

**Sermon:** Light and Darkness, Sin and Forgiveness

**Readings:** [1 John 1:1-2:2 and Psalm 133](#)

Tonight I am sleepless at midnight. When this happens I try, like the Psalmist<sup>1</sup>, to meditate and focus in grateful reflection on You God through the night watches. As I have grown older this seems to happen to me more and more. But tonight I get up and walk outside onto the terrace.

What keeps sleep away is the question I have been struggling with. I see many true followers of you Jesus in this city and the cities around us. But I see many followers going astray. Wandering from your true teaching, perhaps accepting part of it only while sampling other beliefs, adding man-identified gods, and participating in immoral acts offered as religious practices.

How? How do I convince them to have you, and only you Jesus, at the centres of their lives?

I pause, and look out over Ephesus visible in the sliver of moonlight. I know well the shape of this city. I can make out the outline of the Temple of Artemis.<sup>2</sup> All is still at this early morning hour. My mind wanders back over many things, starting with that day when my brother James and I had been fishing and had been called to follow you, Jesus. You called us, together with our friends Andrew and Simon.<sup>3</sup> What would my life have been had we not met you on that day?

That was more than 50 years ago but I remember it like yesterday.

James and I were headstrong young men. The sons of Zebedee but Jesus you referred to us as "Boanerges"- the Sons of Thunder.<sup>4</sup> My understanding of God and love was not then what it is now. I have heard that I am now referred to as the Apostle of Love – and I wear that title as a badge of honour.

I close my eyes and see it clearly as if I was now there. Jesus you setting out resolutely for Jerusalem through Samaria. You sent messengers to the village ahead to prepare but the Samaritans were hostile knowing we were journeying to Jerusalem. James and I burned with anger at this treatment of you and we asked: "*Lord, do you want us to*

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<sup>1</sup> [Psalm 63:6](#)

<sup>2</sup> Temple of Artemis see: [Temple of Artemis at Ephesus - World History Encyclopedia \(ancient.eu\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-34; Luke 5:1-11](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Mark 3:17](#)

*call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"* It was our reaction – that was how we had lived. Confrontation rather than conciliation.

I burn with embarrassment even now as I remember how you Jesus had rebuked James and me before we went on to another village.<sup>5</sup>

I now truly know that God is love, and that the true understanding of the unity of God and love comes into focus and is available to us in you Jesus. If we want to deal with God in the right way we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way we have to deal with God in the right way.<sup>6</sup>

Sleep is far away. I realise that there is a chill in the air and I wrap a cloak around my shoulders. I have been standing still and I walk slowly around the terrace to get warm.

Love brings warmth and unity between brothers and sisters in the church brings beauty. The Psalmist knew this:<sup>7</sup>

*"<sup>1</sup> How good and pleasant it is  
when God's people live together in unity!  
<sup>2</sup> It is like precious oil poured on the head,  
running down on the beard,  
running down on Aaron's beard, down  
on the collar of his robe.  
<sup>3</sup> It is as if the dew of Hermon  
were falling on Mount Zion.  
For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even  
life forevermore."*

I remember joining hands as we climbed up to Jerusalem and sang this Psalm of Ascent. Comparing the effect of God's people living together in unity to the rich anointing of Aaron, head, beard and robes that showed his total consecration to holy service.<sup>8</sup> And the image of how the plentiful dew of Mount Herman would make the mountains of Zion richly productive. And how God's people in unity would make Israel richly productive as the Lord bestowed his blessing.

This is what you Jesus taught us. This is what I have preached, and do preach, to your people. But I despair as I see many of them distracted and straying from the truth. I know that my life is near its end. How can I give guidance to your followers, to my "children" as I affectionately refer to them now in my old age?

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<sup>5</sup> [Luke 9:51-55](#)

<sup>6</sup> I draw here on the thoughts of Eugene Peterson in his Introduction to 1, 2 and 3 John in *The Message*.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 133. A song of ascents. Of David.

<sup>8</sup> [Exodus 29:7 and Leviticus 21:10](#). And footnote to NIV Study Bible at page 921

I have written about what I saw, heard and felt during my time with you Jesus. I wrote so that readers would believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they would have life in your name.<sup>9</sup>

My mind goes back to what I wrote. I don't need a manuscript.

*"For you God so loved the world that you gave your one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life."<sup>10</sup>*

I wrote Jesus how you became flesh and made your dwelling among us – how we had seen your glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

*"1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."<sup>11</sup>*

The light that shines in the darkness.

I wrote how you were crucified. When I close my eyes I see saw how you looked at your mother and I hear your words:

*"Dear woman, here is your son."*

And then turning to me:

*"Here is your Mother."<sup>12</sup>*

From that day I took your mother into my home.

You died as an atonement for the sin of the world. For me as an individual. For all of your sons and daughters, for all who believe.

Even now I feel my muscles straining as I ran to your tomb after Mary Magdalene told us breathlessly that the tomb was empty. Simon Peter and I had run together, but I had outrun him.<sup>13</sup> I saw and believed when I saw the strips of linen that had bound you lying there.

And then after that you showed yourself to me, the disciples and many others. How many years have passed since then?

I sit down now as I think of this. I feel a weariness deep in my bones that has come not from these passing months, but from my more than four score years of living.

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<sup>9</sup> In [John 20:30-31](#) John set out the purpose of his Gospel record.

<sup>10</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>11</sup> John 1:1-5

<sup>12</sup> [John 19:26-27](#).

<sup>13</sup> [John 20:1-9](#)

There have been many trials, tribulations and persecutions during my life. Your words forewarned me and they ring in my ears now:

*“33 “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”<sup>14</sup>*

Herod began arresting some who belonged to the church and persecuting them. He had James, my older brother, put to death by the sword.<sup>15</sup> James who loved you and shared your message with passion. James was the first of your disciples to be martyred for his faith. The remaining 9 disciples, my friends, suffered martyrdom for their faith as well. Only I still live.

An owl calls and startles me. I don't know if I dozed off for a while but I am awake again. I ponder on how I came to be in Ephesus.<sup>16</sup>

Some 30 years after the death of our Lord there had been a Jewish uprising. At first this was successful in forcing the Romans out of Jerusalem. But some four years after this uprising commenced the Romans laid siege to the city and then captured it. The people were slaughtered, the city burned and the Temple destroyed.<sup>17</sup>

I, and many others, became refugees. Jewish and Christian families, from aged to young taking only what we could carry, were driven into exile. Many of us made the long journey and settled in Ephesus.<sup>18</sup> Many did not survive the journey.

Ephesus is, and has been, an important trading city. Located at the intersection of major trade routes with an established harbour that opened into the Cayster River which in turn poured into the Aegean Sea.

It has grown since Paul established the church in Ephesus and it now has a population of more than 200,000 people. Many, like me, are immigrants from all over the world. There is a clash of cultures and a clash of religious beliefs.

I have laboured as a teaching elder to the Christ followers in Ephesus and the surrounding cities. One of my difficulties has been to keep the churches focussed on you Jesus, and on your teaching.

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<sup>14</sup> John 16:33

<sup>15</sup> [Acts 12:1-3](#)

<sup>16</sup> Ephesus was an ancient Greek city on the coast of Ionia, three kilometres southwest of present-day Selçuk in İzmir Province, Turkey. It was built in the 10th century BC on the site of the former Arzawan capital by Attic and Ionian Greek colonists. During the Classical Greek era it was one of the twelve cities of the Ionian League. The city came under the control of the Roman Republic in 129 BC.

<sup>17</sup> See: [Siege of Jerusalem | Facts & Summary | Britannica](#)

<sup>18</sup> For an article on Ephesus in the first century see: [Ephesus in the First century – Bible Study Resources \(takingground.org.uk\)](#)

There are so many distractions and some followers are attracted to mystery cults, the Roman gods or the established goddess Artemis.

I look out to the area where the Silversmiths still ply their trade and remember the riot experienced by Paul and his followers. The Silversmiths made their living by making and selling silver shrines of Artemis. They had risen up against the teaching by Paul that man-made gods were no gods at all. Soon the whole city was in uproar with shouts of "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Paul and his followers had narrowly escaped.

The teaching that spiritual things were good and all material things, including the body were evil, is held by many. This teaching says that whatever is done in the body does not affect salvation and denies that Jesus came to earth as fully man.

It was because of this belief that I had written Jesus that you, the Word, became flesh and made your dwelling among us.

I have prayed about what I am to do, what I can do, to guide the churches, to keep your followers Jesus, on your way.

My prayers have guided me to write a letter to the churches explaining as clearly as I am able to, what I have witnessed and understand.

I have commenced writing and I light a candle and pick up my manuscript now.

I want the readers to be reminded of what they already know but to reinforce this. The disciples and I (and many others) were witnesses Jesus to your life, death and resurrection. Ours is direct witness evidence of what we saw, heard and felt. I have stated it like this:

*"1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."*

"In the beginning was the Word ..." is what I had previously written and here it is proclaimed again. Testimony based on the historical flesh-and-blood reality Jesus of your life and ministry on earth.

I repeat this again:

*<sup>2</sup>The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.*

Why am I proclaiming this? I do so because I want there to be true fellowship between the believers and those who like me were witnesses.

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" Like precious oil running over the head, the beard and the robes.

And not just unity in co-existing, but unity in understanding God's true word. This allows fellowship not only with our brothers and sisters who are believers, but also with God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ.

This will bring joy to the believers and will double my joy and the joy of those who stand with me as witnesses. You know Father God how seeing my children, the believers, walking in the truth, gives me great joy.

My gravest fear is that believers stray from the truth. I have written in clear words without ambiguity what we heard from you Jesus and declare:

"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all".

It must be a choice of one or the other. One cannot choose both.

Darkness is defined as the absence of light. Darkness stands for what is false and evil. Light stands for what is true, good and holy.

I have put the choice strongly like this:

*"6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth."*

I write this to warn those who claim to follow Jesus but who deny important truths about Jesus. They deny, for example:

- that Jesus was the Christ;
- that Jesus was the Son of God, come in the flesh<sup>19</sup>; and
- that the death of Jesus was necessary to provide for the forgiveness of sins.

And I have stressed that if we walk in the light, as you Jesus are the light, then we have fellowship with one another. And more than this, Jesus your blood purifies us from all sin.

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<sup>19</sup> [1 John 4:2-3](#)

My candle has burnt low and I get up to stretch and to fetch another. I look up at the starry sky in wonder. The words of the psalmist flow through my mind:

*"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky displays what his hands have made."<sup>20</sup>*

How great you are Father God.

I light the new candle and I look at this last statement. I am wonder-filled at the fact that through your blood Jesus we, as believers, are purified of all sin. The slate is wiped clean. The stain of sin is removed making us acceptable to God. We can be in true fellowship with our fellow believers and also in fellowship with God.

I pause as I let this fact tumble around in my mind. Fellowship with God, God our creator and fellowship with Jesus the Son. I want believers to understand this and to grasp this with both hands. I don't want them to be distracted. I know that I have stumbled and that believers will stumble. But through you Jesus there is hope, assurance and a way out and up!

We need to own that we have sinned, and will sin again. I look at what I have written:

*"8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.  
... 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us."*

Can I make that any clearer? If we say we are without sin then we are a liar. If we claim we have not sinned then we make God out to be a liar and God's word is not in us. Will my children in the churches believe this?

I said there is hope, assurance and a way out and up. What is this?

It is confession and God's forgiveness. *"9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

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<sup>20</sup> Psalm 19:1

Children come honestly before God confessing your sins and you will be forgiven for God is just and faithful. Do this and your unrighteousness will be purified, the slate wiped clean and the barrier to your true fellowship with God removed.

Children strive not to sin but, know that if you do, you have Jesus as your sinless defender and advocate with God.

Understand that the sacrifice of Jesus makes it possible to be at one with God. The slate wiped clean and God's wrath appeased. For you and for me and for all in the world who believe and accept you Jesus as their Lord and saviour.<sup>21</sup>

Choose light over darkness, truth over lies, and fellowship with God over separation.

Children, have you seen the sun rise after a dark night like tonight? Before the dawn, before the rising, you can see nothing, not even your hand before your eyes.

Then a glimmer in the East and then gradually as the sun rises the blanket of darkness is pushed back. You can see the edge of darkness getting closer to you as darkness flees before the rising sun until you are no longer in darkness but bathed in light.

It is like that with the rising sun. And it is like that with the risen Son of God.

1. Don't be distracted from the truth of the gospel message.
2. Know that you will sin but there is hope, assurance and a way out.
3. The way is by grace through confession and receiving forgiveness.
4. So that you have the joy of eternal fellowship with God.

*<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

As I rise now and stretch I see that faint glimmer in the East.

Gordon Hay  
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<sup>21</sup> See for example [John 12:19](#); [Romans 1:8](#); [1 John 4:14](#); [John 1:29](#)