was only light. If there was only light, and only God, then why create darkness?

Revelation 4:11 Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

"For Thy pleasure"? That seems almost crass. Yet, out of all the beings in the universe, wouldn't it be justified that God alone has that right? Does He have the right to create something for His pleasure? It would be presumptuous to say no. But now the question is: why would God create darkness for His pleasure, whether that darkness is literal or metaphorical? Again, God is light and in Him is no darkness. Yet God in His infinite wisdom found pleasure in creating something totally contrary to Himself.

The purpose of this essay is not to distinguish between physical darkness and metaphorical darkness. Both exist. Rather, the purpose of this essay is to perceive all darkness as fulfilling a superior plan which oftentimes eludes our understanding, and that somehow the darkness we experience is being caused to work together for our good and His glory (Romans 8:28).

Have you ever battled insomnia? Insomnia can lead to frustration, irritation, and more seriously, depression. Typically, insomnia can either keep us from falling asleep or wake us in the middle of the night. Because our body naturally shuts down at night, our brain has difficulty processing dismal thoughts which otherwise could be logically and productively assessed. In other words, thoughts we could normally work through may end up bringing about despair in the middle of the night. When those thoughts come there is always the longing for morning. We see this type of language used in Scripture in various ways to refer to various situations. In the first century, the New Testament tells us the darkness of the Old Covenant was said to be passing away as the Temple was about to be destroyed:

1 John 2:8 Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him

and in you: because the darkness is passing, and the true light now shines.

Ephesians 5:8 For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:

Romans 13:12 The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.

2 Peter 1:19 We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:

For God's people in the New Testament, the light of the conscience cleared by the blood of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:14) was in stark contrast to the darkness of guilt. "Walk as children of light (clear conscience)" the apostle Paul writes to the church at Ephesus. Yet in the Old Testament we read passages which seem to speak of the people of God anticipating a future day when light would rule the darkness:

Psalm 30:5 For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

Psalm 18:28 For thou wilt light my candle: the LORD my God will enlighten my darkness.

Isaiah 60:2 For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.

In the New Testament the dark place was the conscience gradually being lit with the light of Christ:

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But under the Old Covenant the curse of sin's darkness prevailed. They walked through the valley of the shadow (darkness) of death (the guilty conscience). But God gave them hope. They hoped for the light which would one day come to them. God's anger (effected through the imposition of a guilty conscience) would endure for a moment, but joy (the clear conscience because of the forgiveness of sins) would come in the morning:

Act 26:18 To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

Christ had come. The Daystar had arisen in their hearts. Just as darkness was overcome through their faith in Jesus Christ, so today our darkness is overcome through that same faith. Through faith, guilt (darkness) is removed and innocence (light) replaces it. "I am the Light of the world. If any man follows after Me, he shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12) Isaiah foretold this:

Isaiah 60:19-21 The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness

shall the moon give light unto thee: but the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. (20) Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended. (21) Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.

Isaiah associated righteousness with the everlasting light of God. Righteousness and light and a clear conscience are synonymous. John equates light with love:

1 John 2:3-11 And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. (4) He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (5) But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. (6) He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked. (7) Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning. (8) Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth. (9) He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. (10) He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. (11) But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.

To love is to have the light of God; that is, a pure conscience and God's presence. God is love. God is light. In Him is no guilt, no darkness. Loving our brothers and sisters in Christ is to display that our consciences are freed from guilt (darkness). As recipients of mercy (forgiveness, or light) we display that mercy, forgiveness, light, and love toward God's people. We walk in the light as He is in the light and have fellowship (communion) with Him and each other. Fellowship, or communion, is based upon forgiveness or light. Fellowship is the result of love (which is light):

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

The first century world of Jesus was covered by the darkness of self-righteousness:

John 3:19-21 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (20) For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. (21) But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

The deeds of the self-righteous were evil because they were done with evil motives. This is why Isaiah described the *righteousnesses* of his people as "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). The story of the Israelites is marked by constant strife and division. Self-righteousness always leads to comparison and schism. But the communion of Christ (light, love and forgiveness) brings healing from sin and escape from judgment. All true communion has light, or love, as its foundation. We commune with God through

His light. That is, we commune with Him through His love. Through Christ being our mercy seat (Romans 3:25) we commune with God (Exodus 25:22). This is how we know we are His and know we are present with Him (communing with Him): when we love (bestow light and forgiveness upon) one another.

Now, all that said, what purpose is there for times that seem like night or darkness? What purpose is there for physical night or darkness? Let me offer a possible explanation. God is said to be the Light of the world. He is called the Sun of righteousness in Malachi. The physical sun is purely bright. In fact, no stars can be seen when the sun is out. However, when the sun goes down, the stars begin to shine. In Daniel 12 God's people are seen as stars shining forever:

Daniel 12:3 And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.

Stars shine in the midst of darkness. Otherwise there is really no way to tell that they are stars. God has created darkness as an eternal backdrop for each and every one of His people. It is His desire that they would show forth His glory in the midst of darkness. Metaphorical darkness is the primary form of darkness in Scripture. In the Old Testament Scriptures darkness is contrasted with light:

Psalms 112:4 Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness: he is gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous.

Isaiah 42:16 And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them.

God promised to turn guilt into innocence and freedom. He promised to be present with them. God is light, and when He is present with us there can be no darkness. Just as there is no darkness in Him, so also, for those in whom He dwells, there is no darkness in them.

But His people are placed in a universe of darkness to shine forever in the midst of that darkness. This is why there are constant admonitions to let our light shine:

Philippians 2:15 That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;

Matthew 5:14-16 Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. (15) Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. (16) Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Powerfully, Jesus shows our responsibility before others. Let light shine. That is, let our love and forgiveness shine toward other believers. Let the unforgiving in the self-righteous world (that is the world among which Jesus lived, as He was among the Pharisees) see our love for each other:

John 13:34-35 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. (35) By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

Jesus declares that our love (mercy and forgiveness) needs to be displayed. Mercy and forgiveness (true love and light) are foreign to the ways of self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is darkness. Judgment in hypocrisy is the leaven and darkness of the self-righteous world. This type of self-righteousness is a part of the many nights God has created in order for the light (love) of His people to be contrasted against it. When we begin to view night from this perspective, that is, the perspective of God having created it so that He would shine through us in the midst of it, suddenly we see an eternally beautiful purpose for darkness. It is to show how magnificent God's love is in a world of hate, judgment, and unforgiveness. God's love is what draws, not the self-righteousness of hypocrisy and evil judgment. Self-righteousness appears to be light. But there is no mercy in self-righteousness. Legalism and self-righteousness produce judgment, enmity, comparison, and division. At first it seems like light. But it is starkly contrasted with the light of mercy, or love. Jesus speaks of this imagined light in haunting terms:

Matthew 6:19-24 Lay not up for yourselves treasures [self-righteous works] upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: (20) But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: (21) For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (22) The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. (23) But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! (24) No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

If the light that is in the self-righteous be darkness, such darkness is the pathway of the blind. They are blinded by the darkness of empty works. But the light of mercy and love has been created in God's people to always be contrasted with that darkness.

With these things in mind, how do we approach times of darkness? That is, knowing the prime example of light and darkness (love vs. self-righteousness), how can we view other apparent examples of darkness, or night? We have seen how to view the night sky with the stars shining in its midst. It is evident that the stars represent God's people in the midst of a world of blindness, before whom we are to shine as lights. Thus we find deep meaning even in the night sky. But how do we view and even accept the darkness of hurt, discomfort, disobedience, depression, and death?

The most important aspect of darkness to remember is that God "formed the darkness." As we have seen, God causes everything for our good. His love is powerfully involved in us and our living. No darkness in our eternal existence could possibly be the result of random chance or a misfiring of creation. God creates with purpose. "All things were created by Him and for Him, and by Him all things consist." Whatever form of night which seems to surround us, we can be confident that the

night is the mysteriously loving hand of God designed to make His own light shine in us. The darkness feels like the valley of death, even the valley of the shadow of death. But God brings that shadow to us to make His light all the more beautiful and brilliant. Nothing is quite as extreme as long-term suffering or death. But God will bring joy, sometime. Long-term suffering is depressing. Yet, we must watch God work, sometimes over years, to bring joy and purpose. There may even be times when we cannot see the purpose in suffering. Enduring pain and suffering for long periods of time, whether physical or emotional, is draining. Through the darkness of tears God will eventually bring us back to a place of retreat and comfort. In the midst of it we wonder where joy has gone. Before I got married I never really thought about the intense love which would develop between me and my wife, and certainly between me and my two boys. Nothing is as sobering as thinking of losing them. As I have spoken with many parents they experience the same thoughts. For whatever reason these thoughts can plague parents. And unfortunately some parents actually do outlive their children. How can such a tragedy find purpose or usefulness? It is vital to understand that even though we often cannot see purpose in the night of suffering, God has with great purpose brought this night to reveal His light and love. I remember weeping when I first read of Isaac losing his mother and then being comforted by his wife:

Genesis 24:67 And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

God continues to bring comforts into the lives of His people to alleviate the emotional turmoil experienced because of tragedy. We can take this passage of the eternal salvation experience and apply it to the momentary sadness of the various nights that seem to enshroud us:

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

We must look at the temporary moments of night as those signposts which lead us to the various joys and pleasures God uses to take us to a higher place. This is what God has done for us in His marvelous plan of redemption. It should not surprise us that He uses these things to remind us of that plan.

Many mistakenly assume that becoming a Christian means deliverance from any times of doubt and dismay. But without the cold times of doubt and dismay, the warming times of courage, strength, and confidence would not seem so powerfully triumphant. God does not want any of us trusting in our times of confidence. Rather, He wants us trusting in Him who gives confidence and assurance. The enemies of the cross try to tell us that times of doubt and shaking faith are evidences of unbelief. But David had many, many doubts:

Psalms 42:2-5 My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? (3) My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God? (4) When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the

house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. (5) Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.

David was a "man after God's heart" and yet had times of severe discouragement. His was discouraged for various reasons, not the least of which was disobedience, enemies coming against him, and just normal human experience. But when his soul was troubled, He sought God and His people (vv. 4,5). David continues:

Psalm 42:7-11 Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. (8) Yet the LORD will command his lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life. (9) I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? (10) As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God? (11) Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.

David viewed God as "the health of my countenance" (vs. 11). The word *countenance* can be properly translated "face." God is the health of our faces. Sorrow can change our minds, and thus our faces. When we are in despair our faces often show forth that despair. David sought God to be the health of His face; to bring him a new countenance and a new appearance. In the night, God's song was still with David. David was in the night of the law of sin and death before Christ came. We are no longer under that night. But in the temporary 'nights' God brings our way, God is still our healthy face.

We must ask ourselves: why has God created night? Why has God created darkness? What is the purpose of this time of trouble? God must be our song, our health, our bright countenance during desperate times. God refreshes us. The renewal of strength as the eagle is primarily about salvation. But that renewed strength should help us to soar:

Isaiah 40:28-31 Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. (29) He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. (30) Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: (31) But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

The believers during the Old Testament era waited for Jesus Christ to come. He has come and brought the fullness of redemption. How much more is God able to take our temporal sorrows and cause us to lift to higher places?

May we remind others of these truths while remaining entirely sensitive to their times of sorrows. May we weep when they weep, and laugh when they laugh.

Can you take me higher
To a place where blind men see?
Can you take me higher
To a place with golden streets?

--Creed