

Spiritual Darkness

by Daniel Steele

Spiritual darkness is not the will of God, but rather a state of feeling abandoned by God that can be caused by physical or moral reasons, and can be overcome by turning to God and seeking His guidance and comfort.

Scripture: Isaiah 50:10, Matthew 27:46, John 8:12, Hebrews 13:5, 1 Peter 4:12

Topics: "Spiritual Struggles", "Faith And Doubt"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the spiritual darkness that some church members experience, attributing it to various causes such as physical or moral issues. He discusses the differing views on whether God withdraws His favor for disciplinary purposes or if it's due to a lack of faith. Steele contrasts the beliefs of Charles Wesley, who sees spiritual darkness as an act of divine sovereignty, with those of his brother John Wesley, who attributes it to an eclipse of faith. John Wesley argues against the idea of believers being arbitrarily thrust into darkness, emphasizing the importance of penitent faith.

Transcript

Pastors who closely question their church-members find many of them walking in darkness, the natural environment of all unbelievers and backsliders. It is unnatural for the true believer in Christ. With a double negative in the original, he declares, John 8:12, "He that followeth me shall not [at all] walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Yet we find in all our churches some who are evidently fearing God and working righteousness, who diligently use all the means of grace, but complain that there is an incertitude about their path, and a foreboding that it may not lead to heaven's open gate. Sometimes this is the effect of a physical cause. I was once asked to help a despairing Christian woman into the light. I learned from her that after a joyful experience of several years the light within had entirely ceased and left her in Egyptian darkness. "But why are you here at Clifton Springs?" said I. "The plastering fell from the ceiling of my schoolroom and struck my head with a concussion that has shattered my nerves," was her reply; "and since that hour I have lost my grip upon God, and all sense of his favor." I assured her that he loved her now just as much as he did before, and that he was telling her so; but that the telephone was so damaged at her end of the line that she did not hear his comforting words. Ten years afterward I met her with health restored and walking in the light of the Lord. The receiver had been repaired, and the heavenly messages were now heard. But in the vast majority of cases where there is no bodily disorder, the spiritual desolation and darkness must be traced to a moral cause: some sin, some neglect to obey the Spirit's voice, some culpable ignorance of God's promises, some lack of faith with consequent loss of love, some unholy temper, or some shrinking back from the surrender of every idol as the condition of perfect purity of heart,

and of the fullorbed shining of the Sun of righteousness.

But others insist that there is another cause of the evil under discussion. They assert that it is the will of God; that he often withdraws a sense of his favor arbitrarily for disciplinary ends; that we derive spiritual benefit by these hidings of God; that spiritual growth is the result of the diligent search to find him again; and that alternations of light and darkness in the spiritual realm are as healthful as they are in the natural world. This was the position of Charles Wesley. In one of his poems he teaches that spiritual darkness is sometimes an act of divine sovereignty --

"Shall man direct the Sovereign God,

Say he cannot use his rod

|But for some fresh offence?

From saints he never hides his face,

Or suddenly their comfort slays,

To prove their innocence?"

His brother John insists that this desolate and joyless state is because of an eclipse of faith. Hence his sermon on the "Wilderness State," in which he proves that Christians pass into that state because of their unbelief, just as Israel sinned as the cause of their wilderness wanderings. In neither case is there arbitrary allotment. The fixed order of spiritual law has been violated, and its sequences are a sense of desertion, and a feeling of incertitude and discomfort. Charles continues --

"Nay, but he casts the righteous down,

Seems on his beloved to frown,

Yet smiles their fears to see.

He hears their oft-repeated cry,

Why, O my God, my Father, why

Hast thou forsaken me?"

To refute his brother's error, John Wesley examines his Scripture proofs. The first is

Isa. 50:10, "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." John argues very cogently that the character here addressed is not in a state of grace, but is under the law, convicted of sin, and trying to be justified by works. An awakened sinner has a painful dread of Jehovah, and walks in darkness. Penitent faith is the only way out. This text contains no proof that a persistent and obedient believer must sometimes be sovereignly thrust into darkness. The next text is Hos. 2:14, "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably to her." "Hence," says J. W. "it has been inferred that God will bring every believer into the wilderness, into a state of deadness and darkness.

But it is certain the text speaks no such thing; for it does not appear that it speaks of particular believers at all, but of the Jewish nation." The next text is John 16:22, "But ye now have sorrow," etc. John Wesley well shows that Christ is addressing his apostles only, on the theme of his own sorrowful death and joyful resurrection. The whole context proves this. "A little while [whilst I am in the tomb] and ye shall not see me." Hence their brief sorrow. "No inference can be drawn from hence with regard to God's dealings with believers in general." The fourth text is 1 Pet. 4:12, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you." "But this is just as foreign to the point as the preceding," says J. W., who renders the Greek thus: "Wonder not at the burning [martyrdom and its fiery sufferings] which is among you, which is for your trial." Says he, "Neither is this text anything at all to the purpose for which it is cited. And we may challenge all men to bring one text, either from the Old or New Testament, which is any more to the purpose than this." But Charles has hinted at another text in the following verse

"Then let the patient, perfect man

His integrity maintain,

But not before his God;

The Lord may crush a sinless saint,

As once he left his Son to faint

And die beneath his load."

To this John makes no reply, for the obvious reason that the dereliction of Christ on the cross, in his unique atoning sufferings, cannot be logically quoted as a proof that God will treat all saints in this way. No man can have any proper fellowship with Christ in the atonement. He trod the winepress alone. We have no sounding-line long enough to reach the depth of that sorrow, which wrung from the Son of God the cry -- Matt. 27:46, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Martin Luther, after several hours of silent meditation on these words, exclaimed, "God forsaken of God! I cannot understand it." It is certainly a great mistake to generalize the Son's abandonment on the cross by the Father, and insist that this adumbrates the normal experience of all believers. It flatly contradicts the promise in Heb. 13:5, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," fortified by five negatives in the Greek, thus -- "no never, no never, no never forsake."

We close with a word of apology for the great poet of Methodism. His high-strung, delicate, nervous constitution was subject to depressing, morbid reactions, in which he imagined himself forsaken by God, while he was as near to him as ever. Charles Wesley took his theology more largely from his feelings than did his brother, who rebuked this error, saying, "God does not play at bo-peep with his creatures." He insists that there are no arbitrary hidings of his countenance for our growth in loyalty and holiness; that joy and sunshine have a far more effectual purifying power than gloom and darkness; that light and love go hand in hand. Darkness breeds corruption; light purifies. In forming a union with us, God takes the first step; in sundering that union, we take the first step. He never sovereignly and causelessly deserts us even for an hour.

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