
UNSTUCK: FROM THE LOVE OF DARKNESS Michael B. Beough
John 3:14-21; I John 1:5 March 22, 2009

I was trying to give my Confirmation Class a vision of what heaven is like. I read from Revelation 21 the description of the new heaven and the new earth that God promises us.

"See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

I commented that this is the kind of world God promises to all who believe in Jesus Christ. This is what heaven is like.

I thought I did a pretty good job making heaven sound like a place everyone would want to go to until one of the students, an eighth grader, spoke up and said, "I'm not sure I would like that. The world would be such a dull place if we didn't have evil in it. That's what makes it interesting."

At first, his comments stunned me. Then I realized how age affects one's perspective. Most people I know who have experienced evil have not called it interesting.

- I
t wasn't interesting when a church member's son hung himself by a rope from a tree in a public park.
- I
t wasn't interesting when a young teenager fell out of the back of a pickup truck and was killed instantly.
- I
t wasn't interesting when a couple burned to death in their home on Christmas Eve.
- I
t wasn't interesting when a husband drank himself into a stupor every evening while his wife begged him to stop.
- I
t wasn't interesting when I stood with grandparents and wept openly as we buried their two year old grandson.
- I
t wasn't interesting when my father didn't know my name the last years of his life.
- I
t wasn't interesting when my sister got dumped by her husband.

- I
t wasn't interesting when a man killed his wife and then turned the gun on himself.
- I
t wasn't interesting when a teenager died of a drug overdose.
- I
t wasn't interesting when I visited a church member in jail on child pornography charges.
- I
I don't find it interesting that young Americans are coming home in body bags from wars far away.
- I
I don't find it interesting that millions of children in Africa are being left orphaned because of parents dying of AIDS.
- I
I don't find it interesting that people are losing their homes and businesses because of the greed of others.

I guess it is a matter of perspective and experience. At my age, I don't call evil interesting. I call it by the name the Bible gives it, Darkness, the Darkness that Jesus came to get rid of. The Darkness that invades our souls and holds us captive because we can't get rid of it. The Darkness that shuts the windows of our souls and locks them tight against the light and life of God.

Most people I know want to escape the Darkness. In John 3, the first 21 verses are a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus who wants to escape the Darkness. He comes to Jesus at night with a question. He wants to know how to have eternal life. He is a religious man, a leader of his people, well-respected. But it isn't working for him. Nicodemus is looking for help outside the religious institution he belongs to in Jerusalem. He is in the dark and wondering if there is any light.

Nicodemus represents so many people in our culture today who are spiritually hungry but have deserted the institutional church because it is not helping them with the Darkness. They wear T-shirts that say "Jesus is my homeboy", but they avoid the church. They avoid the news because there is so much Darkness in the world. They numb the truth with whatever their money can buy. They may even do volunteer work because it makes them feel better. Just like Nicodemus, they are looking elsewhere, inventing their own way.

So what do we say to those who want out of the Darkness?
 What will we say to a spouse drinking himself to death? To a mother who has just lost a son in battle? To a family who has just lost their house? To a parent who abuses a child? To a father who is never emotionally home for his wife and children? To anyone whose life is stuck in the dark?

We have to tell the truth. I think we must begin with the truth, with what doesn't work. Here is the truth. Not even Batman can get rid of this pervading Darkness. Some are calling *The Dark Knight* one of the greatest movies ever made. Yes, Teresa and I sat in our living room and watched it on DVD. She still doesn't remember ordering it. Not our usual fare.

The movie has struck a chord throughout the world. Over \$1 billion dollars in gross receipts. Why? Great action from start to finish. Heath Ledger as the philosophically motivated Joker. And Batman, the good guy, struggling with a moral dilemma as he battles against the Joker to save Gotham City. Will Batman resort to evil in order to rid the city of evil? The answer is in the title of the movie, *The Dark Knight*. It left me with a sick feeling. The movie seems to say there are only degrees of difference between the Darkness of those who love it (the Joker) and the Darkness in those who fight against it (Batman). Even the best of us are touched by the Darkness. If this movie represents the best we can hope for, then there is no real victory over the Darkness.

With all apologies to Batman, forget the masked and caped man who zips around in his Batmobile, who has the ability to fly to scenes of trouble, who stands toe to toe in mortal combat with a Joker. With apologies to Batman and all other heroes, he cannot overcome the Darkness in any final way. He cannot wrench meaning out of the evil we deplore. He cannot set us on the upward way. He cannot save us.

And forget trying to save yourself. You can't do it. Do you realize how heretical that statement is? Most people I know believe that with a little effort, and maybe some luck thrown in, they can overcome the Darkness. A little more education. The right diet and regular exercise. A fat portfolio. Something to take the edge off. We in the church should know better, but we play this game, too. The problem with the church, even some "successful" churches today, is that they have pointed to themselves as the light. *Come see what we are doing, what we have done, how all-put-together we are.* What people need is not a church that can save them, because the church can't do that. What they need is the truth. What they need is something holy to hold onto. What they need to see is the light, to know there is a light that never goes out and never fades.

If we are stuck in the Darkness, it is because we cannot free ourselves from it. That is what Jesus is telling Nicodemus in John 3. Something else has to happen. Help has to come from somewhere else. From above.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that God is the one who provides the help. There is a light that the Darkness cannot overcome. God has sent the light into the world. We can see the light if we only look in the right direction for it. The light shines from the cross of Christ. Jesus says it this way in John 3:16-17: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God*

did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The truth is that God has taken the initiative, an astounding initiative. He has sent his Son to die at the hands of those who love the Darkness more than light. The light is the cross of Jesus. The light is God's love in his Son Jesus spread-eagled on a cross with blood running down his face and nails tearing at his skin. Here is proof that God loves us, and does not condemn us, but wants us to live in the light.

All we have to do is to come to this light, to walk in this light, and we will be saved. We will have a reason to live, only it will not be a reason in any rational way. It will be a reason born out of the experience of living in his light.

Here is more truth we need to hear. God did not send Jesus to condemn us, but by his coming many are condemned because they refuse to come to his light. *"And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."*

It is a sad truth. Those who love the darkness more than light will never know or experience the grace and love of God. They are the real Jokers in the world who will never get it, who will never come to the light because they love the Darkness. They love their evil deeds. They take pride in them. They boast of them. They keep them hidden in their hearts. And they rot from the inside out.

However, those who truly despise the Darkness, who seek truth and beauty and victory, who are tired of all the evil, who dream of peace, purpose, and promise, will come to the light of Christ because in him is the light of life.

So what do we say to those who are tired of the Darkness? We say come to the light of Christ. Come to the One who has the power and authority to push back the Darkness and to overcome its hold on our lives. When the Darkness descends on your life, look for the light that shines in the Darkness. Come to the light, and walk in the light, and God will open the windows of heaven and pour down on you an overflowing blessing.