Deliverance from Darkness

Richard D. Patterson

Richard D. Patterson is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and has served as a translator for the *New Living Translation* and the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*. Dr. Patterson has written commentaries on Joel in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1985) and on Habakkuk in the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Baker, 1989).

The Common Darkness

"It was a dark and stormy night." Thus Snoopy would begin his novels. Physical darkness is a simple fact of our common experience, occurring not only with the coming of the evening but also often heralding the onset of a storm. Anyone who has visited a deep cave where the lights are turned off or has experienced a total eclipse of the sun can testify to the depth of the impenetrable blackness. Under such conditions flashlights or even automobile headlights prove to be of little use. Darkness can provide an occasion for lovers to meet or for one to encounter a robber. It is too often the time when things that would not be done in the light are carried out. The Apostle John observes that an unbelieving mankind "loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:19-20).

As in the Scriptural citation, darkness and light often form opposites that are brought together. The motto of the Christopher Society reminds us that "it is better to light one candle than curse the darkness." In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (V, i, 90) Portia remarks, "How far that candle throws his beams. So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

The thought of darkness can evoke many responses. Little children, those with poor eyesight, or those who live in dangerous neighborhoods can fear the dark. The image of darkness occurs in many of our expressions. We speak of the Dark Ages as a period of cultural decline, intellectual

stagnation, or ignorance. If we are "in the dark" about something, we are uninformed or unfamiliar with the details of a given matter or subject. We can speak of a "leap in the dark" as a venture into the unknown. The last words of the great political theorist Thomas Hobbes are reputed to have been, "I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark." If we say that a given sentence or saying has a "dark meaning," it can indicate something that is not easily understood or one that may have a hidden, possibly even sinister, agenda. If we "keep someone in the dark," we hold back information from him. That which is unexpected can be associated with darkness. Thus we speak of a political candidate or athletic team that is not expected to win as "a dark horse."

Darkness can signify disappointment or that which is undesirable. A darkened theater or athletic park can indicate a lack of performance or activity. A "dark period" is a discouraging or disappointing time in one's life. Yet reflecting on the prevailing darkness may cause someone to consider the need for a higher power.

The life of men
Is an arrow's flight,
Out of darkness
Into light,
And out of light
Into darkness again;
Perhaps to pleasure,
Perhaps to pain.

There must be Something, Above, or below;

Something unseen
A mighty Bow,
A Hand that tires not,
A sleepless Eye
That sees the arrow
Fly, and fly;
One who knows
Why we live—and die.¹

If a person has a "dark expression" on his face, he is said to have a gloomy or somber outlook on things or to be angry. If someone is told never to "darken my door," his presence would no longer be desirable or welcome. "Dark humor" can refer to that which is off color, debased, or sinister and, hence, not acceptable or desired in normal social settings. Labeling the occult, sorcery, or demonic spirits as "the black arts" can indicate the mysteriousness or evil associated with the idea of darkness.

Darkness has often been associated with the concept of death. Dante Alighieri in his classic work *Commedia* (line 64) speaks of the state of death as "eternal darkness," and Edna St. Vincent Millay laments the passing of loved ones "into the darkness" (*Dirge without Music*, stanza 1). Far different from these sentiments is that of S. Weir Mitchell:

I know the night is drawing near,
The mists lie low on hill and bay,
The autumn sheaves are dewless, dry,
But I have had the day.

Yes, I have had, dear Lord, the day.
When at Thy call I have the night,
Brief be the twilight as I pass.
From light to dark, from dark to light.²

Darkness in the Ancient Near East

Darkness is often mentioned in texts

from the ancient Near East that provided a cultural background and interchange for God's people. Darkness found an important place in many ancient creation myths. For example, in archaic Egypt darkness (*kkw*) was an important concept in some creation stories.

My father Atum sneezed me in a sneeze of his mouth, together with my sister Tefnut.

She emerged after me, while I was still hooded with the air of the Phoenix's throat, on the day that Atum evolved—out of the Flood, out of the Waters, out of darkness, out of lostness.³

Thus John Wilson observes, "The customary myth of creation is of a nature which probably goes back to simple and earthy pre-dynastic beginnings. It tells that before the creation there was a watery void, accompanied by darkness, formlessness, and invisibility."4 Darkness was also a feature of the afterlife. In Egypt the underworld was shrouded in darkness, enlightened only by the god Ra as he made his nightly journey in his sun boat: "Thou art fair, O Re, every day; thy mother Nut embraceth thee. Thou settest beauteous with gladsome heart in the horizon of Manun. . . . The lords of the underworld, they are happy when thou bestowest light on the West. Their eyes open when they behold thee."5

The Mesopotamian underworld into which the dead entered is described as a "dark house" where its residents are entrapped forever. It was a gloomy place, "[where] dust is their food, clay their bread. They see no light, they dwell in darkness." As in Egypt, however, so also in Mesopotamia the underworld could be visited

by the sun god, who was also the god of justice. The early Sumerians "held the view that the sun after setting continued its journey through the nether world at night, turning its night into day." In an Akkadian hymn, a similar function appears to be attributed to the Akkadian sun god Shamash:

Šamaš, your glare reaches down to the abyss

So that the monsters of the deep behold your light.

. . .

By night you continue to kindle[,]
To unknown distant regions and for uncounted leagues

You press on, Samaš, going by day and returning by night.

. . .

[There is none] but you who goes down to the deep,

[...] you blaze abroad the judgements on the criminal and law-breaker.⁸

In the ancient Near East, day and night were often depicted in relation to a cosmic struggle between light and darkness; light being victorious with the dawn of each new day. "The primeval mind envisions life and even the cosmos as a conflict between light and darkness, viewed as combatants struggling for control of the world." Thus in the famous *Great Hymn to the Aten* we read,

Earth brightens when you dawn in lightland,
When you shine as Aten of daytime;
As you dispel the dark,

As you cast your rays, The Two Lands are in festivity.¹⁰

The conflict between the forces of light and darkness becomes an important fea-

ture in other early religions as well. Thus with regard to texts relating to Zoroastrianism in ancient Persia E. Yamauchi remarks,

All things in creation belong either to one sphere or another: aligned with the Good Spirit are light, fire, summer, water, fertile land, health, growth and domestic animals, especially the dog. Aligned with the Evil Spirit are darkness, night, winter, drought, infertile land, vermin, sickness and death.¹¹

The struggle between light and darkness as opposing eternal forces becomes pronounced in some forms of later Gnosticism. In the *Paraphrase of Shem* found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, light and darkness are opposing primeval forces separated by the Spirit:

The mixing of these three powers, triggers the cosmic drama: Darkness, realizing his inferiority and yearning for equality, directs his attack at the Spirit, since Darkness is ignorant of the Light. The mind of Darkness is the prime tool of Darkness to accomplish his evil schemes in the world; yet at the same time the mind of Darkness, together with the light of the Spirit is the object of the salvific efforts of the redeemer Derdekeas.¹²

For the sect at ancient Qumran, home of the Dead Sea Scrolls, humanity was divided into the Sons of Light (the devotees at Qumran) and the Sons of Darkness (their enemies). They believed that because the Sons of Light would fight in accordance with the proper rules for spiritual warfare, in due course God would cause them to

triumph over the Sons of Darkness (1QM xviii).13 Further information on the conflict between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness comes from the Manual of Discipline, in which the struggle for mastery over the souls of mankind is detailed. "All the children of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light, but all the children of injustice are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness."14 Although "the Angel of Darkness leads all the Children of Righteousness astray," Israel's God "and his Angel of Truth will succor all the Sons of Light."15 While God "has established the spirits (of truth and falsehood) in equal measure until the final age, and has set everlasting hatred between their divisions," so that man "may know good [and evil]," ultimately God has ordained the end and destruction of injustice and the ways of darkness.16

From this brief sample of an abundant literature from the ancient Near East it is apparent that the concepts of darkness and its counterpart light caught the attention of thinkers over a vast area. Their relation was not only conceived of in terms of a cosmic struggle between elemental forces in nature but each became used metaphorically in relation to the human experience.

In the cultures of the ANE, light was a common metaphor for that which is good, whereas darkness was the metaphor for the exact opposite.

Light was a figure for health, wealth, knowledge, power, life, and prosperity. So darkness was a figure for hunger, sickness, poverty, suffering, punishment, curses and death.

Darkness was the domain of evildoers and demons, and it characterized the netherworld, the land of the dead.¹⁷

Given the many uses of light and darkness across the spectrum of the ancient Near East, it would be strange indeed if these thematic opposites were not addressed in the Scriptures. As we shall see, they are.

Before we examine the Scriptures, there is one more Near Eastern culture to consider, even though it post-dates the New Testament—namely, Islam. For the themes of darkness and night find a place in the pages of the Qur'an. Indeed, the Qur'an records that Allah has subjugated the night to mankind (Surah 16:12), making the night for a garment and sleep for repose (25:49). He also set the night star to remind people that "every soul has a guardian over it" (86:2-4).

In a classic text Allah is said to take Muhammad on a night journey "from the Sacred Mosque [i.e., the Kasbah at Mecca] to the Remote Mosque, the precinct of which we have blessed, to show him of our signs" (17:1). Nevertheless, Muhammad is reported to have taken refuge from the evil of the night in "The land of the daybreak" (113:2). 19

Islamic doctrine holds that one of Allah's ninety-nine names is en-Nar (light); therefore, the Qur'an was revealed to illumine mankind. "A book which we have sent down to thee, to bring men forth from darkness into light, by permission of their Lord, unto the way of the mighty and praiseworthy one" (14:2). Darkness thus becomes a metaphor of mankind's spiritual ignorance. "The Islamic view of human beings acknowledges no fallenness or depravity. Man's fundamental problem is not usually viewed as rebellion against God, but as weakness and forgetfulness that are inherent in human nature. Therefore, the Islamic view of salvation takes a decisively different form from the Christian view of this doctrine."20

Although Allah is light, he is said to be covered by night (91:4). He is, nevertheless, sovereign over both day and night and has established them as "signs unto a people who reflect" (13:3) and a lesson to those endowed with sight (24:43). "He it is who made the night and the day alternating for him who desires to remember or who wishes to be thankful" (25:63). The flow of night gives instruction as to the fate of unbelievers. "And when the ignorant address them, say, 'Peace!' And those who pass the night adoring their Lord and standing; and those who say, 'O our Lord! turn from us the torment of hell; verily, its torments are persistent; verily, its torments are persistent; verily, they are evil as an abode and a station" (25:64-65). Thus darkness and night become metaphorically applied to all who stand outside the family of Islam.

Having studied the use of darkness in the ancient Near East, including Islam, we now turn to the Scriptures. Our study will consider the scriptural uses of darkness and conclude by noting its retreat with the onset of light.

Darkness in the Bible

The Scriptural texts dealing with darkness reflect both physical and metaphorical darkness. The Bible's opening verses record the fact that when God created the world, it was "formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep" (Gen 1:1-2). It remained for God to cause light to penetrate the darkness so that the earth could experience its regular cycles of day and night. While the presence of physical darkness often appears in the Scriptures, darkness is used frequently to depict man's reaction to it and God's employment of it.

Reactions to Darkness

Darkness can bring fear (Exod 10:21-23; Job 15:22; 23:16-17), especially for those gathered in the awesome presence of God (Exod 19:16; 20:18-21). One can only imagine the excitement and terror the children of Israel must have felt as they gathered before Mount Sinai. They had gone through so much: the long affliction in Egypt, the thrilling events of the ten plagues, the passing through the sea, the adventures in the wilderness. And now three months after leaving Egypt and after three days of holy preparation, they awaited the Lord's descent upon the mountain. Suddenly, "On the third day, when it was morning, . . . there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled" (Exod 19:16). God himself was there, surrounded by thick darkness amidst the thunder and lightning, the smoking mountain and a sound of a trumpet (Exod 20:18-21).

Moses later records the reaction of the people to all of this. They feared for their very lives.

Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we shall die (Deut 5:24-25).

One writer remarks concerning this event, "By this terrible display of His glory, God desired to inspire them with the true fear of Himself, that they might not sin

through distrust, disobedience, or resistance to His guidance and commands."²¹

Darkness and Evil Activities

The cover of darkness provides people with an opportunity to do evil or immoral deeds (Obad 5; John 3:19-20). Murder, robbery, rape, and mayhem typically take place in the dark (Judg 19:25; 20:5; Matt 13:25; 1 Thess 5:7).

Others have been with those who rebel against the light; They do not want to know its ways, Nor abide in its paths. The murderer arises at dawn; He kills the poor and the needy, And at night he is as a thief. And the eye of the adulterer waits for the twilight, Saying, "No eye will see me." And he disguises his face. In the day they dig into houses, They shut themselves up by day; They do not know the light. For the morning is the same to him as thick darkness,

Solomon also observes that the adulteress pursues her trade with the dark of night (Prov 7:8-33). Ezekiel laments that Israel's elders have forsaken their responsibility of godly leadership to worship idols under the cover of darkness (Ezek 8:12).

For he is familiar with the terrors of

thick darkness (Job 24:13-17).

Darkness and Judgment

God can use darkness to punish the wicked. He sent a "thick darkness in all the land of Egypt" that reduced visibility to zero (Exod 10:21-22). Subsequently God brought darkness to the Egyptian forces that seemingly had the Israelites trapped

at the Red Sea, while delivering his people through waters bathed in light (Exod 14:19-20).²² Isaiah predicts a coming day of God's judgment against the Babylonians in which the heavens above them will turn black (Isa 13:10). Amos warns the people of the northern kingdom that they too will suffer a coming day of God's judgment that brings "darkness and not light" (Amos 5:18).

Darkness especially characterizes that coming future day when God's judgment against a world confederation of evil will descend (Rev 16:10-11). It will be an awful day, "a day of darkness and gloom" (Joel 2:2) bringing "trouble and distress, . . . destruction and desolation" (Zeph 1:15). Here the bleak figure of darkness may blend with the physical reality associated with God's coming wrath against a godless and obdurately sinful mankind.

The punishment of evildoers extends into a future of eternal punishment. Previously God cast the angels that sinned down to Tartarus where in the pits of darkness they await the coming judgment (2 Pet 2:4). Satan (popularly known as the "Prince of Darkness"), who stands condemned as a result of Christ's death and resurrection (John 16:11), will eventually be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:10). Jesus describes the final destiny of the wicked as a place in "outer darkness" (Matt 8:12), where there will "be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 22:13; 25:30). Therefore, unbelievers are warned that if God did not spare the sinning angels of long ago but put them "in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day" (Jude 6), they also will be consigned to a judgment of eternal separation from God described as "black darkness" (2 Pet 2:17).23

Metaphorical Uses of Darkness

The Undesirable

Darkness is widely used as a metaphor for that which is undesirable. The psalmist asks that his enemies may experience the misfortune they deserve saying, "Let their way be dark and slippery" (Ps 35:6). He also employs darkness to lament his loneliness and despair (Ps 88:18). Darkness can represent distress (Ps 107:10; Isa 8:22) or disaster (Job 15:23). Job laments that in times when God's light spread over him he "walked through darkness" (Job 29:3); yet now when he looks for light, he is beset by darkness with none to help (Job 30:26).24 Death is depicted by some as a dark valley (Ps 23:4), a "land of darkness and deep shadow" (Job 10:21).

The Unknown

Darkness can symbolize that which is unknown (Job 38:19-20). God asks Job, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2). Informed believers, however, are not ignorant concerning the Day of the Lord for they are "sons of the light and sons of the day" not of "night nor of darkness" (1 Thess 5:4-5).

Evil and Unbelief

The last thought belongs as well to a host of passages where darkness is symbolic of the world of evil and unbelief (e.g., Ps 74:20; Prov 2:12-15; Isa 5:20). Those who oppress the underprivileged and helpless belong to the realm of spiritual ignorance and darkness (Ps 82:5). Paul speaks of the power of the present darkness, in which lurk evil forces that oppose Christian believers (Eph 6:12). The realm of spiritual darkness and sin is presided over by Satan, the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph 2:2). Elsewhere Paul calls the Devil Belial (2 Cor 6:15). The term is drawn from a

Hebrew word meaning worthlessness and speaks here of Satan's being utterly devoid of spiritual value. Satan's spiritual realm of darkness is populated by unbelievers whose hearts are darkened (Eph 5:8) so that they perform all sorts of wickedness (Gal 5:19-21; Eph 2:1-3; 1 Pet 4:3).

Some "darkness" passages give a hint of God's disapproval of false religions. Thus the plagues against Egypt demonstrated the impotency of the sun god Ra before the might of Yahweh (Exod 10:15, 21-22). In addition, the bringing of darkness over Pharaoh's forces at the Re(e)d Sea by the Angel of the Lord (Exod 14:19-20) displayed God's power over nature. But more importantly, it was a direct assault against the forces of Pharaoh that showed the impotence of the god Horus, who was the protector of the king and who was in a sense embodied in the king. Certainly all of this points at least to a tacit denunciation of Egyptian religious beliefs (cf. Ps 105:28).25

Admittedly the Scriptures do not present any formal denunciation of false religions when utilizing the darkness metaphor. Nevertheless, the fact that darkness is said to characterize all who are not true believers is tantamount to a condemnation of both unbelievers and any religion they might embrace. Certainly Paul distinguishes between false religions and the message of Christianity in his address to the men of the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31). Not to believe in God's plan of redemption is indeed to be lost and, metaphorically, to be in darkness (cf. John 3:16-18; 14:6; 2 Cor 4:3-4).

Victory over Darkness

The Divine Provision

The fact of a sin-darkened world of unbelief should not be a cause of hopelessness. For even the darkness is under God's control. It is he who forms the light and creates the darkness (Isa 45:7). God can use darkness to conceal himself from human view (Gen 15:12; Exod 20:21; Ps 97:2). God knows what is unknown to man (Dan 2:22) and what happens under the cover of darkness (Ezek 8:12-15). Moreover, as predicted, his Son appeared in the land of deepest spiritual darkness to rescue people from the kingdom of darkness and its evil ruler (Isa 9:1-2; Matt 4:15-16).

Such was accomplished at Calvary. There was perhaps no greater period of darkness than at Jesus' crucifixion. Matthew records the scene as follows: "From the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice," Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?'—that is,—'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" (Matt 27:45-46). In that awesome cry, Jesus' fourth saying from the cross, we can discern the force of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice—the time when the sinless One was treated as sin for man's justification (2 Cor 5:21).

The cry itself is taken from Psalm 22:1. As Franz Delitzsch suggested long ago, Christ's citation of the opening words of the Psalm indicates his appropriation of the whole Psalm.²⁶ James Mays points out that "citing the first words of a text was, in the tradition of the time, a way of identifying an entire passage."27 Indeed, all the major portions of the Psalm can be felt in the fourth through the sixth words from the cross. One hears of Christ's deep feelings of rejection despite his knowledge that he is paying the penalty for the sin of mankind.²⁸ The great affliction that Christ suffered on mankind's behalf is reflected in the fifth word from the cross, "I thirst" (John 19:28; cf. Isa 53:3-9; Zech 13:7). That word may well reflect the psalmist's agony, which is recorded in the second movement of Psalm 22 (vv. 11-21). The final victory of the Crucified One mirrors the third movement of the Psalm, which culminates in the psalmist's assurance of deliverance (v. 22) and of the final divine triumph (vv. 26-31). The psalmist's declaration, "He has done it" (v. 31) anticipates Christ's victorious cry, "It stands finished" (John 19:30). The climactic moment of propitiation has been reached and Jesus can safely commend his spirit into God the Father's hands (Luke 23:46). Here again one can sense the appropriation of the psalmist's words (Ps 22:23-24).29

As the three hours of darkness at Calvary were followed by renewed light, so the prevailing darkness of sin stands vanquished in the triumph over sin and death by him who is the Light of the World (John 8:12). Because of Christ's victory at the cross and his subsequent resurrection from the tomb, believers have been delivered from the "kingdom of darkness" and its evil ruler and have been brought into "the kingdom of his dear Son" (Col 1:13). As citizens of his kingdom they are no longer under the power of darkness and night and the works that belong to them but are "sons of light and sons of day" (1 Thess 5:5; 1 Pet 4:3).30

The Believer's Position

Peter points out that, living in the light, believers have a high and noble privilege. Like Israel of old (Exod 19:4-6), they are constituted "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, . . . a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet 2:9). All of the terms hold special spiritual significance for living as citizens of light, not darkness. Among all the nations of the world only Israel was God's personal choice to be his people

(Amos 3:2). At least three significant points for Israel and for Christians follow from this fact. First, as heirs of the covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:2-3; 17:7-8), God redeemed the Israelites out of Egypt from a land of oppression and bondage (Exod 3:7-10; 6:2-8; 12:21-36; Ezek 20:5-6). We are reminded that God has also chosen and redeemed Christians from a sin-darkened world of unbelief and slavery to sin (Eph 2:1-3; 2 Thess 2:13).

Second, because Egypt was at the time of the exodus a mighty nation, Israel's deliverance was one that God alone could accomplish (Hos 13:4). It is no less true for today's believers. Not only is the substitutionary sacrifice of a divine Christ the only means sufficient to atone for man's sin (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Heb 9:26), but also he alone has the power to overcome the darkness of sin's dominance over the individual (Rom 5:6-8; 6:17-22; 7:21-25; 2 Cor 2:14).

Third, Israel's redemption was a matter of God's sovereign grace rather than any inherent qualities that the people of Israel possessed (Deut 7:7; 9:4-6). The same is true for all of us who are the objects of God's deliverance (Rom 6:23). For as naturally born individuals, we were held in the bonds of darkness and its unfruitful deeds (Eph 5:8-11). We were spiritually dead and totally helpless (Eph 2:4-10). Moreover, we could in no way please God (Rom 8:4) but were "by nature children of wrath, even as the rest" (Eph 2:3). It is to God's credit and by his grace that we have been saved (Eph 2:10; Titus 2:11; 3:4-7).

God also points out that despite the fact that Israel had a special class of officiating priests (Exod 28:1; 32:26-29; Lev 8-9; Num 3:5-10; Deut 10:8-9), in a sense all Israelites were to serve as God's special representatives to the surrounding nations. Above all, Israel's task was a spiritual one. The Isra-

elites were to worship and serve God and to glorify him with their lives. In so doing they would be his representatives to attract other peoples in order that all the world might know Israel's God. In this regard Isaiah quotes the Lord as saying, "Turn to me and be saved . . . For I am God, and there is no other" (Isa 45:22). Such will one day be the case (Isa 60:1-3).

The nations will naturally gravitate from the darkness of their own experience in the light that is dawning on Israel. . . . The brightness of the presence of God (cf. 4:5) in the person of the Savior will be irresistible. However far God's people may fall short of all that God is, if they will only reflect the light of the incarnation in some part of its power, even kings will want to come to fall at his feet.³¹

Peter's "kingdom of priests" carries with it the ideas of royalty and priestly service. As those who have been taken into union with Christ the King (Gal 2:20; Eph 2:11-22; Col 1:15-23), Christians enjoy a royal status. One day they will even share in his glory (Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12). Meanwhile, they have the blessed opportunity to serve before God as a spiritual temple, God's "holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pet 2:5). Not only do they have direct access to God through Christ to find personal solace and guidance (Heb 4:14-16; 10:19-22), but they can intercede for the needs of others (Col 1:3, 9-12; 1 Thess 5:25; 1 Tim 2:1-2, 8). As with Israel, there is a missionary imperative in the status of a "kingdom of priests" for believers today. For Christians, priestly service and prayers should involve God's own concern for the salvation of all people (1 Tim 2:3-6; 2 Pet 3:15) in order that they too may join those who have been called "out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

Not only was Israel God's personal choice and a kingdom of priests, but Israel was to be a holy nation. Having redeemed Israel out of bondage and brought them into a new and living relationship, God had a right to expect his people to live lives of faithfulness to him (Lev 19:2; Deut 6:1-13; Jer 2:1-10). Today's believers are likewise encouraged to live godly lives, faithful to the end (Titus 2:11-14; 1 Pet 1:1; 2 Pet 3:10-11; Rev 2:10).

God also proclaimed that Israel was his "own possession" (Exod 19:5). The Hebrew word here means basically "property, one's personal possession" (cf. 1 Chron 29:3; Eccl 2:8). It is found only a few times in the Old Testament. Moses uses it three times in reminding the Israelites of their basic covenantal relation and obligation to the Lord. Because God chose Israel as his special possession, his people were to live holy lives (Deut 7:6) and reflect his standards in their daily behavior (Deut 14:1-2). If they were faithful in their commitment to him, God would see to their good success (Deut 26:16-19). Israel was to be a thankful people who praised the Lord for his goodness to them (Ps 135:3-4). Sadly, Malachi could only find fault with the people of his day for their selfishness and lack of fidelity to God. Yet he finds hope in a spirituallyminded group that fear the Lord "and who esteem His name" (Mal 3:16). Not Israel per se but those who thus constituted a righteous remnant would become his treasured possession, who would know his blessing rather than his wrath in the day of God's judgment (Mal 3:17-18).

Interestingly enough, because New Testament believers likewise partake of the promise of the patriarchs through faith in Christ (Gal 3:6-9, 15-18, 26-29), they too are counted as God's special possession (Titus 2:14). As such they, like Israel of old, are to

be reminded they are "God's own possession" (1 Pet 2:9) and are to serve God and reflect his holy standards, walking in the light (1 John 1:6-7).

Made part of God's family through the grace of God and faith in Christ, Christians can not only experience the abundant life that Jesus promised (John 10:10), but be assured of God's loving regard as his "special possession," his "peculiar treasure." With such a realization, believers ought to live so as to produce a treasurefilled life (1 Cor 3:12-13; 2 Cor 4:1-7). Part of that treasure-filled life is the manner in which believers live and work together. Rather than being those who "bite and devour one another" (Gal 5:15) they should "be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (Rom 12:10; cf. 13:8-10). They should support one another rather than reject one another, for such an attitude belongs to the realm of spiritual darkness from which they have been delivered (1 John 2:11; 5:7). Indeed, "The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him" (1 John 2:10). Because of Jesus' saving work, there is for the believer the reality of a new life that the darkness can never overpower (John 1:4-5).

The Pauline Profession

The Apostle Paul knew something of that reality. He testified that God had been pleased to reveal his Son in him (Gal 1:15) and to commission him as his minister (2 Cor 3:18). The testimony of the Apostle Paul is illustrative of the power of the gospel to transform the individual from darkness to light. Like those to whom he would later minister, Paul had been enveloped in a sin-darkened world, headed by the "god of this world" who blinds "the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory

of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4). As a zealous Pharisee he actively persecuted those who claimed to follow the way of Christ (Acts 9:1-2; 22:2-5). Dramatic change began when, in fulfilling his commission to go to Damascus, he was overpowered by a light from heaven that exceeded the brightness of the sun. There and then he received a new, higher commission from Christ himself to confront unbelievers in their sinful state (Acts 26:17-18).

Paul thus became a minister of the New Covenant (2 Cor 3:6). As William Webb observes, "Not only does Paul in 3.6 explicitly refer to diakonous kaine diatheke, (terminology reminiscent of Jer. 31[38].31), but also in 3.2-6 he makes clear verbal allusions to Old Testament traditions about the new covenant."32 Webb goes on to demonstrate that "new covenant and exilic return theology may be traced throughout 2 Cor 2.14-7.4 These traditions have been woven into the fabric of Paul's understanding of his role in apostolic ministry."33 Indeed, the ages-old promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-8), channeled through Isaac (Gen 26:23-24) and Jacob (Gen 28:13-15), and from the patriarchs (Gen 50:24; Exod 3:15) into the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:11-26; Ps 89:26-29, 35-37) that was to reach its culmination in a New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 34:20-31; 37:18-28), began to be operative in the finished work of Christ (Matt 26:27-29; Heb 8-9; cf. Luke 1:67-79). Walter Kaiser, Jr. appropriately remarks, "Christians presently participate in the new covenant now validated by the death of Christ."34 That New Covenant makes membership in God's family available to all, Jew and Gentile alike (Eph 2:11-21), and constitutes believers as "Abraham's off-spring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29).35 It is for this New Covenant, currently in force, that Paul now serves as a minister "not of the letter, but of the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:6).

After a brief interlude dealing with the glorious nature of his ministry (2 Cor 3:7-18), Paul returns to a discussion of his duties in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, a passage that uniquely brings together the physical and metaphorical uses of darkness and light. Here he details the central feature of his commission. Despite the efforts of the Adversary to darken the minds of unbelievers, Paul carried on to bring the light of the gospel to those still enshrouded in the darkness of sin.

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness" is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:5-6).³⁶

In this passage Paul, the minister of the New Covenant, speaks of a new creation. In a brilliant metaphor he declares that just as in the original creation light came to disperse the darkness of earth, so it is with the second creation. No less than the dispelling of the primeval darkness by physical light, the dynamic power of the gospel can penetrate the most sin-darkened mind so as to bring the knowledge of God's glory by beholding Christ and personally appropriating his saving work (2 Cor 5:17-21). The darkness of spiritual ignorance thus becomes illuminated by and overcome by the light of spiritual truth.

Paul himself was living proof of such a transformation (2 Cor 3:17-18; 1 Tim 1:12-14). In the text in 2 Corinthians 4:5-6 Paul not only draws upon his earlier discussion in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18 but may be giving a veiled hint of his own encounter with the risen Christ. On the road to Damascus, Paul

was bathed in a brilliant light and received a new understanding of God's purposes and a new commission from the Lord. In the same way, those who turn from the sindarkened world to Christ through the light of the gospel have a view of God's glory "in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Henceforth, their knowledge of God will never be the same, nor will they (2 Cor 5:17).

Conclusion

The theme of darkness appears prominently in the Scriptures. While its metaphorical use is overwhelmingly negative, as we have seen, the Christian hope is in the One who creates and superintends the darkness. He has provided both a way of escape from a sin-darkened world and can guide his followers in the paths of light and spiritual understanding. Such should be sufficient for the believer. Therefore, even in the midst of the darkest circumstances (cf. Hab 3:16-19) and death itself, the believer will "fear no evil" (Ps 23:4).³⁷

Lead, kindly Light, amid the
encircling gloom;
Lead thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from
home;
Lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet: I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for
me.³⁸

The change from darkness to light, from spiritual death to life, may be likened to a rare gem named Alexandrite. Named after Czar Alexander II of Russia, "Its main characteristic is the ability to change color if exposed to a light source rich in red rays: by candlelight or tungsten light, it turns red or reddish. This unusual phenomenon is what distinguishes it from other green

chrysoberyl."³⁹ As with Alexandrite, the dark nature of man can be dramatically transformed when exposed to the light of the gospel (John 8:12). Exposure to the light of the Word and a close fellowship with God will also cause believers to glow with the reality of the indwelling of Christ, thus casting a light in a dark world of unbelief (Matt 5:14; Phil 2:15-16; 1 John 5:1-7). No less than Paul, believers have been commissioned to be light bearers (Matt 5:14) to tell of Him who is the Light of the world.

ENDNOTES

¹R. H. Stoddard, "The Arrow," in *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, ed. J. D. Morrison (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928) 81. ²S. Weir Mitchell, "From Dark to Light," in *Masterpieces*, 576-577.

³J. P. Allen, "From Coffin Tests Spell 76 (1.6)," *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols., eds. W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 1:10.

⁴J. A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 58-59.

⁵A. Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians*, trans. A. M. Blackman (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 139. See futher G. Steindorff and K. C. Seele, *When Egypt Ruled the East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 141-142.

6"The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld" in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 107; Hallo and Younger, *The Context of Scripture*, 1:381. 7S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 132. An interesting contrast may be seen in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Book 1, lines 63-64), in which he pictures Satan, cast out of Heaven, now dwelling in a place of "utter darkness" (Hell) where "No light,

but rather darkness visible served only to discover sights of woe" ("Paradise Lost" in *John Milton The Complete Poems*, ed. J. Leonard [Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1998] 122; cf. Book 1, line 72; Book 2, line 407).

⁸W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 129. The word translated "the abyss" and "the deep" (Akkadian, *apsu*) usually represents the cosmic subterranean sea as well as the water that became a personified deity in the Mesopotamian creation epic *The Enuma Elish*. Whether *apsu* here is a synonym for the underworld or for the watery deep that flowed into the underworld is uncertain.

9"Darkness" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, and T. Longman, III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 191.
10M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 vols. (Los Angeles: Univer-

sity of California Press, 1976) 2:97. ¹¹E. M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 439.

¹²The Nag Hammadi Library, ed. J. M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 308.

¹³See G. Vermes, The Dead Sea Scrolls in English, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin, 1995) 123-145; E. F. Sutcliffe, The Monks of Qumran (Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1960) 204-223; F. G. Martinez, The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated, trans. W. G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 95-125; E. M. Yamauchi, Pre-Christian Gnosticism, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 220-223.

¹⁴Vermes, 73.

15Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 74-75.

¹⁷J. D. Price, "hsk," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., ed. W. A. VanGemeren, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 2:312.

¹⁸E. H. Palmer, trans., The Qur'an in *The Sacred Books of the East, 50 vols.* ed. F. Max Müller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970) 9:1. Traditional Islamic doctrine holds that the famous "Night Journey," told in the "Sura of the Night," took Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem. It is of interest to note that a news item in the World Net Daily (Sep 4, 2003) reports that an Egyptian columnist, Ahmad Muhammad, writing for the Al-Qahira, a government weekly journal, wrote that the celebrated "Night Journey" of the prophet Muhammad was from Mecca to Medina!

19If this appears somewhat contradictory, it must be remembered that here and elsewhere "The Qur'an itself is not a formal and consistent code either of morals, laws, or ceremonies. Revealed 'piecemeal,' particular passages being often promulgated to decide particular cases, it cannot fail to contain many things that are at variance with, or flatly contradict others" (Palmer, 6:Lii).

²⁰N. L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 122. Geisler and Saleeb go on to observe, "Thus, salvation in Islam is for the most part a future state experienced only in the hereafter. It includes pardon from past sins and deliverance from hell, as well as gaining God's favor and acceptance in heaven."

²¹C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 2:126. Today's believers can learn a lesson from this incident. While we have not, like Moses at Mount Sinai or Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-5; 2 Pet 1:16-18), been eyewitnesses of the Lord's glory, we can behold it in the Word, by which we "are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor 3:18). As the children of Israel were cleansed in anticipation of meeting with God at Mount Sinai, we also must be holy (1 Pet 1:15) and so live that when Jesus returns "on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt 24:30), we will be blameless before him (1 Thess 3:13; 5:23).

²²Helpful discussions of the exodus itinerary and the location of the sites involved may be found in J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (New York: Oxford, 1996) 164-175, 182-191; and B. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 88-91.

²³Believers may take heart in the knowledge that they are delivered from such a judgment. Their destiny is not wrath but "salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:9). Yet because they know "the fear of the Lord," they "persuade men" (2 Cor 5:11). Thus there is a missionary imperative in the scriptural teaching to bring others to knowledge of Christ so that they too may escape from a sin-darkened world. ²⁴Significantly, words denoting dark or darkness occur nearly three dozen times in Job. Many of the

common metaphorical uses of darkness can be seen. In addition to the texts mentioned above, one may note examples of discouragement (Job 17:12), distress (28:11), disaster or destruction (3:4-6; 20:26), dishonest practices (24:17), divine judgment (5:14), and death (10:21-22), as well as that which is unknown or mysterious (12:22; 37:19). In addition, darkness and light frequently appear together (e.g., Job 11:17; 12:22, 25; 18:18; 26:10).

²⁵Although not directly addressing the issue, Paul also hints at the impotency of anyone who belongs to the darkness of night, including their false religion, when he distinguishes true believers from those who "belong to the night or to the darkness" (1 Thess 5:4-5).

²⁶Franz Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Psalms, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 1:305-308. Note the close parallels: cf. Ps 22:7 with Matt 27:39-40; Ps 22:8 with Matt 27:41-44; Ps 22:16 with John 19:34; Ps 22:18 with John 19:23-25. See also K. Schaefer, Psalms (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001) 52-58; V. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," Westminster Theological Journal 48 (1986) 271. For a dissenting view, see D. A. Carson, Matthew (Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 578-579.

²⁷J. L. Mays, "Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion," *Theology Today* 42 (Oct 1985)
322; see also H. Gese, "Psalm 22 and the New Testament," *Theology Digest* 18 (1970) 237-243.

²⁸Several New Testament texts tend

to indicate that Christ may not have been totally cut off from fellowship with the Father (e.g., John 8:29; 16:31-32; 17:5, 21-23: Heb 2: 9-12).

²⁹The full exegesis and exposition of the Psalm is not the goal of this study but will appear shortly in another study. It should be noted, however, that the Psalm shows a definite double division: A. Lament, including (1) the psalmist's torment (vv. 1-10) with alternating statements of seeming rejection (vv. 1-2, 6-8) followed by renewed confidence (vv. 3-5, 9-10) and (2) the psalmist's trials (vv. 11-21) consisting of two sections introduced by the phrase "be not far off" (vv. 11-18, 19-21); and B. Thanksgiving, recording the psalmist's triumph, featuring his vows and praise for his delivering God (vv. 22-31).

³⁰The hymn writer expresses it so well:

In my darkness Jesus found me, Touched my eyes and made me see,

Broke sin's chains that long had bound me,

Gave me life and liberty! (J. W. Peterson, "O! Glorious Love!" in *Favorites* 7 [Grand Rapids: Singspiration, 1971] 44).

³¹J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 538-539.

³²W. J. Webb, *Returning Home* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 85.

³³Ibid., 157.

³⁴W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15 (1972) 11-23.

³⁵This is not to say that in the present

operation of the New Covenant that the previous promises to national Israel have been fully realized. "However, in the midst of this unity of the 'people of God' and the 'household of faith' there yet remains an expectation of a future inheritance which will also conclude God's promise with a revived nation of Israel, the kingdom of God, and the renewed heavens and earth. Again, it is evident that we share already in some of the benefits of the age to come, yet the greater part of that same unified plan still awaits a future and everlasting fulfillment." W. C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward an Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 269.

³⁶For an interesting discussion of the New Covenant theme in 2 Cor 4:1-6, see Webb, 94-102.

³⁷The hymn writer shares this same conviction:

When darkness seems to hide His face,

I rest on His unchanging grace; In every high and stormy gale, My anchor holds within the vale.

(E. Mote, "The Solid Rock," in *Inspiring Hymns*, ed. A. B. Smith [Grand Rapids: Singspiritation, 1974] 329). A lively difference of opinion exists among scholars as to whether the Hebrew term *salmawet* in Psalm 23:4 should be translated "deep darkness" or "shadow of death." For details, see W. L. Mitchell, "SLMWT, 'Deep Darkness' or 'Shadow of Death'?" *Biblical Research* 29 (1984) 5-20; and D. W. Thomas, "SALMAWET in the Old Testament," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 7 (1962) 191-

200.

³⁸J. H. Newman, "The Pillar of the Cloud," in *Masterpieces*, 89.

³⁹K. Lyman, Simon & Schuster's Guide to Gems and Precious Stones (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986) 116.