

The Pain of Change

Change can, of course, be very painful. Visiting Colditz Castle, we were informed that unemployment in the area ran at over 20%. Hungary has managed to stop rampant inflation only by abolishing student grants, child benefit and freezing pensions for a year. The latter example should, in fact, lead to an improved situation fairly soon; but meanwhile it hurts.

Often it is the painfulness of change that lies at the heart of Reformed resistance to *semper reformanda*. Those in leadership are perceived as 'suspect' and those losing part of the treasured and familiar find life uncomfortable; even if (so they are assured) 'things will get better'.

A great deal of charity, wisdom and grace is required here. Firing from our ghetto at someone who doesn't mind people lifting up their hands in worship lacks balance and love. Is such bodily posture really so important? Wisdom is needed too! Discerning what is

and is not appropriate is often difficult and requires a profound biblical wisdom. And then there is grace; grace in the one who is uncomfortable with change, grace in those seeking change.

The Challenge

We shall soon be entering the twenty-first century. Yet tragically, the Reformed movement which (alone?) has the biblical, theological and spiritual resources to provide the solid foundation upon which the twenty-first century church needs to build is, too often, only just exiting the nineteenth century.

Let us then awake to the vision which inspired our forefathers in the faith. May '*sola Scriptura, semper reformanda*' be the watchwords which lead us into the coming century and millennium and may we, therefore, offer the lead (under God) which the evangelical movement desperately needs.

Ephesians 6:12

The Powers of Darkness Against the powers of this dark world

DAVID SEARLE

The third of three studies

Some little time ago, I saw a documentary on television about the high mortality rate among Russian babies. Apparently, the infant death rate is as high as in Third World countries. Out of the babies which do survive at birth, 50% contract serious illnesses of one sort or another. The Russian doctor who was interviewed believed there were three major causes of this high mortality rate among babies: first, mothers are suffering from malnutrition and lack of vitamins; second, hospitals are poorly equipped and therefore unable to cope with problem births; third, the air is polluted with industrial toxins making certain diseases almost inevitable among both mothers and babies.

One could not help but be amazed at the fruits of an atheistic government which has deliberately shut God out for most of this century. As information about the former Soviet Union filters through to the West, we are discovering how blind and irresponsible the communist regime has been. When we think of the

suffering of the people there, we glimpse a little of what Paul means by the phrase, *the powers of this dark world*.

But lest we think that the West has escaped these *powers of this dark world*, let me remind you of the answer the Prime Minister gave to the Leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons a couple of years ago, when asked about the seemingly endless rise in the crime rate. The Prime Minister's defence of his government—listen to this—was that since the war crime has been steadily rising whatever government was in power. What a tragic admission! In other words, the *powers of this dark world* are active in our society as well.

The wave of violent crime that is engulfing our land can doubtless be explained in sociological, anthropological and psychological terms. But that by no means excludes a spiritual explanation. Let us try, therefore, to understand what we are up against as we study

Paul's phrase, *Our struggle is . . . against the powers of this dark world.*

Paul is Here Giving Us Encouragement

Dad is taking his seven year-old daughter for a walk in the Cairngorms. She has been asking to go with him for weeks, and at last the big day has come. She is so excited as she puts on her new walking shoes and little knapsack with her lunch. But after a mile or two walking up Cairngorm, she is hot and tired. It is not that dad has planned too long a walk, He knows she will manage to reach the top of the mountain. So he encourages her: 'There's not far to go now. We'll take a rest for a minute, and then go a bit further. Have a piece of chocolate.' And so, with Dad's assurances, the seven year-old carries on up the steep path.

That is something of what we have here. The world in Paul's day was just as evil and wicked as it is today. But Paul is saying something very encouraging when he calls the forces of evil *the powers of this dark world*. He is saying that the evil powers will not last forever. They are limited, because 'this world' is limited. This world has a beginning and an end. Therefore evil also must have an end. The goodness and love of God are eternal. But the badness and evil of Satan are restricted to time and space. And in our strenuous climb up the steep pathway of life, as we struggle with the obstacles in our way, we are here encouraged that soon we will reach the summit, because the mountain track ultimately comes to an end.

Some of you will remember Idi Amin? For a few years, he strutted about Uganda wearing his general's uniforms, with glittering rows of fake medals conducting his reign of terror. The whole world was infuriated, yet powerless to stop him. But his power soon ended. The same will happen to Saddam Hussein. It did with Napoleon, Hitler and all other human despots. And Paul is saying: these spiritual forces of wickedness have a rule which is *limited* to this world.

This word of encouragement for those of us who are Christians, however, contains a warning to those who do not yet know Christ as Lord. It warns them that *the fruits of sin* will also soon come to an end, because all the enjoyment that sin offers will one day vanish.

When you are walking along some seaside town's esplanade, you see people walking their dogs along the sand. I have often watched as a dog has chased a stick or a stone being thrown for it. Occasionally, the stone is thrown far out into the water, and the dog dashes in to find it and will even swim right out of its depth looking for the stone. But all it gets is a mouthful of sea water. It comes back with nothing.

Men and women are like that. They go chasing

after ambitions and riches, swimming through the ebbing tide of worldly pleasures against the warnings of God's Word. But at the end, they have nothing. For the man without God dying in silk pyjamas in the private clinic costing him £200 a day is a pauper in rags compared to the Christian in the national health ward dying in the faith of Christ. Christians take with them into eternity a capacity to enjoy God that has been developed and nurtured by the Holy Spirit over all the years of their lives.

So that word 'world' encourages those of us who love the Lord Jesus.

Then the end will come when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15: 24).

And our encouragement is that Christ will reign supreme.

Paul Also Gives Us Here a Word of Explanation

Do you ever wonder why there should be so much sorrow, pain, hurt, heartache and suffering in this world? Some people make much of all the evil in the world, and use it as an excuse for not believing in God at all. This is rather strange. It is rather like saying, 'I don't believe in sunshine, because there's so much wind and rain.'

So Paul explains to us exactly what it is we are up against. The key he gives us to unlock the mystery of so much evil is that word *darkness*. It is a word the Bible often uses to describe the problem of evil. 'Darkness' can be used as a metaphor for 'ignorance of God'. Let us see what explanation it offers us and what light (!) it can throw on our paths.

[i] Darkness Blinds People, That Is, It Distorts Their Judgement

Most of us live where street lights are on all night, and they give at least some glimmer in our bedroom in the middle of the night. But when you live right in the country, and you waken in the night, trying to find even your slippers in the pitch dark can be a major operation. I lived deep in the country for ten years, two miles from the nearest street light, and I can assure you that some winter nights the darkness can almost be felt.

Spiritual darkness is like that. Remember the words of Christ as he was nailed to the Cross: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Lk. 23: 34). Because darkness blinds people, they act in ignorance without realizing what they are doing. They

do not see their actions as wrong; nor can they see where those actions are leading.

[ii] Darkness Prevents Usefulness

I know that blind people are trained to do skilled jobs. But those of us without such training, put into a dark room, would be unable to do anything useful. My mother left school at fourteen, but two years later resolved to go to college to train for missionary work. She had only the nights to study because she worked on a farm from 4am until 9pm every day. So she waited until her sister was fast asleep; and then lit a candle, and sat all night studying by that flickering light. Whenever her sister stirred, she blew out the candle and waited in the dark until her sister was breathing heavily again; then she relit the candle and worked on. Three full nights every week for two years she studied by the dim light of a candle. Without light, you and I can do nothing.

Our lives have been given to us to use for God and for good. But if we are in spiritual darkness, what can we do for God or for his kingdom? The answer, of course, is that without light, anything we attempt will turn out to be a mess. We need light to work. Those in spiritual darkness can do nothing for the Lord. Across their grave stones is the unseen epitaph—'This man, this woman, did not do an hour's work for God in all their lives, because they lived and died in darkness.' Darkness prevents usefulness.

[iii] Darkness Also Shuts Out Real Pleasure

Would you visit an art gallery in the night when there was a power-cut? You would not see much of the old masters and their beautiful works, would you? Or how about visiting Austria to see the country and spending your time there sleeping by day and driving through it by night. You would not see much of Austria.

I know that there is a spiritual 'night-light' that sends a shimmer of light into everyone's soul.¹ That is because we are created in God's image, and we all share general grace. We can see that 'night-light' burning in great architecture, poetry and music. But there is a whole world of glory and beauty in Christ which is never seen or known by those who are in spiritual darkness. And when we come to know Christ, we suddenly step into a world that is flooded with light and we see things in a completely new way:

Heaven above is softer blue, earth around is sweeter green,
Something lives in every hue Christless eyes have never seen!

[iv] Darkness Also Brings Fear

In the Alfred Hitchcock film, the woman is alone in her home, when the lights mysteriously fade and she is left in the darkness. She then hears a door creaking, and

the unmistakable sound of a footstep. She calls out, 'Anyone there?' But there is no answer. Silent darkness. Then another slight sound, and she begins to panic. 'Who's there?' No answer from the blackness, just another slight sound, nearer this time. You hold your breath as the film shows the fear growing on the woman's face.

Darkness brings fear, especially when someone faces the unknown of eternity, and that unknown is darkness. 'Is there anyone there?' the dying man whispers. But no one has told him of Christ, or if anyone tried to tell him, he never listened. And as the darkness of death closes in on him, he is alone and afraid.

[v] Darkness Opens Up the Way for Wrongdoing

The burglar operates at night so he can use darkness as cover for his thieving. *Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil* (Jn. 3: 19). Buildings nowadays are floodlit to provide security. When a building is bathed in light, the vandals are less likely to do damage for the simple reason they may be seen.

By the same token, when there is spiritual darkness, it is far easier to sin. Paul makes this point when he says that knowledge of sin comes with the law.² If you do not know you are in 30mph area, you may travel at 50mph, not realizing you are in a restricted area. But you are still breaking the law. It is like that with God's law. When people do not know God's laws, the way is open to break them. So spiritual darkness opens the way for wrongdoing.

[vi] Darkness Closes the Door to God

Darkness closes the door to God because darkness means ignorance of God. It is a vicious circle. Those who are in spiritual darkness do not know God, so they do not know, or care, about how to find him. Spiritual darkness is like a mist that covers their minds. They cannot be bothered with God. They may attend church and hear sermons, but they cannot understand, because they are in darkness.

[vii] Darkness Blocks the Pathway to Recovery

There is no real concern about sin when we are in spiritual darkness. Our consciences are easily silenced. Our wills have no strength. The person who is ignorant of God is like a sleep-walker, eyes open but not seeing, going places but not knowing where. So the way to Calvary is constantly missed, and even if people pass close by, though they may see a dim shadow of the Cross, they never see it for what it is—God's prescription for their need.

Darkness. And this is the darkness of this world over which Satan rules. Paul is giving the Christian an explanation for the problems to be faced.

Paul Gives Us the Key to Evangelism

The question must arise, 'If the situation is as bad as that (and I assure you that it is), what hope is there for those who are in spiritual darkness? If their consciences are dead, if they do not see their condition is desperate, if they do not care about God, what can be done for them? Surely, their case is most serious, if not hopeless?'

We have the answer in the last four words of v.12: *We struggle, wrestle . . . against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* Now that is a most significant phrase. It is the fifth time Paul uses it in this letter.³ What does it mean?

It refers to a spiritual realm, distinct from heaven and distinct from earth, a realm somewhere in between heaven and earth. It speaks of that spiritual realm as it makes contact with the here and now in which we live. And in this spiritual realm there are whole battalions of demons—*spiritual forces of evil*—mustered their unseen array against the people of God.

Call this realm, if you like, the spirit world. What Paul has already told us about this realm is that Christians have been lifted into that spirit-world: those who are in Christ have been bathed in light. We have been lifted out of earthly darkness and have come into the glorious light of knowing God. And in this spirit-world of *the heavenly realms*, Christ is victorious. He is Lord.

But it is in that spirit-world the battle is being fought as Satan scatters his clouds of darkness to blind men and women to the love and grace of Christ. It is *in the heavenly realms* we struggle, we wrestle. *Not against flesh and blood . . . but in the heavenly realms.*

So the cure can only be a spiritual cure. We cannot use ordinary water to wash away the guilt of sin. We cannot use bread and butter to feed the hungry souls of people. We cannot use grape juice to revive those who are fainting from spiritual exhaustion. Spiritual problems can be solved only by spiritual power. That is why the flesh and blood of Christ had to be given for the life of the world.⁴

So it needs the pure light of the Holy Spirit to dispel this darkness of which we have been thinking, because we are operating *in the heavenly realms*. The Christian, in one sense, has been given contact with a superterrestrial world. And in that spiritual realm, while there is deep darkness (ignorance of God), there is also the immense power of the Holy Spirit. He alone can restore to life those who are in the dark shadow of death.

Only he can awaken blind consciences. Only he can throw light on the wickedness of living without God. Only the Holy Spirit can light the pathway to the Cross and to the waiting Saviour. Only the Holy Spirit

can lead the blind out of the gloom of spiritual night, restore their sight and bring them into the sunshine of God's love.

That is why we wrestle and struggle. Our fight is on two fronts. It is against sin and its darkness in our own lives, and it is against Satan's hold on the lives of so many others. We wrestle by faith and we wrestle by prayer. I wonder how much we know of this spiritual battle as we work in our churches and offer our service to the Lord?

We must wrestle with our lifestyle, to love God and to hold the deceitful riches of this world as lightly as we ought. The struggle is against falling in love with mere trash, and falling out of love with Christ, the pearl of great price. We wrestle with our selfish wills lest we pamper ourselves and feed our own pride, instead of carrying the Cross and following Christ. There is many a Christian who has found the Cross too heavy, and has laid it down and opted out of this spiritual struggle in the heavenly realms.

I must end this with a challenge to myself and to each one of us. Do we wrestle against the darkness we have been considering? In our own lives, and in the lives of others?

Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease,
while others fight to win the prize, and sail through blood-stained seas?

God make the church of our generation aware of the heavenly realms. That is where the battle is. That is where Christ's victory is. That is where the power of the Spirit is. And that is the realm we enter when we pray in the Spirit.

May Christ come and waken any who have become drowsy and near to falling asleep, so are in danger of Satan's clammy mists of darkness swirling round them and casting a spell on them to make them useless to God. If we drift from Christ and fall in love with this present world as Demas did, then far from being living prophets, we will be dead losses. The church of God is cumbered and hindered by people like that. That is precisely why the battle is so often lost.

May Christ rebuke us all! May Christ waken us! May he rouse us! Men and women are without God, living and dying in darkness, hell-bound. It needs those who are in the heavenly realms, in close touch with the Holy Spirit, to bring light to them—the light that will show them their need and let them see clearly the way to God. So may we pray.

Are we the soldiers of the cross,
The followers of the Lamb?
And shall we fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His name?

No! we must fight if we would reign:
 Increase our courage, Lord;
 We'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
 Supported by Thy Word.

Thy saints in all this glorious war
 Shall conquer, though they're slain;
 They see the triumph from afar,
 And shall with Jesus reign.

When that illustrious day shall rise
 And all Thine armies shine

In robes of victory through the skies,
 The glory shall be Thine.

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Footnotes

1. John 1:4f, 9.
2. Romans 7:7ff.
3. Ephesians 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10.
4. John 6:51ff.

Jonah 4:1–11

'Nineveh City Mission' leader resigns in angry protest! . . .

ANDREW WHITMAN

The book of Jonah is a familiar enough story! But what is its relevance for us today? In the West as a new millennium looms on the horizon culture-watchers are telling us that society is becoming increasingly 'post-modern' in its outlook. The old certainties are rapidly disappearing and a new generation is emerging composed of morally confused people who 'cannot tell their right hand from their left' (4:11). Alongside this, many in the Christian church have an increased expectation of revival—a God initiated movement yearned for as much in the Reformed tradition as in other quarters. The hotly debated questions of the hour are: 'Will we experience heaven-sent revival in the near future?'; and perhaps more poignantly: 'If so, what will it look like?' One question that doesn't seem to have surfaced as yet is: 'How will it affect us if and when it comes?' Perhaps naively many of us assume that our response will be one of delight and gratitude. Like Jonah, though, God's grace may not have got under our skin yet.

In Chapter 4 of this intriguing prophecy we find 'the second-chance prophet' in the throes of citywide revival and yet, ironically, in the process of bursting a boiler in anger; resigning not only from his job, but also from life itself! The entire book ends with a power-

ful question: 'Should I not be concerned about that great city?' (4:11). Did Jonah eventually come through to share more of God's compassionate heart for outsiders or not? It seems that the question is left hanging in mid-air for us to answer in our day.

In this chapter there are three distinct references to the prophet's anger. First his attitude of 'We are not amused' produces a volcanic eruption of emotion and frustration, ('Jonah was greatly displeased and become angry'—verse 1) resulting in a moody prayer. God then asks him on two successive days if he has any right to be angry (verse 4, 9). On the first occasion the Lord is given 'the silent treatment', while twenty-four hours later a disgruntled 'I do' is the response. Jonah is so filled with fury that he is 'angry enough to die' (verse 9). He presents a startling contrast to the God whose character he correctly refers to in his earlier prayer as one 'slow to anger and abounding in love' (verse 2).

With apologies to Doctor Luke and his famous fifteenth chapter we find here the Old Testament equivalent of 'How *not* to rejoice with the angels. . .'. There may be joy in heaven over just one sinner repenting (Lk. 15:7, 10), but there are also mutterings on earth (Lk. 15:28–30). Thus, grace from God uncovers its absence in us! No wonder Proverbs 4:23 says: 'Above