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The Gospel of John

XXXIX. Shall Not Remain in Darkness

John 12:37-50

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“When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.” What Jesus had said – which we read last week – was this: *“The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.”*¹ And with that said, He walks away from the crowds, ends His public ministry, draws His disciples close in around Him for their final meal together – and for His final preparation for the cross. *“When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.”* The public ministry of Jesus is now done, the cross awaits.

But as Jesus’ public ministry draws to a close, our Gospel writer John takes a moment to ask what must have been a very real question for the disciples – that if, as they believed, Jesus really is the Messiah, then why haven’t more of His own people, the Jews, come to believe in Him. John begins with a sad statement of fact: *“Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.”* Remember the signs we have witnessed Jesus doing as we have read John’s Gospel together? The water being changed into wine at Cana², the miraculous healing of the official’s son from a distance, without even seeing or laying hands on the boy.³ The feeding of the five thousand with but fives loaves and two fish⁴; the healing of the man born blind.⁵ And then, most of all, the raising of Lazarus from the dead.⁶ And how many more miracles had Jesus done, and the people seen, than John had written down? And yet, writes John, *“Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.”* All the evidence they could have possibly needed had been placed before them – and yet they did not believe. And yet they would soon condemn Him to die.

And so John begins our passage by asking “why”? He quotes from Isaiah as one possible explanation:

*Lord, who has believed what he heard from us,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*

In other words, maybe one reason His own people had not believed in Him was simply because He was so different from what they thought the Messiah would be – taken aback by His failure to take on their Roman occupiers, for example. And, just in general, not at all like their expectations of to whom the arm of the Lord would be revealed. Seems quite likely, given that the strangeness of Jesus troubles us still, if we are honest about it. The fact that He still refuses to be what we want Him to be, to do for us what we think He ought to be doing for us. We want Him to protect us and those whom we love from all harms and alarms, to make us prosperous and happy at all times. But

Jesus continues to confound our expectations. Does not that cause us also, at least sometimes, to struggle to believe?

John then considers a second possibility, again with a quote from Isaiah – that perhaps the deeper problem is not the strangeness of Jesus, but rather the hardness of the people’s hearts in relation to Jesus, in relation to the Father who sent Jesus. Quoting Isaiah again:

*He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them.*

Now, we have to be careful with that quotation – it comes from a different time and a different context in the salvation story. It must not be read as a sort of predestination formula – that only those whom God chooses get to be saved. For that would make a lie out of everything Jesus has been saying about His ministry and the hope of our salvation. To take just one example: “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*”⁷ Okay, another example: Jesus standing up on the last day of the Feast of Booths and saying, “*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.*”⁸ So this Isaiah quote cannot be taken to mean that it is all God’s fault that the people did not receive Jesus.

What it does mean is that the blindness of our eyes can indeed stand in the way of our seeing Jesus as our Savior – the One whom we are longing for, desperately in need of to deliver us in life and from death. And the hardness of our hearts can indeed prevent us from letting Jesus into our hearts, even if we do see Him as the One who is our Savior. I have known that sort of hardness of heart in myself; and I have seen it in others. It is real.

For example, no less a Christian than C. S. Lewis struggled with hardness of heart. Before his conversion to Christ, to his credit, Lewis had seen in Jesus and in His teaching something many fail ever to see. His eyes were not blind, because he understood correctly that if he let Jesus in, he would have to change. He would be changed. The settled orthodoxies of his life would all come undone because of Jesus; and the priorities he had chosen for himself would all have to be reconsidered. And so, hardness of heart stood in his way because he didn’t want this to happen. He didn’t want Jesus to come into his life and change it. Indeed, he resisted Jesus with every fiber of his being. And when Jesus finally pierced through his hardened heart anyway, Lewis spoke of that moment as if it were one of the worst nights of his life:

People who are naturally religious find difficulty in understanding the horror of such a revelation. Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about “man’s search for God.” To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat . . .

Remember, I had always wanted, above all things, not to be “interfered with.” I had wanted (mad wish) “to call my soul my own” . . . [But] Total surrender, the absolute leap in the dark, were

demanded. The reality with which no treaty can be made was upon me. The demand was not even “All or nothing.” I think that stage had passed . . . Now, the demand was simply “All.”

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling . . . the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.⁹

Hardness of heart. Is there not some such hardness in our hearts, also?

“Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.” Jesus not being the sort of Messiah the people were expecting. Or maybe they didn’t have eyes to see and ears to hear, and their hearts were just too hardened to let Him in. Regardless, here at the end of Jesus’ public ministry John was left mulling over the mystery of the prophetic words he himself had proclaimed in the prologue to his Gospel: *“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”¹⁰*

But then John brings up the fact that some did receive Him – even some of the religious leadership who were otherwise bent on getting Him to the cross: *“Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him.”* But for this group John has little praise. In fact, he seems to be reserving for them the greater judgment, seeing in them a third and perhaps the least excusable of all the reasons God’s own people rejected Jesus: *“Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”*

They believed Jesus to be the Messiah, accepted Him as sent from God. But they refused to let their belief go any further than that, go any deeper than that. They refused to openly declare Jesus as their Lord, first off. But also, and more tragic perhaps, they refused to let Him change their living and what they were living for. They believed in Jesus, but didn’t let that belief alter, in any way, their conduct among their peers. They accepted that Jesus was the light, but continued to walk in the darkness so that others wouldn’t think they were weird. Or so that they could try to have their cake and eat it too – believe in Jesus, but keep on running their lives the way they always had. *“For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”*

Glory. There’s that word again – three weeks in a row. And what have we learned? That the glory of God is expressed supremely in self-sacrificing love in obedience to the Father. In other words, the glory of God is the cross of Jesus Christ. The glory of man, however, is simply self-regard writ large – fame and fortune and fitting in with others. *“For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”* Christians in name only. Christians in passive, private belief only – not in daily living also. Christians who want Jesus, but only insofar as He doesn’t rock the boat. Only insofar as He restricts Himself to blessing their plans and priorities, and never demands that they should follow His.

And suddenly it begins to feel like John is deliberately stepping on our toes now, as well as those of Jesus false friends among the authorities back then. Are we also false friends, false servants of Christ who accept Jesus as our Savior, but with conditions attached? Accepting Jesus as our Savior, but with the full intention that we will not accept Him also as our Lord – as the One who now rules over and governs every aspect of our lives? Those who have accepted the truth of Jesus Christ and His teachings – yet refuse, in our daily lives, to take up our cross with Him, following Him into a life of self-sacrificial love of God and neighbor.

Those who think we only have to check the Jesus box with our words in order to be saved – but not with our lives. Instead of daily seeking to follow His way, according to His truth, in order to live the Life He has called and claimed us for. Believing in Jesus, but continuing to live our lives on our terms – telling Him to serve us, instead of letting Him teach us how to serve God and to serve our neighbor in His name. *“For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”*

Dallas Willard, a provocative and brilliant writer on the life of Christian discipleship, calls this refusal to let Christ teach us how to live as being a “Consumer Christian”:

The consumer Christian is one who utilizes the grace of God for forgiveness and the services of the church for special occasions, but does not give his or her life and innermost thoughts, feelings, and intentions over to the kingdom . . . Such Christians are not inwardly transformed and not committed to it. Because this is so, they remain not just “imperfect,” for all of us remain imperfect, but routinely and seriously unable and unwilling to do the good they know to do . . . They remained governed, or “slaves” of . . . sin.¹¹

Consumer Christians. But as bad as it is that we should withhold ourselves from Jesus, what is almost as bad – and what we rarely consider – is how, in withholding ourselves from Jesus we are also withholding ourselves from what Jesus wants to give to us: Life. In withholding ourselves from Jesus we are missing out on the abundant and eternal life He promises to give to us. As John Ortberg puts it in his book with the wonderful title, If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat: *“This is a way that leads to stagnation – unrealized potential, unfulfilled longings. It leads to a sense that I'm not living my life; the one I was supposed to live. It leads to boredom, to what Gregg Levoy calls the common cold of the soul.”¹²*

*Sinful patterns of behavior that never get confronted and changed,
Abilities and gifts that never get cultivated and deployed –
Until weeks become months,
And months turn into years,
And one day you're looking back on a life of
Deep intimate gut-wrenchingly honest conversations you never had;
Great bold prayers you never prayed,
Exhilarating risks you never took,
Sacrificial gifts you never offered,*

*Lives you never touched,
 And you're sitting in a recliner with a shriveled soul,
 And forgotten dreams,
 And you realize there was a world of desperate need,
 And a great God calling you to be part of something bigger than
 yourself –
 You see the person you could have become but did not . . .
 There is no tragedy like the tragedy of the unopened gift.¹³*

Consumer Christians. Could this be even worse than those who reject Jesus out of hardness of heart – to say we believe in Him, but not let Him truly enter our hearts and minds and souls and bodies? Not let Him truly change us from foolishly chasing the false glory of man to reflecting, in our daily living, nothing less than the true glory of God? “*For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.*”

But with that accusation still hanging in the air, suddenly John steps aside, as Jesus reappears from where He had been hiding. And lest we think, after what John has said, that we are without hope and already condemned, Jesus then speaks to us powerful words of hope – words of promise and words of assurance. After John has rightfully called us out in Jesus’ name and for our own sake – such that we should become ready and willing anew to hear Jesus speaking to us – Jesus then again takes center stage and He speaks to His disciples, then and now, saying: “*Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.*”

What is God really like? Look at Jesus. “*Whoever sees me sees him who sent me.*” Jesus is what our God is truly like. And Jesus upon the cross, the glory of God revealed, reveals to us what our God thinks of us – and just how far He is willing to go to draw us all back to Himself, draw us all deeper into Himself, draw us all forward into the life – abundant and eternal life – that He wants us to share with Him forever. All our attempts to deny Him, to keep Him at arm’s length from our daily lives and inmost thoughts, are as nothing when set against His great, eternal desire to draw us to Himself, out of His wondrous love for us.

And then comes the word of hope, the word of promise, the word of assurance given to us all – whether our hearts are hard or only half-committed: “*I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.*” May not remain in darkness. No longer have to walk in darkness – with no clue as to how to live, with no capacity to live as though we did. “*I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.*”

Whether our hearts are hardened by life, or only half-committed within the life of faith, to us all this promise, this invitation, this assurance comes: that He will not stop reaching towards us until He has at last brought us out of the darkness of our unbelief or half-belief into His wonderful light – and Life. That He will yet enable us, following Him, to walk in the light of joy, the light of love, the light of salvation, the light of self-giving – the light of our Lord and Savior

Jesus Christ. Our hearts may be hardened, or they may be half-committed – but the Light is shining still into our darkness. And the darkness, in the end, shall not overcome that light.

Believe. Believe in the goodness, the power, the love of Jesus for you, for me. Like C. S. Lewis, let us just surrender to Him, give up and give in to Him, let Him have His way in us. For He can and He will save us from the darkness of life in this world, save us even from the darkness which dwells within our own hearts. Save us, such that we will walk in Light the rest of our days, and rest in His love forevermore.

¹ John 12:35.

² John 2:1-11.

³ John 4:46-54.

⁴ John 6:1-14.

⁵ John 9:1-41.

⁶ John 11:1-44.

⁷ John 3:16.

⁸ John 7:37.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, Surprised By Joy (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955), pp. 227-229.

¹⁰ John 1:10-11.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 342.

¹² John Ortberg, If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 34.

¹³ Greg Levoy, Callings, as quoted in Ortberg, pp. 34-35.