

The people that walked in darkness

Part 1

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Date	13.01.2006
Duration	00:37:13
Online version	https://www.audioteaching.org/en/sermons/jsb015/the-people-that-walked-in-darkness

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[00:00:00] Our reading is in the Prophet Isaiah, beginning in chapter 8, verse 19, Isaiah chapter 8, verse 19, And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that speak and mutter, should not a people seek unto their God for the living to the dead?

To the law and to the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

And they shall pass to it hardly shed and hungry, and it shall come to pass that when they shall be hungry, they shall fret themselves, and curse their king and their God, and look upwards.

And they shall look unto the earth, and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish, [00:01:03] and they shall be driven into darkness. Nevertheless, the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first she lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea beyond Jordan and Galilee of the nations. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy.

They judge for thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoils.

For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the scarf of his shoulder, and the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

For every battle of the warrior is a confused noise, and garments rolled in blood. [00:02:05] But this shall be with burning and fuel of fire, for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end. Upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice, and henceforth even forever, the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will perform this. I want to direct your attention particularly in this passage we have read, to verse 2 of chapter 9.

The people that walk in darkness have seen a great light, they that dwell in the land [00:03:05] of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

I suppose I have been reading the Bible in general, and this book in particular, all my life at intervals, but only recently did it come over me in a fresh way what a wonderful picture is presented by these words.

The people that walk in darkness have seen a great light, have seen a great light.

I speak to myself that it is a wonderful statement, that people who walk in darkness have seen a great light, and for the people who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, for them hath light shined.

Now I shall be spending a few minutes trying to explain something about this verse to you, [00:04:06] but I can say right at the start, because you will go to sleep in the first ten minutes, I've got to make quite sure that I do say one thing, and that is that it's perfectly plain that these words are fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the first of the four Gospels contains these words.

And leaving Nazareth, Jesus came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthilim, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaac the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon and the land of Nephthilim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people which sat in darkness saw a great light, and to them which sat in the region of the shadow of death, light is [00:05:04] sprung up.

So there's absolutely no doubt that the plain intention of the Bible's story is that these words are fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, I can't take it for granted that you know very much about him. Of course, if you do, you'll never get tired of hearing who he is and what he has done and where he is now.

And if you don't know, there's not a bit of good by going any further beyond saying that these words are fulfilled in Jesus, unless you know what he did and who he was.

One of the first preachers of the gospel, they were very careful, indeed, that there should be no doubt from the word go who they were talking about. They never left it in any doubt at all, although in their day the tremendous event about the [00:06:02] life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth were in the memory of every person present.

Yet they left it in no doubt when they preached that they were preaching what could come to these people for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But in our day, of course, we can no longer take it for granted that people know about him. One of the things they said was this, he was a man who went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil, for God was with him. Now did you know that about Jesus?

That he was a man who went about doing good, and not only that he went about doing good, but that his power was great enough, and his love and compassion were strong enough, that he was healing all those who were oppressed of the devil, and he was doing this because in a very particular way

God was with him. [00:07:03] Now the fact of the matter is that Jesus is still, by this gospel, going about doing good.

He's still healing all those who are oppressed of the devil who trust in him.

And he's doing this because God is with him in a very, very special way, of course, that I shall have to explain.

One of the very striking things about the Lord Jesus Christ that we must never forget when we are thinking about him, and reminding ourselves that this passage is fulfilled in him, is that he was absolutely unique in several important factors.

But one of them is that he was the only man who ever lived, before or since, who was absolutely clear of every trace of sin and evil.

He could say to the people who had watched him closely every day of his public life, [00:08:05] which of you accuses me of sin?

And there wasn't a word of answer to it. They knew only too well that nobody had ever spoken like this man. They'd all experienced the power of the gracious words that fell from his lips, and they knew that he went about doing good and never evil. They couldn't accuse him of sin. Now this wasn't because the Lord Jesus Christ wasn't tried. He was certainly a unique person. But we read of him that he was at all points tempted, like as we are, yet without sin. We are tempted, only too well do we know it. But we are tempted, and it cannot be said of us who are tempted yet without sin, not of any one of us, not of any man or woman in the world. But in all the cults of the human story, and the desperate plight it is in today, there has only been one of whom it was said that he was without sin.

[00:09:04] But of course, although the Bible is so clear that it is the wages of sin that is death, it is only because of sin that people die, that the great central fact of the story about Jesus is that he died. Why did he die? In the book that tells us that it is because of sin that men and women die, why did Jesus die? What was the meaning of Calvary, with all its darkness and its agony for the Savior? Well, we are told in this same prophet, and it's applied time and time again in the New Testament, he was wounded there for our transgressions.

He was bruised there for our iniquities.

The judgment of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed. The Savior died so that we might be given the victory over death.

[00:10:05] The Savior died so that he might bear the consequences of our sins.

The Savior died so that he might be able to grant us forgiveness.

It wasn't sufficient that he was moved by compassion, but the justice of God had to be met, and the Savior died so that he might grant us forgiveness. And one of the wonderful reasons why the coming of Jesus was a great light is because he can grant to all who come to him, he can grant the absolute certainty of forgiveness in the sight of God, who says to them, your sins and iniquities will I remember no more.

Of course, we would be doing a terrible injustice to the Bible story, like the pictures from [00:11:01] many churches, if we only came, wonderful as it is, to the place called Calvary. But another thing that was said by one of the first preachers of the gospel is this. This is the gospel that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures, and I've given you a little hint of that, that he was buried, but here's the result. The third day he rose from the dead, according to the scriptures, and it's because he rose from the dead and he's alive, Jesus is alive in heaven today. That's the present situation.

Jesus is not only a story, Jesus is not only a history, Jesus is not only a backward Luke, Jesus is alive today in heaven, and the fact that he rose from the dead is one of the most wonderful pieces of symbolism, as well as being an absolutely certain fact, that in the bodily truth, Jesus rose again from the dead.

[00:12:01] But death is the very center and essence of the human plight.

You look around the world today and think of all its suffering, so it is. But when all is said and done, and when the last word is spoken, then men die.

Many of them don't face the fact that it's the wedges of sin that is death. But this is the end of the thing, and it's the very heart of the human plight. death, where we come to the very last extremity that we can in this life.

And we have to say, what comes after the judgment of God, Jesus has conquered death by his resurrection, and Jesus can give us not only forgiveness, but a new life with himself, a life which belongs to his Father's house in heaven. And I can tell you something else. Jesus is coming again, the person whose first appearance in Galilee of the Gentiles there, [00:13:05] the scene of strife and bitterness at this very moment. One of the wonderful elements in the fact that he appeared in a great light is that that light, though it appeared to be extinguished on the hill called Calvary, Jesus is coming again.

He's coming again, first of all, to receive his own people who have trusted in him, to be with himself. And he's coming again in fulfillment of one of the last of the promises of these Old Testament writers.

He shall arise with healing in his wings, and shed his blessings over all the world.

You know, this scripture, past, present, and future, this scripture, a great light appeared to those that sit in darkness, those that walk in darkness. It's been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[00:14:04] It's a very interesting thing, all the supposing that I've made sure of that, and you're still awake.

It's a very interesting thing to look at these words and to try to see what they were intended to mean.

It's a rather interesting thing to try to think what kind of a background, what kind of a picture is involved in the words. The people that walk in darkness have seen a great light. They that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, for them has light shined. You might think, well that's two separate statements, that the people that walk in darkness have seen a great light, and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shined.

But I don't think this is probably what we're intended to understand. You know, all this is poetry translated with wonderful precision.

It really is astonishing the way the very idioms and shades of the Hebrew come across [00:15:07] in the authorized version of the Old Testament. This is a translation of Hebrew poetry. Now in English and other modern languages, poetry depends upon rhythm and rhyme.

And it's the kind of parallel, line after line, or stanza after stanza, rhythm and rhyme that make poetry. But in Hebrew, it's the rhythm and parallel of meaning is paralleled in the successive lines, you see, which makes it poetry. And you see what that says here. The people that walk in darkness is paralleled by they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death.

And that they have seen a great light is paralleled by saying, upon them has the light shined.

And so I believe that this is really, in Hebrew poetry, it is a statement of a single situation.

[00:16:06] Those who walked in darkness and dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, then to them this great light has appeared. I wonder what the picture can be. Well, imagination runs away a bit.

You might think of people potholing or something like that. And they're stuck down there in the dead darkness, a couple of hundred feet down below, and wonder whether they'll ever be got out. But when the moment comes that the rescuers arrive and a great light appears let down to them, my word, that's a moment of rejoicing and relief for them. One can think of lots of situations in which people who are in darkness find a great light to be a very wonderful event.

It's quite obvious, of course, that their first meaning, as they appear in this book of Isaiah, is to do with the fact that these people, the people of Israel, the people who [00:17:11] dwelt in the land occupied by the tribes of Zebulun and Nephilim, the Way of the Sea, the Galilee of the Nations, that they were being warned by Isaiah that they were going to be driven off into slavery.

And the deportation which lay in front of these people because of their sins against God was the darkness. A good deal about it. You see, there's a very modern kind of sound about verse 19.

It speaks about familiar spirits and wizards that peep and that mutter.

Well, it sounds very much like a description of the occult practices that are becoming so very, very terribly well known, even in England today.

[00:18:02] The peeping and the muttering, the darkness associated with such practices, the spirits pretending to be the spirits of the departed, the witches and the wizards and all their occult practices. It's not a new thing, this.

It's new to us, thank God, because I say thank God for the freedom that we've had from it for so long. It's new to England, it's new to Britain, but it's not a new thing. It was a very live thing with these people. When they got themselves into a mess, instead of a people turning to their God, they tended to do all kinds of things, turn to other nations for help by alliances, look to great cruel nations to be their saviour. And one of the things they did was to turn to ask for help from familiar spirits and from wizards that peep and mutter.

And what the word of God says to those people, it says about the modern drive to seek familiar spirits and wizards and witches, it says, to the law and the testimony, if they, that [00:19:09] is the familiar spirits and the wizards, this is verse 20 of chapter 8, if they speak not according to this word, that's Isaiah's prophecy, the word of God, it is because there is no light in them. Now there you see, you have introduced the theme that is dealt with in the verse that we are speaking of. In these powers of darkness, real though they were, they were the powers of darkness, and they are the powers of darkness, and there is no light in them. And let us all be warned and be absolutely clear about the fact that they are powers of darkness. There is no light in them. They belong to hell, which is their home. It is wise for us to turn to God and his word, to the law and the testimony, as Isaiah calls it. [00:20:01] And then it goes on in verse 21, to say about these people who refuse to turn to the Lord and his word, it says, they shall pass through it, I suppose that's the land, hard bested and hungry.

They shall come to pass it, when they shall be hungry, they shall set themselves and curse their king and their God and look upwards. And they shall look unto the earth and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish, and they shall be driven to darkness. That's the frightful prospect of a whole people being depopulated, driven away into darkness from the light of their homes by a cruel enemy. That dimness, as in times past, that kind of trouble was frequent.

At first they were lightly afflicted, afterwards they were more grievously afflicted. But the time would come, and you know there's not the slightest doubt that the prophet intended [00:21:04] that we should understand the great leap forward here, the time would come when the people that walked in darkness would see a great light. Instead of wizards that peep and mutter, instead of human props that would certainly break and let them down, instead of walls that instead of protecting would burst and fall upon them, the people that walked in darkness would see a great light, and there that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Well, we've understood that this is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ and his coming. Nevertheless, the experience of being amongst the people herded off in a movement of depopulation of distant lands is not an experience that is very common. But the words spoken of here, they speak in the very widest sense of the need that arises [00:22:02] from our human plight.

I suppose that one of the pictures most strongly evoked by this is people who live without the sun.

And this is true, as we all know, in northern climes. We usually think of it as being in north Scandinavia, but I suppose that one of the most terrible places is the north of Canada, in the Mackenzie River, in the Yukon Valley, and the slopes down to the Arctic Sea. When the sun has gone for months, it isn't only that it's dark, but the sun with all its life is gone, and the cold is cruel and piercing and killing, unimaginable, when the sun is gone and the great nature of human need is gone. And oh, what a wonderful moment it is when in the land of the midday darkness the sun comes back again and a great light appears. [00:23:03] It is indeed light from the dead.

I wrote down the other day a note of something I read about the experience of a traveler in northern Canada on the slopes of the Arctic Sea, and this is exactly what he said.

One February day he saw a strange glow in the south.

For a moment he was puzzled and thought of some strange kind of aurora borealis. Then the explanation flashed on him, and he called excitedly. The two men watched the glow deepen till their eyes, so long accustomed to the darkness, awoke to the light. Suddenly the peaks above the fjord,

one of the ice peaks above the fjord, flushed into [00:24:01] deep rose, and the glow from the south seemed to run across the frozen ocean to meet them. A ray, an authentic ray of sunlight, made a path in it, and over the edge of the world appeared a semicircle of blood red.

The sun had come back to the world. You see, there's a wonderful picture in the idea of people who are walking in darkness.

What a wonderful thing it is that all that's associated with darkness is gone when the great light of the sun appears.

Now we've got to see how this applies to ourselves, and these two expressions, the people that walk in darkness, and the people that dwell in the land of the shadow of death.

I truly believe if you don't belong to Christ, at the bottom of your heart you understand [00:25:02] that that's a picture of your life.

I've been systematically visiting my neighbors recently, and indeed much more systematically praying for them.

And since you can't know them at all, I'll tell you about two households that I've reflected upon them, and I think how much they're a picture of the modern life of the late twentieth century in these western lands.

One of these households is composed of a mother and son. They're absolutely all in all to each other. The son is all that a son could possibly be, in ordinary human terms, to his old mother.

But they haven't got a thought outside this life.

In their whole concept of life and what they live for, they're absolutely earthbound. [00:26:05] And sooner or later, the icy hand of death will break that partnership.

They're living under the shadow of death.

It's just as though a person were living, and a person comes behind with a light behind them, and the shadow of what is coming falls upon them. They're living in the land of the shadow of death, and it will certainly come. And death, because of sin, will lay its hand upon them. It's because they live in the darkness, which means being without God.

And they live in the land of the shadow of death, a death that comes as the wages of sin, and brings them into the judgment of God.

The other household I'm thinking of is, in some sense, very different. In some sense, it's only two, sadly, the same. [00:27:01] This time, a husband and wife.

But a more absurd and lamentable state of affairs you couldn't imagine.

I mean, the relationship between the two is a perfectly good one, as far as I can see. It leaves nothing at all to be desired. It's a perfectly good relationship between husband and wife. And if you plead, the

husband lives in Arabia, and works in an oil field there, making pots of money with a big salary, and he puts it all in the bank, and lives on expenses. His wife works at home in order to keep herself there, and he's home about a couple of weeks of the year, and they're doing all this, living without the comfort of each other's presence, in order to retire early and spend it all freely. You see, in one sense, it's a scheme that's reminiscent of lots and lots of schemes according [00:28:02] to which people live these days, but they're absolutely earthbound.

They haven't got a ray of light that connects them with the world above, or the world beyond, because it's not in their consciousness that very quickly they may never see the day of retirement, because they live in the land of the shadow of death, and they have not seen the great light of the Savior.

Now that's true.

These things are true of us by nature.

I've told you two examples, and you know that they have certain singular features, but they're by no means rare or uncharacteristic of the kind of life that people live around us today. And they present your situation and my situation without God. We're walking in darkness.

[00:29:01] We're in the land of the shadow of death, and we're absolutely certain by all human experience that the moment is going to come we will die. Our consciences tell us that we're going to meet God, and we're not ready for it. We're in darkness and the land of the shadow of death. Is it not a wonderful thing that I can tell you that there is a great light waiting for you? If you only turn from having your back to God and his word, that great light has been shining since Jesus came.

That great light has been shining down from his glory in heaven, and that great light of his glorious gospel is shining for you. And I've tried to explain in the first word to make sure you heard it before you went to sleep.

I've tried to explain already what it is to you. It means, you see, that the fact which connects you with death and damnation, your sins, well [00:30:02] the great light in the first place is that Jesus has died to meet that situation. And Jesus not only is uniquely the sinless one, he's not only uniquely the one who didn't need to die himself, but he's uniquely the one, the only one, who can meet your need by granting you a full clearance of sin and granting you the present possession, not only the certain possession in the future, but the present possession of a life from God and with God that is certain to blossom in the Father's house in heaven. That's what the great light will do. There's a great deal in the Bible about the light, the chance from God. We saw in this passage here that in these popular resources of some kinds of people today, wizards that teeth and mutter and familiar spirits, there's no light in them. But there is light, there was light in Isaiah's word, and there is light in the word of God. [00:31:05] And not only does that light give you, if you will receive him, the Savior, give you the present knowledge of salvation and the possession of the life that is really life, but that light will henceforth be the light in which you walk.

You will no longer be amongst the people who are walking in darkness. You will no longer be amongst the people who are living in the shadow of death. It is life that lies before you, life here in this world with a capital L, the life more abundant, and life everlasting with God in the world to come. It's no longer the shadow of death, but the light in which you walk is a light that is the light of life.

A very wonderful word in the psalm, and I easily misquote it, and so I'd better turn over to Psalm 119 and verse 105.

[00:32:10] You might think that it would take a clever man to misquote it, but I'm certainly that kind of clever man.

It says, Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

Now this is the experience of those who've been brought into the light of God and the light of the Lord Jesus Christ. They can say about this holy scripture, which is for them the living word of God, that it is a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path.

I heard of some youngsters a few years ago having some kind of a bean feast on our local mountain on Teesside called Roseberry Topping.

And they were still up there when it was getting dark, and they had to get down a fairly rough [00:33:03] and precipitous way through the woods with the roots of trees across the path, and they found the going a bit difficult, until somebody produced a torch, and he shone the torch on the path.

Well this was some slight improvement, but it didn't solve the matter. But when somebody produced another torch and shone it on their feet, they were all right. They needed both, you see.

They needed a light on their path, and they needed a light on their feet, and in such a light they really were able to walk safely.

Now the word of God is all that we need for light upon our pathway.

The fear of the Lord, which comes from the study of holy scripture, and ruling our lives in accordance with it, is light for every kind of situation that can possibly arise. [00:34:04] And it's the practical working out of the fact that we are no longer walking in darkness, and we are no longer in the shadow of death. I suppose the most wonderful promise of this time that the Lord Jesus Christ uttered was when he said in John chapter 8, I am the light of the world.

He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. That's another passage which, although less explicitly, no less certainly demonstrates that in holy scripture the words which we have been speaking about this evening are fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were fulfilled when he appeared. They have gone on being fulfilled in the experience of those who have come to him ever since. How can you get out of darkness into light?

[00:35:01] How can you get into the place where instead of walking in darkness and in the land of the shadow of death, God by his word is a light unto your feet and a lamp unto your path? How can you pass with certainty from death unto life? How can you be right with God? Well, this great light is the light that shows you all this, and the road to it is first of all to realize your need. And I have the slightest doubt that if there's anyone here who is not a Christian, then in your heart of hearts you have received conviction of the truth of this by the way this word speaks to your own experience that you are walking in darkness and in the shadow of death, and no ray of light from outside this life has shone for you. Well, by the way of confessing to God that need that you have of that light and salvation, [00:36:01] you can receive it from the Lord Jesus Christ. He is living and he is present and he

is still saying to you, come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. He is still saying, I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. Now if some of you sang with me last night, I heard the voice of Jesus say, I'm sure you won't mind singing it again, because just as it was suitable to our speaking about Jesus as the living water and out of spirit, so it is suitable to our singing of Jesus as the light of the world, number 62.

And this time I'll read the last verse.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, I am this dark world's light.

Look unto me, thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright.

[00:37:02] I looked to Jesus and I found in him my star, my sun, and in that light of life I'll walk till travelling days are done.