

Opening Words

Yes, the darkness around us is dark indeed, but the light of Christ is penetrating the darkness through his people.

165 Eph The Spiral of Sin and Death 1

My wife and I read a book called True Grit –not the novel by Charles Portis that has been made into a movie a couple of times. This book is by Deborah Meroff and tells the stories of Christians who live their faith in some of the most difficult places on earth and in some of the most trying circumstances of life. This is not a book for the faint of heart. After reading one chapter I thought to myself, “there are places on this planet that are Hell on earth.” And I use the phrase “Hell on earth,” not as a literary device or as hyperbole. There are some places that are wholly given over to evil.

I read the story of a group of people who were desperate to leave their country because of tyranny. They packed into a small boat, like sardines. After a few days at sea they spotted another vessel and thought they were saved, but then they saw the skull and crossbones on the flag. It was a pirate ship. The pirate ship came alongside them and men boarded, separated the women from the men, molested the women, took their supplies and left. I was reading this while I was in the back seat of a car, my brother in law driving through beautiful country in the U.S. I looked out upon the beautiful landscape that God had made and thought of the ugliness of sin that has stained the world. I just wanted to cry.

The passage we are looking at today is Ephesians 4:17-19 which is Paul’s description of the depths to which humanity can plunge when not guided by hearts that are hungry for truth. I shared my experience with you in my reading of this book because as we look at these verses, I hope we will realize that Paul is not just talking theology. He is not just making a theological point about “Total Depravity.” He is describing reality of life without God, a reality which the believers in Ephesus had come out of, and a reality that still surrounded them in their pagan city. And, shall I add, a reality that is becoming increasingly apparent in our country. Listen as I read Paul’s description of a world that has walked away from God.

So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, ¹⁸being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; ¹⁹and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

Paul uses seven words and phrases to describe a world without God. Let’s list them:

- Futility of mind (17)
- Darkened understanding (18)
- Exclusion from the life of God (18)
- Ignorance (18)
- Hardness of heart (18)
- Callousness (19)

- A giving over to sensuality (19)

That's quite a list, isn't it? One of the things that jumps out at me in this list is Paul's heavy reliance on "mind" words. In verse 17 he speaks of the futile mind. And in verse 18 he speaks of a darkened understanding and of ignorance.

Someone looking at this and making a snap judgment might say, "well the problem is a lack of truth and we need to give people the truth." And while that is not inaccurate, we must probe further into the passage. The problem of paganism is a lack of truth, but that is not the core problem. We cannot just give people truth and expect that that will solve the problem. There is something deeper.

Paul presents a sequence that explains why society spirals downwards. Let's see if we can find this sequence in these verses. I'm going to do this by showing you how the phrases connect with one another. We begin with the phrase "futility of mind" and we ask, "why are people's minds futile?" And we discover the answer in the next two phrases. It is because they are darkened in their understanding and excluded from the life of God. That is why their minds are futile and empty. That is why people do things that we might describe as "unthinkable." Have you ever heard of a person doing something stupid, or seen someone doing something stupid, and you ask, "What were they thinking?" And of course, the answer is "they weren't thinking." Their minds were futile, empty and the reason they were that way is because they had no understanding. They did not have the life of God in them enlightening them.

But this leads to another set of questions. Why is it that people have a darkened understanding? Why is it that people are excluded from the life of God? Why is it that they make poor choices in life or wicked choices in life? Paul says it is because of the ignorance within them. Now some might see that phrase and say, "Oh, OK, it is a lack of education. Paul is talking about illiterate people who have little to no education. And so, if we just educate them, then they'll be OK."

Well, again, not so fast. Education is important, but its success depends on the type of education people receive. We can educate people with nonsense or educate them with truth. I am afraid that our society is mass producing educated hedonists. People may have technical knowledge and expertise, but if they do not have wisdom and knowledge they will still be ignorant.

When Paul speaks of ignorance that is inside people he is not talking about a lack of educational opportunity. Lots of people in the world have only a rudimentary schooling, but they don't live the way Paul describes here. The ignorance Paul is speaking about is something deeper. What is the cause of this ignorance that leads to a darkened understanding that leads to a futile way of thinking and a futile life? This leads to the next phrase, again in verse 18 – "because of the hardness of their heart."

Now we are at ground zero. Now we have reached bedrock in our digging. The problem is not just an intellectual problem. The problem is not just a lack of education. The problem is one of the heart. The problem is a matter of the will. The problem is that at a very basic level, people, communities, and nations have made choices to turn away from God's truth and life, and they have hardened themselves against God and become callous.

Paul tells us the same thing in Romans 1. He presents the same sequence although he does it in reverse order. Here in Ephesians he starts with the consequences of turning away from God and then works down to the bedrock problem – a hardness of heart. In Romans 1, Paul starts at the bedrock problem and works up to the consequences of turning away from God. In verses 26-32 he describes a life out of control and given over to sin. In verses 24-25 he describes how society exchanged truth for a lie. In verse 21b-23 he speaks of their darkness and futility. But in the first part of 21 he tells us what is at the root of it all. He says, “even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks.” People refused to humble themselves before God, worship Him, and learn from Him. They did not want God and because they made a choice not to follow God they started on a path that led to darkness that led to futility that led to a life of gross sin.

Paul describes it this way in Ephesians 4:20, “they have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.” It sounds like that boat load of pirates who commandeered the other boat of helpless, defenseless people that I described to you earlier.

As I sat in the back seat of the car while another family member drove my wife and me through the beautiful state of New York, and as I read this horror story and others, I would have despaired unless I knew that this is not the end of the story. Paul will go on to say in the next verse that “you did not learn Christ in this way,” which implies that the light of Christ has invaded the kingdom of darkness and has begun a transformation in the hearts of people. And so even though this world became a place of darkness, even though Hell came to earth, the kingdom of heaven has invaded this earth, and we now have little pockets of heaven, so to speak throughout this earth that are penetrating the darkness and changing people, families, communities, and as we know from church history, sometimes even whole nations have been transformed.

That is happening in some parts of the world today. The country of Iran is a place of great darkness where a government of tyranny robs its people and exports revolution around the world. Yet, in this darkness, God’s people are multiplying and shining the bright light of Christ.

Let me get back to the pirate story. It seems so strange to talk about pirates. I used to think that was a thing of the past, a thing of history, something for novels or cartoons, but it is real today in some parts of the world. When the pirates boarded the vessel filled with defenseless women and children, one quick-thinking woman smeared her face with a nasty, black, foul smelling grease. The pirates took one look and one smell at her, turned away in disgust, and she was spared. After the pirates left, the vessel made its way to a safe country and this woman eventually made her way to Canada where she heard the Gospel and was saved by Jesus Christ.

She grew in her faith. She went to a Bible school, and she prepared herself to return to the land of origin. Then she went back to the country from which she fled as a teacher. She fled from tyranny in a dangerous boat and suffered unspeakably as the dangerous vessel made its way over the waters. She returned to this land of tyranny in an airplane that flew over the same waters effortlessly. To be sure, there is still no religious freedom in this country. Tyranny still reigns, but this woman, now a professional, has decided to go back, help educate her nation, and help the growing underground church in their witness for Christ. Yes, the darkness around us is dark indeed Paul describes in Eph 4:17-19, but the light of Christ is penetrating the darkness through his people.