

THE LESSON OF THE CEILING FAN

Colossians 1:12-14

A number of years ago Laurie and I were at the Kukui Grove Mall in the town of Lihue on the island of Kauai. We were shopping when we stopped to listen to a local concert set up in the mall. It was around 8 p.m. when suddenly the sound stopped and all the lights went out. In an instant it was total darkness around us. The power in the whole area had gone out. We were going to have to find our way out of that unfamiliar mall then locate our car in the parking lot all in the dark. Laurie got out her cell phone and used it as a flashlight to help us find our way. Then we had to drive back to our hotel several miles away along streets that had no traffic signals, no street lights, no lights on street names or direction signs. After a slow drive we managed to make it to our hotel where the power was also out. The only lighting was emergency lighting in the halls, so once again we used the light from the phone to locate some books in our totally dark room, then sat on the floor in the hall reading until the lights eventually came back on.

I didn't like living in the dark. Do you remember the massive power outage that sent our entire region into the dark back in 2011? Do you remember the chaos of that event? Darkness and its ensuing chaos is most definitely not my favorite thing. I would like you to think of the chaos of darkness this morning as we consider a remarkable thing that God has done for us. We'll see it in Colossians 1:12-14.

WE WERE IN THE DARK

Central to the message of these verses is the concept of rescue. Rescue implies that we are in dire straits. If I am sitting on the couch eating the terrific Chex Party Mix that Laurie makes and watching an exciting football game on television I don't need to be rescued. In fact, if you rescued me from that I would be displeased. A rescue is only required when you are in danger or in a place of pain.

Paul says that his readers were living under the dominion of darkness, a situation that calls for rescue. Paul was using darkness as a picture of evil. They were in a place where darkness ruled. The Bible says they were not the only ones. All of us are born into a world that is dark. Ephesians 6:12 says, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world." Isaiah 60:2 says, "See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples." We humans typically do not like to be told things like this, but the most important thing you can do when you are in the dark is to recognize that you are, in fact, in the dark. All of us are born into a dark world, without exception. Matthew 4:16 announced the beginning of Jesus' public ministry by quoting Isaiah 9:2, which says, "the people living in darkness have seen a great light." You might say that's nice for those who are living in darkness, but Jesus came for the whole world, which means the whole world is living in darkness.

Well now wait just a moment. This world isn't so bad. In fact people are desperate to continue in it. They do everything they can to avoid leaving it. If they get cancer they take toxic chemicals that wreak havoc on their bodies and make them miserable in the effort to defeat the disease and continue living. If this world were such a dark place wouldn't people be anxious to leave it? Honestly, I like it here. Seems pretty nice to me.

First we have to recognize that since this is the only world we've ever known, we have nothing to compare it with. It's hard to realize it is dark if you've never seen light. When Laurie and I were first married I was surprised by a couple of things about her. She told me that she didn't like Mexican food and that she wasn't a big fan of steak, that she would prefer waffles to steak any day. This was mystifying to me because I love Mexican food and, while I like waffles, I think they do not compare with a good steak. Laurie has since converted. She discovered that she didn't like Mexican food because her family's version of it was tacos using those pre-made taco shells that were not good, and she didn't like steak because her dad insisted it be so thoroughly cooked it bore a striking resemblance to shoe leather. That's the world she knew. When she got outside that world her eyes were opened. We don't realize how dark this world is because we've never lived in any other.

We can confirm that this world truly is dark by considering the reality of what life is actually like here.

The dark makes it hard to see

We all know that it is hard to see things at night. If you have ever experienced total darkness you know you can't see anything. When I was a kid we visited Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. The trails on that tour are lit, but at one point they gathered the group in a chamber and turned off the lights. It was pitch black. I could wave my hand in front of my face and not even see that it was there; you could only feel the breeze it made. You could almost feel the darkness. It was oppressive.

Is that true in this world? Yes, in this world the majority of people cannot see the truth. There are some things about believing in Jesus that take a lot of faith. God becoming a baby, the resurrection, God existing as three persons yet one being; all of that stretches our minds, to say the least. Yet so much about it seems so clearly true. Toby has said as he has studied the systems of the human body it has become glaringly obvious that this is no accident. The hand of the creator is all over it. Why don't people see that? Why don't they see how desperately they need forgiveness and the fact that there is nothing that can provide it outside of Jesus? Why can't they see the power of the evidence for the resurrection?

Here's why: they are in the dark. When our kids were young Toby and I used to often play catch with the football or a baseball out in the street. But there always came a point when we had to stop because it got dark. Toby did not blame me for not playing after

that. He didn't get upset with me because I couldn't see the ball. You just can't see the ball in the dark. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ." They are in the dark and they cannot see.

At times I am tempted to shake my head in dismay at what people believe, at the obvious things they should be able to see but can't. Then I remember, this is a dark world. They are in the dark so I should not be surprised at what they cannot see. They need my sympathy and my prayers.

The dark causes fear

Have you ever noticed that kids do not usually fear monsters in the closet or under their bed in the daytime? It is usually at night that those normally mundane places turn into scary dens of lurking evil. What is the difference? It's the dark.

A few years ago Laurie was visiting her family and I was alone in our house. I'm all grown up so that doesn't freak me out like it might have when I was a kid, but I noticed I did like having some noise, like the television on at night. In the middle of the night just as I was drifting off to sleep I heard a noise. It sounded like the door from the garage into the house opening. I was instantly alert. Clearly someone was in our house. I got out of bed and tiptoed to the closet where I have a hockey stick I can use for self-defense. I debated whether I should sneak down in the dark and try to surprise him or announce my presence by turning on the lights. I opted for turning on the lights. Then I hustled downstairs to find no one. Other than me the house and the garage were empty and undisturbed. All that was disturbed was me. What made hearing that noise kind of scary was being in the dark. As soon as I turned the lights on in the house the situation felt less ominous. To this day I don't know what that noise was, though.

So we should anticipate that in this dark world there will be fear. And that is exactly what we find. Fear dogs us every day of our lives. We fear failure, rejection, embarrassment, pain, and of course death. Who does not fear that the strange pain they felt today, or that odd bump, is cancer? We fear what happens after we die, we fear rejection by God. People live continually in fear. We were out to dinner recently with several friends and in the course of conversation one of the people asked, "Do you know who Telemachus is?" I immediately said yes, but when they said, "Tell us," I realized I didn't. They said Telemachus but my brain said Tertullian who was an early church leader. I was embarrassed, feeling like I looked stupid. I began to think of how much I hate looking stupid or being embarrassed. We often are dogged by nameless fears that we can't even identify, we just feel fearful. Fear is always a factor in our thinking. Welcome to the dark world.

Romans 8:15 says the Spirit of Christ is not "a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear." That verse says we are naturally slaves to fear, and we are. Jesus said in John

14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” We need peace because we don’t have it. We’re afraid. The peace Jesus gives is not like the “peace” the world gives, which is actually just an illusion; it is based totally on circumstance and disappears in an instant. We are left only with fear.

The dark brings frustration

Because we cannot see clearly, and especially the dark blinds us to the truth, we begin to believe lies. We try to find something that will fill our lives with hope, fulfillment, peace and joy. Not seeing the truth we fall prey to the trap of pursuing things that promise those things but cannot deliver them.

Ephesians 4:22 says that our life in the darkness is “corrupted by deceitful desires.” What that means is that we have desires that actually lie to us. They tell us that if we can only fulfill them we can find the satisfaction and peace that we long for. But we keep getting disappointed. We fulfill a desire and it feels good, but then we discover it didn’t give us the permanent peace and fulfillment we hoped for. Now we need something else. Because we are in the dark we cannot see the truth of what is happening. We are stuck in a lifelong pursuit of one thing after another that will in the end prove to be a mirage.

Even worse, Ephesians 4:18 says of those in the dark, “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God.” That’s perhaps the worst part. In our darkness we are disconnected from God and from the life he gives, which is the full and abundant life we desire.

We have friends whose son wants to be a rock star. He has dedicated himself to that end. He is sure this will be the life that he has always wanted. He has worked hard and has become a very good musician, but he is no rock star. Here’s the question: if he achieved the success and fame that has so possessed his heart and mind, will it connect him to God? Obviously it will not. The same is true of any other desire we pursue in this world. Great intelligence, great power, great riches, great fame, none of those will ever connect us to God, and that means in the end we will lack the peace, the life we desire and we will end up frustrated and restless.

In fact, our friend’s obsession with being a rock star is destroying his life and he cannot see it. We all know that to keep doing the same thing that does not and cannot work, to do it over and over expecting it to somehow yield a different result is the definition of insanity. Yet all over the world humans keep pursuing one goal after another hoping that it will finally work and they will be at peace, only to get the same disappointing result. We end up enslaved, trapped in our insanity, restless and frustrated. Welcome to a dark world.

In the dark, unable to see the truth, people believe lies and this leads to them doing evil. Don't you find yourself frustrated by all of the evil in the world? Why do people do the terrible things they do? Why don't they treat each other better? Why can't we all get along? It is frustrating that there is so much misery in human relations. That's a frustrating part of life in a dark world.

The dark is hopeless

Matthew 4:16, that verse Jesus used to announce the beginning of his public ministry, goes on in quoting Isaiah 9:2 to describe all of us as those "living in the land of the shadow of death."

That is a source of much of our fear. In Psalm 23:4 David wrote, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, ..." That's where we walk. Every day of our lives we live in that shadow. Why is it so disturbing when we are in an airplane and we hit heavy turbulence? It's not because we have a big problem with a bumpy ride. It's because we are thinking, "I'm going to die! The plane is going to plunge 35,000 feet down to earth and my final minutes of life are going to be lived in screaming terror. In the end we are all going to just be a smoking hole in the ground." We hear of a friend or loved one who is diagnosed with cancer and we feel sick inside. Why is that? Because we fear they are going to die, and with that sneaks in the "that could happen to me" thought.

Death is all around us and we know it could blow up our world at any moment, and we have little or no defense against it. If we do not have a hope, not a wish but a certain hope, we live in a dark dungeon of fear. Ephesians 2:12 says we are "without hope and without God in the world."

I was reading a review of George R.R. Martin's series of fantasy novels, *A Song of Fire And Ice*, that has been turned into the *Game of Thrones* television series. The reviewer remarked that Martin's characters are generally unhappy. There is a strong sense of melancholy as they live in a chaotic and ruthless world. There is an absence of joy. What I found interesting was that many critics praise Martin's writing because of its "realness." In other words, it depicts the melancholy, the cynicism and joylessness of the human condition. That is part of the dominion of darkness that Paul was talking about.

In *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, the first book in the Narnia series, C. S. Lewis depicts Narnia as a world doomed to perpetual winter. It is oppressed by an evil queen who has banished all sunlight and warmth from the world. Personally that would be a nightmare for me. I know many people love skiing and snowboarding. More power to you. Those are not for me. They require snow. Snow is frozen water, which absolutely requires cold. I hate cold. You can ask Laurie and she will verify that I am cold most of the time. We've had friends who have said, "You should go to Montana. The beauty there is incredible." I'm sure it's lovely. I've seen pictures. Here's my problem: it's cold. I love warm days and warm nights. Let me just pose a question. In God's original perfect world,

what were the first humans wearing? Nothing. No parkas, no boots, no heavy animal skins. What does that tell you? In God's perfect world it is warm! Lewis was using the cold as an analogy for the darkness of this world. J.R.R. Tolkien used darkness effectively in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. A darkness spread from the land of Mordor. Under that darkness there was only death and evil. That was his way of describing this world. That is the world in which we live.

I am at times bemused when brothers and sisters in Christ express shock and anger at the state of our world. I hear them rail at its opposition to the truth of the gospel, at its crudity and ugliness and its unfairness. Excuse me, but why would you expect anything different? This is the domain of darkness. Do you expect it to be full of goodness and light? That would be absurd. To be angry and frustrated at the state of the world is like being angry and frustrated at the night because it is dark. Hey, at night it's dark. Deal with it. One of Laurie's least favorite sayings is, "it is what it is," but when it comes to this dark world, well...it is what it is. Don't expect something else. Fortunately there is good news.

GOD HAS RESCUED US

Verse 13 tells us that God has rescued us from that darkness. We are not doomed to a gloomy existence in this dark domain. Matthew 4:16 says that on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. Luke 4:18 says that when Jesus inaugurated his ministry he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed." That's us. The oppressed, those imprisoned in darkness, those who are blind in the dark. Jesus came to open the cell door and remove the chains, to enable our sightless eyes to see. In Psalm 139:12 David wrote, "Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for the darkness is as light to you." Psalm 18:28 says, "My God turns my darkness into light."

God has overcome the darkness. God has rescued us by his work. Is it not obvious that if we need rescue it is because we cannot save ourselves? There is a Lowe's commercial that I think is hilarious. It shows a guy putting the finishing touches on a ceiling fan that he has installed in his home. Now finished, he climbs down from the ladder, goes over to the wall and flips the switch to turn the fan on, prepared to proudly watch his masterpiece in action. The fan starts to turn, but after just one revolution there is a puff of flame and smoke then the entire unit drops out of ceiling onto a table below and smashes it into pieces. The scene switches to the outside of the house where we see a picture window. Suddenly the ceiling fan flies through the window, shattering it, and lands on the lawn outside. Then the words "Need help?" appear on the screen.

I suppose I like the commercial because it depicts how every home improvement or home maintenance project I've ever undertaken has turned out, with the possible exception of changing light bulbs. But there is a message that applies in this situation. When you

cannot do what needs to be done the most important thing you can do is recognize that fact. Admit that you need help.

In her book *A Field Guide To Getting Lost* Rebecca Soinit wrote that search and rescue experts say that when people get lost in a wilderness area the key to survival often depends on one thing: knowing and admitting they are lost. It turns out that kids in that situation are more often found than adults because they don't stray as far in an effort to rescue themselves. They typically hunker down, curl up and wait for help, which makes it easier for rescuers to find them.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What a strange thing to say. We would think it is the people who are rich in spirit who will possess the kingdom of God. When Jesus said that, it was shocking, a complete contradiction of prevailing theological thinking in his day. It doesn't shock us as much because it is familiar to us, and because we often don't get what Jesus is saying. The poor in spirit will possess the kingdom of God specifically because they are poor and they know it. In other words, *they realize they cannot save themselves*. They know they need to be rescued.

Verse 14 speaking of Jesus Christ, Paul says, "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Our redemption, our rescue from the domain of darkness, required the forgiveness of sins. The problem for us involves the very nature of forgiveness. To understand the issue here all we need to do is ask one question: can you create forgiveness? I can do a lot of things. I can try to reform. I can try to make amends. I can apologize to someone I've offended. But I absolutely cannot create forgiveness. When I need to be forgiven I cannot make the offended party forgive me.

Let's imagine that one day I realize that I am guilty and therefore need to be forgiven. I can decide from that point on I will never again do the thing that caused my guilt. And let's imagine that against all odds I am able to do what I've decided. From that moment on I never do that thing again. That's good, but it does not remove the guilt of my previous actions. My only hope in regard to that is that the offended party rescue me from my guilt by forgiving me.

Of course unfortunately we all know that when it comes to God we can decide all we want that we will never again do the things that cause us to be guilty before him. It won't help, because we won't follow through on that commitment. We can't. So all we will do is add to our already large pile of guilt.

In other words, our only hope is that God provides some way for us to be forgiven. That is our only rescue from the darkness of guilt. That is exactly what he did when Jesus came into this world to proclaim release to the captives. We were the captives. In him we have been given that release from guilt.

Perhaps you have heard the story of Harrison Odjegba Okene. He was the 29 year old cook on the Jascon 4, a tugboat, one of 3 that were towing an oil tanker off the coast of Nigeria. For some reason the boat capsized and sank. Harrison was in the bathroom when the boat went down. It was total chaos. He didn't know what was happening. All he knew was he was tossed violently around and he heard shouting from elsewhere on board. The boat sank upside down in 100 feet of water and ended up on the bottom of the Atlantic. Harrison got into his cabin and made a platform of two mattresses. He climbed onto it and found a pocket of air. There he stayed. He didn't know what had happened except it was clear the ship had sunk. He assumed his 11 shipmates had escaped, but he was trapped at the bottom of the ocean with no way out. He had no way to save himself. He had one Coke, but nothing to eat, nothing else to drink and no light. All he could do was sit in the cold dark praying for someone to rescue him. Two and a half days later divers came to recover the bodies. It appeared no one had survived. Harrison heard the sounds of the divers going through the boat. Finally he saw their lights when one came into his cabin. He tapped the diver on the back and scared him nearly to death. But the diver gave him hot water to warm him up, then gave him oxygen and they got him out of that ship. Harrison is like us. He could not save himself. He was totally dependent on others to rescue him.

We are like Harrison. It is dark and cold here. We cannot see; we are trapped in a cycle of frustration, failure and disillusionment. We are pounded by fear and guilt. We were created for God but are cut off from him. We are stalked by the specter of death and there is not one thing we can do to rescue us from that situation. But in Jesus Christ God came to our rescue. He has forgiven us, opened our eyes, put us on the path to life, connected us to himself and his life, and given us certain hope. He has rescued us when we were completely helpless.

GOD HAS TRANSFERRED US TO THE KINGDOM OF LIGHT

Verse 13 tells us God has brought us into the Kingdom of his Son. Notice that verse 12 says God has “qualified” us for the kingdom. That tells us that the kingdom has some qualifications for entry and that we don't meet them. If we did God wouldn't have needed to qualify us.

We have been learning about a whole new aspect of life the past couple of years. We have been learning about how life is for a military family and especially how it is for a fighter pilot. One of the things we hear about a lot from Michael is “quals.” Every new thing a pilot does involves qualifying. They get qualified to fly, qualified to pilot a new aircraft type, qualified for new weapons systems, qualified to land on an aircraft carrier. Michael has to qualify as an instructor. Some day if he chooses to become an airline pilot he will have to qualify for that. One thing I know for sure: I'm not qualified to fly anything, not even a single engine Piper Cub. I'm not qualified because I don't have the ability. Qualification requires that you prove you have the ability to do something.

What are the qualifications for God's Kingdom? He requires that we be perfect to enter his kingdom. Just in case you weren't sure, I fall a bit short there. How short? Let's put it this way: it's more than a few light years short.

Why perfection? Why would God keep so many people out? Why set the standards so high? Let's put it this way: what do you think standards should be for allowing people who have the Ebola virus into this country? What should be the standards for having people with Ebola into your *house*? Would it be all right with you if a person with a little bit of Ebola came to your house? What we need to understand is that what we have spiritually, all of us, every single human, is the equivalent of Ebola. It is the evil virus. Even a speck of it, one little imperfection, brings death. Essentially God has to quarantine us from his kingdom of light.

It is a powerful thing to be cleansed and qualified for this kingdom. We need to understand that there are 2 kingdoms at work in creation. They are there at all times. We are all in either one or the other. One is a doomed and dark kingdom of death, and the other is a kingdom of light and life. To be rescued from the former and brought into the latter is a gift of unimaginable proportions, one we can never earn or repay.

APPLICATION

This is great news, but what should we do with it?

ACCEPT THE RESCUE

If you've been trying to rescue yourself from the darkness by flailing about, trying to find the right philosophy, the right amount of good behavior, the right combination of the riches of this world that will finally save your soul, it's time to stop. It's time to let God rescue you.

GIVE THANKS WITH JOY

That's what started this whole discussion. Verse 12 says we should be "giving thanks with joy" because God has qualified us for the kingdom. No matter what happens in your life, you have immeasurably precious reasons to be thankful and joyful. On your worst day you have reason to thank God because he has rescued you from the domain of darkness.

Harrison Okene, after his nearly miraculous rescue said, "The rest of my life is not enough to thank God for this wonder. It is incredible." Obviously he has a very physical reason for saying that, but we have an equally strong reason to say that the rest of our lives is not enough to thank God for freeing us from the domain of darkness.

I challenge you today to try something for the next week. When you wake up, as your first act, verbally thank God for rescuing you from the domain of darkness and bringing you into his light. When you go to bed, do the same. Thank God for rescuing you from darkness and transferring you to his kingdom of light. Twice during your day, maybe when you see some Christmas lights somewhere, pause to thank God. Discipline yourself to thank God for the fact that he has rescued you.

DON'T LIVE IN THE DARK

Trust God. Trusting him is the solution to fear. *Every fear we struggle with is alleviated by trust.* The hopelessness is vanquished by trust, for our God is the God of hope. Trust that in God we have eternal life. Trust that because of what Jesus has done for us we do not need to fear God's wrath, judgment or condemnation. Trust that in his wisdom God will work good for us in all things. Trust that God will never abandon or forsake us. Trust that God tells us the truth about life, and that he fills every moment of our lives with purpose.

God has opened your eyes. He has turned on the lights, so see the world for what it is. See those desires that scream to you that you must fulfill them in order to find the fulfillment and satisfaction and peace you want for what they are. They may be desires for good and reasonable things, but they are not what provides real peace. Our peace is found only in living out the will of God and rejoicing in him.

SHINE THE LIGHT

All around you are people living in darkness. They can't see what they're doing; they are blinded by the dark so in a spiritual sense they could not even see their own hand in front of their face so the truth is not visible to them. They are frustrated, lost, hopeless and don't know the way out. We cannot rescue them. Only God can do that. But what we can do is shine the light. Let them see your *hope*, your *gratitude* to God, your *peace and joy*. And most of all we can pray for them and care about them.

Imagine that you knew someone who was in Harrison Okene's situation. This is someone you care about, someone you love. You know they are trapped in that dark water and if something isn't done that person is going to die. Let's also suppose that you do not know how to scuba dive. You personally can't save the person who is trapped. What would you do? Would you just shrug and give up? My guess is you would do all you can to contact people who *could* help him, and desperately encourage them to get moving to go to your loved one's aid. Spiritually we can't rescue, but we can talk to the one who is able to, so let's do that.