

The Light of Dawn

Proverbs 4:1-19 | Bryce Beale | March 26, 2017

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”¹

Isaiah the prophet predicted this, that light would one day dawn over the darkness in which his people sat—he looked with a hardened eye to the horizon and saw only the pitch of night. Israel, who was to be a candle amidst the dark world, plunged herself into the same darkness. Her candle had gone out.

Yet the prophet, moved by the Spirit of God, spoke amidst a people of unclean lips and offered a promise pure as crystal: A light would one day dawn on this darkened earth.

So many centuries later, a rabbi walked along the Sea of Galilee. A star of light, piercing the midnight sky, had announced his birth and led the wisemen of a far nation to him; but now, as he walked along the coast, and as he began to open his mouth and teach, that former starlight began to fade, overwhelmed by the beams of a rising sun. A light was dawning, just as the prophet had predicted.

The sheep of Israel had long been harassed and helpless, subject to the misinformation of their wolfish leaders, and the sway of their superstitions. But now a light was shining in the darkness. The Gentiles had been given over to the worship of wood and gold, and to infinite fancies that pretended to be theology. But now a light could be seen on the horizon.

As the apostle John would write not long afterward, “the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”²

The rabbi was Jesus, the light of the world.

It is no wonder then that his followers should be so in love with the truth. We had stumbled through years of midnight; but when Jesus knocked upon our hearts, he brought with him the first light we had ever seen. We lived on lies; he was the first undiluted truth we tasted.

When we urge others to become friends with this Jesus, to trust him completely and make a full surrender to him, it is not because we think we have unearthed the mysteries of this world and can explain them fully. We do not purport to be the dawn for our neighbors; we will not have the answer for every question. But we have seen the dawn—yes,

¹ Isaiah 9:2 (ESV).

² 1 John 2:8.

the very light of the world. We can only commend him to those who, like we once did ourselves, walk in dark valleys.

And since we now walk in the light, and know what it was to walk in the darkness, we love the truth as it is found in Jesus. Like the residents of Sodom, we were struck blind and strained uselessly after our sins; like Elymas the magician our eyes had been blocked off to the light, and we needed someone to lead us by the hand.

We were blind; but *now* we see. Now the light has dawned upon us, revealing to us what is true.

With the apostle Paul we can say,

[W]e have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.³

Ah yes, the temptation remains to cover our sins, to cast up a smoke screen when another tries to confront us—but we know that in honesty and repentance is our strength.

We know as well as any that a little dishonesty here, a lapse of our integrity there, and we will probably advance more quickly in some lines of work, and make more money in the end. But if we must sacrifice our newfound light, our truth and wisdom, to get the wealth, then we have only gotten what one commentator calls “thousands of shining nothings.”⁴

Jesus is the truth—and as we will settle for none but Jesus, we must settle for nothing but the truth.

Consider this as we read our text for this morning, from Proverbs chapter 4.

PROVERBS 4:1-19

The two offers

We might imagine Jesus himself, with the truth held in one hand, since in him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” extending that hand toward you palm up, the truth sitting there like a glistening metal, reflecting light. And Jesus makes his appeal that you take it.

³ 2 Corinthians 4:2.

⁴ George Lawson, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1984), 80.

Jesus' offer

"Hear!" he may say, as in verse 1; or more intimately, as in verse 10, "Hear, *my son*." He reaches his arm nearer you. "Be attentive," he says like verses 1 and 2 as he gazes into your eyes, "that you may gain insight, for I give you good precepts."

The words of Solomon's father, the great King David, recorded in this chapter beginning in verse 4, also reflect the heart of Christ toward you. "Let your heart hold fast my words."

Then the appeal becomes more firm, more compassionately sober, saying as in verses 5 and onward, "Get wisdom; get insight! Take it! Whatever you get, make sure you get this."

There bright wisdom sits in his palm, and you eye it questioningly. But this is not what Christ desires. "You must *love* her, prize her, embrace her!"

You must join the lover of Psalm 119 and say, "I find my delight in your commandments, which I love."⁵

We remember Jesus before Pontius Pilate, that lamb led to the slaughter silent before his shearer. When he does speak to the Roman governor, these words fall graciously from his lips: "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."⁶

Pilate retorts, "What is truth?" and walks away.

Oh Pilate, if you had only loved the truth, you would have heard it and had it—or rather, him! "What is truth?" The very man you ask this question, *he* is the way, and the truth. And if only you were of the truth, and loved the truth, you would have known. You would have perceived the invisible light that surrounded this beacon of God.

But Pilate did not love the truth—he did what our passage in Proverbs powerfully warns against. He forsook the teaching. He traded truth for convenience, and so we see him washing his hands as he delivers to death a man he knows to be innocent. Darkness descends.

What grief in the heart of the Savior, who yet holds forward his hand with its treasure of wisdom. As Pilate turns away, we can almost hear Jesus take up the words of our passage.

⁵ Psalm 119:47.

⁶ John 18:37.

“Do not forsake my teaching!” in verse 2, and in verse 5, “do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.” And in verse 13, “Keep hold of instruction; do not let go!” Pilate let go.

The devil’s offer

“Pilate let go, yes—but he did not do as badly as Judas,” you might say. Well, perhaps. We are quick to condemn Judas, who betrayed Jesus into that circumstance in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. But know that Judas is not the only one to sell Jesus, and silver is not the only dark currency by which Jesus is sold.

When the disciples fled, they forsook wisdom. In fact, they traded Jesus for thirty shekels of safety, as it were. The religious leaders sold Jesus for thirty shekels of their position and honor; Pilate sold him for thirty shekels of peace.

These all ignored the words of Proverbs 23:23: “Buy truth, and do not sell it.”

What is your asking price for Jesus? He holds forth truth and wisdom in his hand and pleads that you should take it. But the devil stands beside him and holds forward his hand as well—in the shadow of his palm gleams a grim and precious metal, thirty shekels worth. Will you sell Jesus for this price?

What has the devil made your shekels of? What is it that tempts you to forsake the teaching, to turn away from Christ and his offer of life in the gospel? If there is anything you value above the worth of Christ, the devil may offer it to you. All the kingdoms of the world and their glory have been given into his hand, and he gives it to whomever he wills.⁷

Just this week a friend informed me that in his younger years, he made an honest attempt to sell his soul to the devil so that he might become a rock star. There is an old German legend of a certain Dr. Faust, a professor unsatisfied with life who does sell his soul to the devil in exchange for 24 years of demonic powers.

What is your Faustian asking price? What will you sell the truth for; what will you deny the Savior for? What is necessary to convince you to take the thirty shekels out of the devil’s hand? What metal must those shekels be made of?

Think of those who have taken the offer in the past.

Here is Demas, Paul’s companion. He appears to be walking in the way of Christ; he is companion to the apostle Paul, who preaches the mystery of the gospel, who proclaims free reconciliation with God through faith in Christ. The cross is always in Demas’ ears. And there

⁷ Luke 4:5-6.

Demas stands within arm's reach of the heavenly gate, the pearl entrance into eternal bliss. Christ's hand is extended to within a foot of Demas' chest, and he has had long to look upon it and contemplate whether he will take it or not.

But behind him, coins clink. The devil measures out thirty worldly shekels. One coin is the promise of wealth in this world, freedom from financial anxiety. It clinks into his hand. Another is the lusts of the flesh and all the pleasures the mind can imagine. Clink. This one is a coin of reputation; you will be followed and liked on social media, and your peers will all be talking about you. Clink.

Jesus appeals to Demas, now so near the kingdom of heaven: "Do not love the world or the things in the world!"⁸ There is a moment in which Demas hesitates between the two hands and their offers. Eternity stands balanced like a large boulder with a narrow base, ready to fall one way or the other.

And then Demas' decision is made. Paul writes, "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me."⁹ The stone falls to the left with a dusty thud.

The words of Proverbs are inscribed indelibly upon that fallen rock of Demas, as an everlasting warning to the sons of men: "Keep hold of instruction; do not let go."¹⁰

I appeal to you

I appeal to you who are here. Christ's hand is extended before you, his eyes are fixed on your own and will not be turned away. But I wonder: why do you hesitate?

Is it the clinking of the devil's shekels that makes you wait, makes you hold out to see if he will make you a better offer than Christ can?

Why have you as of yet refused to give your life to Christ?

Here you are this morning, within earshot of God's appeal for you to be reconciled. The blood of Christ has dried upon the cross, the sacrifice necessary for your eternal salvation from sin has been made. All is prepared, the table is set for you to come to the feast. The gates are still open and the bridegroom has extended his invitation to all men everywhere, that they should repent and come.

⁸ 1 John 2:15.

⁹ 2 Timothy 4:10.

¹⁰ Proverbs 4:13.

The hand of Christ is so near your chest this morning, with its shining offer of eternal life sitting upon it, that it is almost touching you. Can you not feel the breath of Christ upon your face, he is so near?

Behind you, the clink, clink, clink of the devil's offer. In front of you, the determined gaze of the Son of God. Why do you hesitate between two opinions? Today is the day of salvation! Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart!

Take hold of wisdom, and, as verse 4 of our text promises, "live"! As verse 10 promises, "the years of your life will be many"—yes, unending, eternal really. Lay hold of Christ by faith this morning, and you will have eternal life. Extend your hand by faith and lay hold of the promises, the offer of life, of Christ himself. Renounce all else, shut your ears to the clinking behind you.

Like Pilgrim in the famous tale of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, put your fingers in your ears and run toward the Wicket Gate crying, "Life! Life! Eternal life!"

Then you will have accomplished the beginning of wisdom—you will get wisdom. You will receive Christ, and with him eternal happiness.

The two paths

Friends, I set before you today life and death. In our passage in Proverbs, we find again the two paths.

With what time remains, I would like to show you the outcome of whatever choice you make, in relation to Christ. If you choose to take hold of what Christ offers, let me show you what results; if you hesitate, or if you turn and take hold the shekels of the devil, let me show you what your life will look like.

The path of the wicked

Let me begin then by explaining the path of the wicked, of those who forsake Christ and wisdom and truth.

See the last verse of our text, verse 19: "The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble."

I vaguely remember several years ago, when a group of us had gone to Lithuania to help our missionary Steve Davis with an evangelistic summer camp, that one night of the high school camp we were supposed to take our campers from the cabin on a "night walk" through the woods.

So that day while our campers were busy, we leaders walked the path we were to take. Trees were marked to remind us which way to go through the woods, from station to station, where I presume the gospel was being shared (though it was in a language I did not understand).

I just remember that when night had fallen and our turn came to walk that same path, it seemed a different path entirely. The person leading had a light, but all of us who were behind him struggled on along the path, kicking every manner of object on the ground. We couldn't see them! Here an old stump jutted out of the ground, and there a fallen branch or something similar. Everything was an obstacle, and I kicked item after item. The darkness made the trek almost untrekable.

As we stumbled along, we noticed that we were not seeing any more of the tree markers we were to follow—we could not find them. We were quite lost.

According to Scripture, if you do not extend your hand to take hold of the truth as it is in Jesus, this is the manner of your entire life. If you prefer the shekels of the world, then you, whether you will it or not, will cast them like Judas across the ground, for you will trip over an unknown obstacle and lose your grip on them.

If you do not have Christ, you have no promise of safety, in this life or the next. You walk in deep darkness along the crest of a mountain, or before the gaping mouth of a pit.

“[Your] way shall be to [you,]” the prophet Jeremiah says, “like slippery paths in the darkness, into which [you] shall be driven and fall.”¹¹ Or again we read in Deuteronomy, that your “foot shall slide in due time.”¹²

The most famous sermon ever preached on American soil was given in Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741, and it was preached on the verse just read, “their foot shall slide in due time.”¹³

The preacher began by pointing out four things this verse suggests about the wicked, the one who rejects Christ. These four things are true of you.

First, you are always exposed to *destruction*. The foot shall “slide”—you walk in the darkness along a winding path that lines a rocky ridge. Your foot treads within inches of the edge, but you have no idea. You think that you are safe. Destruction is very near.

In fact, secondly, you are always exposed to *sudden unexpected* destruction. You never expect to trip, or you would not do it. When you stumble over something, you are surprised. So along the mountain path

¹¹ Jeremiah 23:12.

¹² Deuteronomy 32:35.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” CCEL.org, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html> (accessed March 25, 2017).

of darkness, you will soon be surprised to step not onto solid ground, but into the air, and you will fall.

Thirdly, you are liable to fall *of yourself*, because of your own weight. No one needs to push you; your sinful nature weighs you down toward destruction at any moment.

And lastly, the only reason you have not fallen yet is, as the verse says, because it is *not yet "due time."* God holds you suspended over an eternal hell, and it is nothing but his good pleasure that prevents you from falling. God has many ways to take a man or woman out of this world.

It is no wonder our passage begs you, beginning in verse 14, "Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on."

This is a dark, dark path, that only gets darker the further you walk.

You may begin with petty sins; you start by taking only one of the devil's coins. You are, after all, a moral person; you are not a monster.

But soon you will want another coin, and another. See the outcome of this dark path, what you are and will become apart from the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Verses 16 and 17:

For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.
For they eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.

You will be surrounded by disgusting atrocities, by the grotesque face of undisguised demons, by bestial vices. But you won't know it. You will be in the dark, and won't know what it is you stumble over. Sin will be as common to you as eating or drinking, and more important to you than sleep. But you will trick yourself; you will, saddest of all, probably think you are alright with God and will go to heaven. But no, you will sink down to hell, for that is where the dark path leads.

The path of the righteous

But look once more at our text and you will see the other possible path, the path of the righteous. Here is the path those walk who reach out and take what Christ offers. See verses 11 and 12:

I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
When you walk, your step will not be hampered,
and if you run, you will not stumble.

See how different this is from the path of darkness. You can walk along without a care; you can run and not worry about falling. But how can you have such freedom here?

See the answer in verse 18: “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.”

You who are the children of the King, who are brothers of the Prince of Life; you who have reached out and taken hold of the hand of Christ, claimed his blood for the forgiveness of your sins, you walk a lighted path. You are honored in the sight of God and angels; wisdom has placed upon your head a beautiful crown.

And your day grows brighter and brighter as you walk along.

Do you want to meditate as you walk along; you are welcome to do it, for you needn't be worried about tripping. You are walking in freedom! Do you want to run? Then run! There is no obstacle to hinder you.

You know the truth, and the truth has set you free.

Christians, see how the day grows brighter over time. Perhaps you have felt the dark midnight of the soul, even as a child of God. You may say, “This doesn't feel like a path of freedom and light to me right now.”

But brothers and sisters, the day grows brighter. As Amos says, the Lord turns deep darkness into the morning.¹⁴ And for as long as your darkness may last, the Lord will give you songs in the night. If you have taken Christ's hand, then Christ walks with you hand in hand along this path. He himself is the light of it, just as he will be the light of our heavenly city once we arrive there.

And the further you walk along, the brighter your path will become. It must become brighter, for with each step you draw nearer the city of light, the heavenly Jerusalem, where there is no night.

Friends, the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. The light is with you a little while longer—while you have the light, believe in the light.

And see whether or not Christ spoke honestly when he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

¹⁴ Amos 5:8.