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BETTER THAN A CELL PHONE

John 8:12-30

When I was in my senior year of college my roommate, Brian, got sick when he was home for Christmas break and had to stay home until almost a week after classes started again. When he was finally well he planned to fly back from Colorado where he lived. He asked me if I could pick him up at the Ontario airport, which was the closest airport to our college. I was happy to do that. He was scheduled to land late one night. We learned that Brian’s flight was being delayed and diverted to LAX. A buddy was going to come with me to get Brian and we found ourselves with several hours to kill. We came up with a plan. We decided we would go see a movie. There was a theater in downtown Ontario that charged a small price because they didn’t show first run movies. I still remember the movie we went to see. It became one of my favorite old westerns. I hadn’t seen it before that night. It was *El Dorado*, starring John Wayne. After the movie we went to the airport and finally collected Brian. But driving back to school presented a challenge. The reason his flight was diverted was heavy fog in Ontario. Obviously, since it was night time it was dark and the fog was extremely thick. We weren’t very familiar with the airport, and to make matters worse, they were in the middle of a big construction project at the airport so the roads were a mess. All of which combined to put us in a situation where we found ourselves not sure where to go. We noticed a couple of cars that seemed to be on their way out of the airport confidently so we decided to follow them. I noticed several other cars falling in behind following us. We crept along at a snail’s pace because of the poor visibility, keeping our eyes glued to the two cars just ahead of us. Then they stopped, and didn’t move. Why weren’t they going anywhere? I squinted and as the fog lightened for just a moment I could see that the lead car’s headlights were shining on a sign. It was in the roadway. It read, “Dead End. Open trench ahead.”

In the dark and the fog we didn’t know where to go. So we followed someone we thought knew where they were going, only to end up at a dead end. All of us in that train of cars had to turn around and try to find another way out of the airport area. Obviously we eventually made it. Those events taught me that when it’s dark and you don’t know where you going, following the crowd isn’t the best way to go. Unfortunately, a lot of the time in this world it’s dark and we don’t know where to go. But there is hope for us, and we’ll learn about that in John 8:12-30.

JESUS MADE ANOTHER ASTOUNDING CLAIM

This chapter continues telling about events that happened when Jesus went to the Feast of Tabernacles. We saw in chapter 7 that this feast took place in the early fall. It was a time to give thanks for the harvest, but it especially commemorated a key moment in Israel’s history, a time that was a crucial part of their identity and their faith. This feast reminded them of how God provided for the people of Israel when they were in the desolate wilderness of the Sinai peninsula. We saw in the last chapter that a big focus of the feast was how God miraculously provided water for them in that desert. Jesus claimed to be the real meaning of the feast, for he is the source of living water.

There was another aspect of Israel’s experience in the desert that was also celebrated at the feast. Exodus 13 says that after Israel was able to leave Egypt they went into the desert. But they had lived their entire lives in Egypt as slaves. Most of them had never been outside Egypt. Now they had gone into a trackless wilderness that was completely unfamiliar to them. The GPS system was no help to them because, oh, wait, it wasn’t going to show up for 3,000 years. They also didn’t have maps. To make matters worse, they didn’t even know where they were supposed to be going. How did they know where to go? Were they like those loggerhead turtles that migrate around the ocean, or maybe like the birds that go south for the winter, they just knew instinctively where to go? No, if left to their instincts they would have gone back to Egypt. Exodus 13:21-22 tells us how they knew where to go, “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.” The Lord guided them with visible symbols, day and night.

As part of the Feast of Tabernacles to remind them of how the Lord guided them on their way they symbolized the pillar of fire by 4 huge lanterns in the courtyard of the temple that they lit at night. It was said that when those lanterns were lit it could be seen throughout Jerusalem. When those lanterns were lit during the feast the people would wave torches, dance, and sing songs of praise to God.

The focus of the feast at night was the light that God gave to lead Israel in the wilderness. In verse 12 Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” Once again he was making the claim that this feast was commemorating him! He is the one giving divine light. Only he isn’t just the light for Israel, he is the light of the whole world. Anyone who follows him will never walk in darkness again, but will have the light of life.

JESUS DEBATED HIS OPPONENTS

As you can imagine, this claim was controversial. The leaders of Israel were outraged. They argued that he was making grandiose, and in their minds, heretical claims about himself, and he had no corroboration to back him up. Jesus’ answer was, as he said in verse 16, “I stand with the Father.” In verses 28-29, “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” Jesus was saying what the Father had told him to say. We saw earlier controversies in chapter 7 over this same issue. There Jesus had pointed to the miracles that he did as evidence that he was speaking what the Father had told him to say. They showed the Father was with him and was validating his claims with those works. I think of those malls where parking is free if you actually buy something in a store. Your parking ticket has to be validated at a store where you made a purchase, even if it’s just a pack of gum. The validation says your claim that you shopped at one of the stores in the mall is true. Jesus’ miracles were the Father’s stamp of validation, saying that his claims were true.

The opponents said, “You keep talking about your Father. Who is your Father, and where is he? And why should we care what he says?” They were thinking of a human being, of a dad they assumed Jesus was referring to. They’re thinking, “So your tradesman dad, a nobody from Nazareth, taught you to say these things and sent you here. Who gives a flying leap?” Jesus essentially said they don’t know his father, that they can’t know him because, as he said in verse 23, “You are of this world. I am not of this world.”

I don’t think they completely understood what he was saying here. They mostly missed what Jesus was really saying. They did catch that he said, “I am not of this world.” So now you’re ET, Jesus? Why should we listen to you? That statement alone tells us you are crazier than a guy who thinks he’s George Washington. You’re not of this world? Exactly which planet did you come from? Men are from Mars and women are from Venus, but where are you from? Munimula, the metal planet? Sheesh, what a nut job.

IMPLICATIONS

What does that have to do with us?

PREMISE: JESUS IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Laurie and I got married in a style that is completely outdated today. These days weddings are all about some cool outdoor venue, and the party after the ceremony, which is as brief as possible. Our venue was our church. We got married at 8 o’clock at night. At the reception we served cake and punch. There was no DJ, no dancing, no big meal. Definitely old school. The wedding ceremony included a lot of music. We had friends who were great singers perform several different songs. One of them was a popular song of the time called *You Light Up My Life*. Yeah, I know. Could it be more dated and cliched? The words of the chorus were, “You light up my life, you give me hope to carry on, you light up my days and fill my nights with song.” Some people would think it is schmaltzy and hokey today. However, it expressed what Laurie and I felt about each other. To this day, Laurie has lit up my life, meaning she has brought great joy and love into my life. She brings more joy than anyone or anything, and it’s not close. She truly is the light of my life.

There is a sense in which that is what Jesus was saying. As the light of the world he is the one who gives us hope to carry on and fills our nights with song. He gives great joy. How does he light up our lives? How does he bring us joy? In what ways is he the light of the world?

WE LIVE IN DARKNESS

Jesus said that those who follow him will not live in darkness. What does that imply? Those who don’t follow him will live in darkness. Darkness speaks to us of several things. It stands for ignorance, for instance. My beautiful bride is full of life, but she does have some quirks. Like all of us, she has an ongoing internal conversation with herself. We all do this self talk. One quirk that Laurie has is occasionally she seems to think I am privy to that conversation. So she will start talking to me as though I’ve been involved in it all along. I have this strange sense of being dropped into the middle of a conversation. Not long ago she did this and I said, “I am totally in the dark here. I have no idea what we’re talking about.” Being in the dark means not knowing.

Think about Israel’s predicament in the wilderness. They lacked the knowledge and experience to navigate their way to a homeland. They needed God’s light to show them the way. Without that light they would have literally been lost, confused and hopeless. Years ago Laurie and I were scheduled to fly home on a red eye flight. After considerable delay, the flight was canceled. The airline put us up in a hotel for the night. It was after 2 in the morning by the time we got into our hotel room and we were exhausted. So we brushed our teeth and collapsed into bed. I woke up a couple of hours later and had to go to the bathroom. The room had blackout curtains and it was super dark. The room was totally unfamiliar to me. In my groggy state I tried to remember the layout of the room, and kind of felt my way through the darkness to the bathroom. After a wrong turn or two I finally reached my goal and took care of business. Then I headed back to bed. The first thing I did was took a wrong turn and walked right into a wall. Then I tried again and somehow walked into a closet. I tried a couple of more times but I walked into another wall and another closet. At that point I had a moment of near panic. I had the thought that I was trapped. I couldn’t get out. In the dark, I didn’t know where to go. Like I said, I was very sleepy and groggy and not exactly hitting on all cylinders. As you can see, eventually I did manage to find my way back to bed. Being in the dark and not knowing where to go is a bad place to be. That’s us in this world. We are blundering around in the dark with no idea of where we are going.

In Colossians 1:13 Paul wrote that God, “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.” To live in the dominion of darkness is to live in a place where evil rules, destroys hope and leaves us with despair. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, the late Frederick Buechner wrote, “Part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease and incompleteness.” He goes on to say that all of us know that something important is missing in us. This is what happens when we live in the domain of darkness.

In Romans 1:21-22 Paul wrote of the human race, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.” A big problem for the human race is that because they refuse to glorify God and give thanks to him, their hearts are darkened, so their thinking becomes futile. For something to be futile means that it ends up being empty and useless. That is what happens to human beings. They think up lots of amazing things, but in the end it all amounts to nothing. We have created astounding scientific and technological wonders, but human nature is the same, human beings still struggle with the same things they always have.

A fundamental principle that we must always keep in mind is that believing what is real and true is best, and believing a lie or an illusion is harmful. There was a time when tobacco companies advertised their cigarettes as beneficial and helpful. Which was better, to believe that lie, or to reject it and believe the truth? A lot of people lost their lives because they believed the lie. Still today people smoke cigarettes believing somehow it won’t damage their health. Believing what is not true is never good, and usually has terrible consequences.

I remember the first time I saw an IPad. A friend who loves tech stuff had a brand new one when they first came out and he showed me his wonderful new toy. I remember thinking, “I don’t get it.” Why would you want that when you have a laptop computer? That tells you how smart I am. I am amazed at what this thing can do and how useful it is. Apple really lucked out on that one. They want you to think they’re really smart in creating this device, but I know better. This came about by accident. Over time it just happened.

Oh come on Rick, you can’t believe that. Well, consider the human eye. It contains over 100 million cells, it can see 10 million different colors and now scientists have shown it can detect a single photon. And our culture says it’s an accident. It just happened. Think of your brain. A cat’s brain has 1000 times more data storage capacity than an IPad and is a million times faster. Our brains are enormously more powerful than a cat’s. And our culture says our brains are an accident. They just happened. Here’s where it gets really fun. Without your eye, your brain can’t see. But without your brain to interpret signals from your eye, your eye is useless. So the brain and the eye had to accidentally happen at the same time. So let’s review. iPad, clearly not an accident. Without question designed and purposefully created. Human eye and brain, inconceivably more complex and powerful, simultaneous accidents.

Yeah, that makes sense. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. If you believe what is not true it will harm you. What this does to us is says we are meaningless accidents. Human beings have no value because they’re just accidents. There is no right or wrong for us because we are just accidents, which have no moral component. The implications of this thinking for us is both horrifying and devastating.

Darkness also speaks of evil. Living in this dark realm affects even our choices. Buechner wrote, “We need no urging to choose what it is that will destroy us, because again and again we choose it without any urging.” All of us know that experience. Why do we keep choosing what hurts us, what we don’t need or want? Paul wrote of that experience in Romans 7:19, “I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do. This I keep on doing.” Every single human being knows that experience. This is what happens when we live in darkness.

On a web site called The Experience Project they encouraged people to write about their experience in life. One woman wrote, “I prefer darkness over light. The darkness allows me to hide who I am and what I really feel. In the light all things have a chance to be revealed. Darkness makes it easier to hide.”

Darkness does make it easier to hide. Do you remember going to see movies in the theater? We don’t do it much any more. Laurie and I went to the theater once last year to see *Top Gun: Maverick*. But I remember going a lot more in the time before the pandemic. One absolute must when going to the theater was popcorn. For me, the popcorn had to be drenched in butter, or whatever that butter flavored liquid they let you put on it actually was. I recall one time when we went to see a movie and I enjoyed my butter soaked popcorn. When the movie ended the lights came on, and I could see I had managed to get butter stains all over the front of my shirt. As long as I was sitting in the dark theater I thought things were fine. The light revealed what was really there, and it wasn’t fine. Yes, living in the dark allows us to hide, to stick with the evil things we know are there.

The biggest problem is in the darkness of this world we are cut off from God. He is that piece that is missing. We were made by him and for him. Without him we can never be whole. We will always carry around a sense of loneliness. We will be burdened by guilt, which makes no sense for an accident but stubbornly never goes away. We face the terrifying prospect of death with no hope. We have no hope of connecting with the God who can solve all these issues. To walk in darkness is to live in a world that is confusing, harsh, hopeless and ultimately tragic. There is no good end in this dark world.

JESUS SHINES THE LIGHT

While we were on vacation one time Laurie and I went shopping at an outdoor mall. We were delighted to discover as we were done with our shopping that they were having a concert in the middle of the mall. We sat down to enjoy the concert. We had only been there a few minutes when everything suddenly went dark. There had been a power outage. So the concert ended abruptly because there was no power for the sound system. But it also was very dark in that mall. All the lights were out. This was maybe around 8:30 and it was totally dark. Everyone sat there for probably 10 minutes hoping the power would come back on. But it became apparent that it was likely not going to happen quickly. People began getting up to leave the concert area. Laurie and I faced a bit of a challenge. We were in an unfamiliar mall and in order for us to get back to our hotel we were going to have to make our way out of the mall, find a generic rental car that looked like a lot of other rental cars out in the parking lot, then drive back to our hotel, all in the dark. Laurie hit upon a helpful solution. Her cell phone. We used it to light our way. Following the light of her phone we were able to navigate out of the mall and find our car. We got in and using our headlights drove back to our hotel, which, unfortunately, was also out of power. Fortunately there was emergency lighting in the hallways, so we sat on the floor in the hall outside our room and read by the light of the emergency lighting.

I tell you that story because it speaks of the importance of light. When Jesus said he was the light of the world, he was telling us that he is the light we need to find our way through this life. He’s better than the light of that cell phone. As we go through this dark world, how are we going to find our way, to navigate through it all? Jesus is the light that shows us the way. By listening to him, by following him we can find our way.

One of the things dark does is it enhances fear. Everything is much scarier in the dark. I woke up one night some time back and was certain I had heard the door from our garage into our house open and close. I was instantly concerned and a little fearful. Laurie was sleeping peacefully in bed next to me, so it wasn’t her. Whoever it was, it was someone who did not belong in our house. I got out of bed, crept quietly to my closet, not wanting to alert the mysterious intruder to the fact that I was awake, got a baseball bat I keep there for emergencies like this, and began to stalk the intruder. I quietly opened the door of our bedroom and peered out. It was dark, and I could see no one. I heard no movement. I was very tense. I had a decision to make. Lights or no lights? I decided lights were the best way to go. I turned on the lights. No one charged at me. No one ran out of the house. I searched the entire house, with the lights on. I checked the garage. There was no one there. I figured out I had just dreamed hearing that door close, there never had been anyone there. Here’s the thing, there is a huge difference between having that experience at night in the dark and hearing something curious during the day and investigating it. The dark is just much more fearful.

I remembered a time when Laurie and I visited Michael and Carissa when they were living in Mississippi, and we all went to New Orleans for a couple of days. One day we walked through the Garden District of that city and we came upon a cemetery. Cemeteries in New Orleans are different. The water table there is so high they can’t bury people in the ground, so they build crypts and tombs above ground for them. We went through that cemetery, and it was kind of interesting. But the thought hit me, what would it be like to go through this place at night? No thank you. I realize it’s just superstitious, but seeing that place at night would just be too creepy. The dark is just scary.

If we live in this world in the dark, it’s going to be a fearful place. That’s why David wrote in Psalm 27:1, “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?” With the light of the world in us the dark of this world is no longer so fearful. We don’t fear so much because God is with us, his plan is at work in our lives, and we have the hope of eternal life. Life is no longer tragic. It has meaning, it is not a random pointless, futile exercise, and it ends with joy.

Light means there is hope. Think of the symbol of a lighthouse bringing hope and safety yo sailors on a dark and dangerous shore. When we were alienated from God, living without him, needing him for every human soul is desperate for him, and we had no way to be restored to him, we were literally hopeless, Jesus rescued us, his light brought hope.

Jesus provides the light that connects us to the God we all need. He provides forgiveness, taking away our guilt and inadequacy. He gives us meaning. He is with us to guide us through the world, to show us right and wrong, to give us his presence and help, and to give us hope in all things, even to the end.

Yesterday at our Anchorman Bible study I asked the guys about how they ended up in the jobs and the careers that they had. It was very interesting to hear about the paths they had taken in life and to note that they were quite different. One had a firm conviction about what he should do with his life since he was very young. But another had no clear idea what he should do, but as he went along one door after another led him to different steps and very different career choices. Others were somewhere in between those two. What was apparent most of all was each guy had a sense that God has worked to direct him through life. Jesus the light was guiding them through the darkness of this world. What a comfort it is for us to know that the light of the world is with us even now, guiding us through life.

There was a powerful statement John made earlier in John 1:5. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” About a year ago Laurie and I got to have a short getaway for a few days in Palm Desert. We stayed in a nice condo some friends provided for us. One night in the middle of the night Laurie woke up and she needed to use the bathroom. Ah, another go to the bathroom in the dark in the middle of the night story. Yes, that’s what this is. As she made her way to the bathroom she briefly stumbled. She braced herself by putting her hand on the wall. Only, she accidentally put her hand right where there was a light switch. When she did that she turned on the lights in that bedroom. All I knew was that one second I was sound asleep, then the next I was jolted awake in blinding light. I observed something that night. It was dark, and as soon as light showed up, darkness could do nothing against it.

When it is dark, even a little bit of light defeats the darkness. The darkness cannot overcome a light. When Jesus said he was the light of the world one of the things it meant was that life in the end is not dark. The light, Jesus, will win, and that changes how we think about life in this world.

Jesus as the light brings hope, he brings truth, he brings victory, he brings joy to our lives. He lights up our lives. He defeats evil. He begins defeating it inside of us, he enables us to overcome, and in the end, the story of this world will be that he wins. So at the heart of our existence, there can be joy.

CONCLUSION

Ephesians 5:8-10 says, “You were once darkness, buy now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth, and find out what pleases the Lord.”

Realize when we don’t walk in Jesus we are choosing darkness. Not walking in him is like turning the light off. When I was 12 years old our family took a trip across the country. We saw the Grand Canyon, the Meteor Crater in Arizona, the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills, Niagara Falls, Boston, New York, Washington D. C. and Colonial Williamsburg, among others. We also visited Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Those caves extend for 21 miles. We went on a two hour tour. At one point the guide stopped our group in a chamber of the cave and had us all find a place where we could stay without moving. Then he turned off all the lights in that chamber. We were cut off from all light. We were in total darkness. I remember I could almost feel the darkness. It was oppressive.

To live in darkness is oppressive. It will mean we cannot know our way in this world. It will always be confusing because we can’t see. We won’t know our way, we won’t know what is good and right to do, we will be dominated by fear, we will not have hope, and we will do evil.

Choose to walk in Jesus. I read a story from a man who visited Mammoth Caves in Kentucky when he was young. He had a slightly different experience than mine at Carlsbad Caverns. At one point on his tour they also turned off all the lights. But after a brief time, after their eyes had adjusted somewhat to the dark, the tour guide did something different. He lit a candle. One candle in the large cavern they were in. He said it was amazing how much light seemed to blaze.

For us to walk in the darkness is to let the light of Jesus shine in all the chambers of our lives. It means to see the world, its values, its ideas, is priorities through the grid of Jesus. It is to let his light guide our steps. It means living in hope because he is with us, going before us, and he will be with us for eternity. As Paul says, **to walk in the light is to seek to please God in everything we are and everything we do**.