

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Lord Turns My Darkness into Light

2 Samuel 22:29-51

We recently had someone from SMECO come to our church and move one of the lights in our parking lot over to a new pole. The fixture looks different from what we're accustomed to, partly because it's designed to reduce light pollution, which can have a disruptive effect on natural cycles or inhibit the observation of stars and planets. It reminds me of an experience we had a few years ago, when our family hosted some exchange students from Japan. As their stay with us was coming to a close, we asked them if there was anything else they would like to see or do in our area. They surprised us by asking if we could go see stars. They were so accustomed to living in an urban area, where the light from the city made it very difficult to observe the night sky. So here in the fields of Southern Maryland was an opportunity to do something they rarely got to do. It was amazing to watch them marvel at the sight of the stars and planets, something we often take for granted.

In our urbanized, industrialized societies, we're able to use artificial lights to overpower the darkness. But things were very different in the villages, towns, and cities of the Ancient Near East. Israel had no SMECO to come and install new equipment that would illuminate homes, businesses, and streets. If you wanted light, a lamp was often your best bet. Oil lamps in particular were a fixture of domestic life, including within the king's residence. No wonder that David, like many other voices in the Scriptures, uses the lamp as a way of describing the presence and power of God.

"You are my lamp, O Lord; the Lord turns my darkness into light" (v. 29). This is part of a song attributed to King David. In fact, all of 2 Samuel 22 is David's song of praise, a royal psalm of thanksgiving. The chapter's opening verse says, "David sang to the Lord the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul" (v. 1). David's lyrics are full of images of threat and rescue. He says that the Lord's deliverance was like being plucked out of deep and dangerous waters, or like being snatched from the grave, or having his enemies scatter in different directions. Or, as we hear at the beginning of today's text, it was like light coming in and scattering the darkness.

No matter which imagery he uses to describe God's saving action, David continually stresses that it was the Lord's doing, and not his own. The opening lines of David's tune set the tone and center the message: "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior. . ." (vv. 2-3). God is my Savior. This musical confession of faith goes to the heart of how we understand the character and purpose of God. God as the one who saves is revealed to us most fully and decisively in Jesus Christ, in whom God has intervened to rescue us from the power of sin and death. Christ's death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead are God's action that delivers us from the grave and brings us into the life of the world to come.

It's no wonder then, that we, like David, sing words of praise. Words like the ones in our second hymn during today's service: "My faith looks up to thee / Thou Lamb of Calvary /

Savior Divine!" God our Savior. One of the reasons we sing our faith is because it helps keep hope alive. Hope for us as individuals and hope for us as the community of God's people in Christ.

And hope is what sustains us, particularly when we face circumstances that appear to deny the reality of God's unfailing love and sovereignty. Theologian Karl Barth described the Christian perspective on life as a "defiant nevertheless." This means maintaining and cultivating the conviction that though there's much evidence to the contrary, in our lives, in the lives of others, and in the life of the world, nevertheless we still operate on the belief that God's saving sovereignty will prevail and that those who are in Christ will share in God's redeemed and restored world, where his justice and peace will reign. Now that's something worth singing about, whether the singers are David and God's people Israel, or we ourselves who are here together this morning.

"You are my lamp, O Lord; the Lord turns my darkness into light." That's the way it's rendered in David's song. Back in Psalm 18, which, as I said, David is using, it's slightly different. "You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light" (v. 28). I've often used portions of this psalm, portions of David's song, with people in circumstances where it appeared that darkness was winning out over light. In hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers. In the family room or at the kitchen table. In the counseling room or the waiting room. In the funeral home or at the graveside. Many of you have been with me, and I have been with you, when we remembered and reclaimed these precious words of divine rescue. Divine light in the midst of deep darkness.

The late film director Stanley Kubrick once described his view of life this way: "The very meaninglessness of life forces man to create his own meaning. . . . The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it's hostile but that it is indifferent. . . . However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light."¹ King David says something very different. He doesn't say we have to supply our own light. Instead, he declares, "You are my lamp, O Lord." For the faithful, there's no confusion about the source of our light, our hope, our salvation. "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer." He's the one to whom the praise and gratitude should flow.

One set of authors has imagined the following scenario:

Imagine you fall off the side of an ocean liner and, not knowing how to swim, begin to drown. Someone on the deck spots you, flailing in the water and throws you a life preserver. It lands directly in front of you and, just before losing consciousness, you grab hold for dear life. They pull you up onto the deck, and you cough the water out of your lungs. People gather around, rejoicing that you are safe and waiting expectantly while you regain your senses. After you finally catch your breath, you open your mouth and say: "Did you see the way I grabbed onto that life preserver? How tightly I held on to it? Did you notice the definition in my biceps and the dexterity of my wrists? I was all over that thing!"²

No, as the authors point out, instead of drawing attention to how you cooperated with the rescue effort, you would hopefully focus on the person who threw you the life preserver and express your gratitude. That's the primary thing that David is doing in his song of praise. He and his song direct our attention to the Lord as the source of our rescue. "You are my lamp, O Lord (not I myself); the Lord (not I myself) turns my darkness into light."

Now that doesn't mean there's nothing for you to do. Your faith in the Lord is part of how his saving power becomes effective in your life. And not just faith in an abstract, theoretical sense, but faith that takes the form of attitude and action. Even though the Lord is your light, there are things that you need to do to keep that lamp burning, like prayer, Scripture,

worship, fellowship, and ministry to others and to the world. In other words, you can't just sit back and wait passively for God to hand you the victory. Day in and day out, there are things that you can do to fight the battle and to participate in how God is working to dispel the darkness in your life and in the lives of others.

But as you do so, know that such hope, and such faith, are only possible because God doesn't save us from a distance but by coming to us, most of all in Christ, to be with us and for us, in the midst of the darkness. God doesn't ship us a flashlight with a message attached saying, "Here, I hope this helps. Remember that the batteries aren't included. You'll have to get those on your own." No, God steps into the darkness with us, to light the way out.

In his book titled *Grace*, Max Lucado recalls the 2010 story of the Chilean miners who were trapped below 2,000 feet of solid rock. On the surface above, the rescue team worked around the clock to devise a means to get to the miners. As Lucado puts it:

On October 13, 2010, the men began to emerge, slapping high fives and leading victory chants. A great-grandfather. A forty-four-year-old who was planning a wedding. Then a nineteen-year-old. All had different stories, but all had made the same decision. They trusted someone else to save them. No one returned the rescue offer with a declaration of independence: "I can get out of here on my own. Just give me a new drill." They had stared at the stone tomb long enough to reach the unanimous opinion: "We need help. We need someone to penetrate this world and pull us out." And when the rescue capsule came, they climbed in.³

As surely as we come here today and sing our own songs of deliverance, know that the saving power of God is strong enough and determined enough to penetrate whatever darkness you're facing, in whatever forms, and to pull you out. That doesn't mean you'll always get a miraculous intervention from above that removes all your troubles and trials. But it does mean that in the midst of your circumstances, whether illness, grief, depression, chronic pain, mental illness, bullying, financial loss, conflict, abuse, abandonment, or any other power that threatens to destroy your hope, the Lord is still in the business of turning darkness into light.

Gardner Taylor once told about preaching in Louisiana during the Depression. Electricity was just coming into that part of the country, and he was out in a rural, black church that had just one little light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. Taylor said he was preaching away when suddenly, in the middle of his sermon, the electricity went out. The sanctuary went pitch black, and being a young preacher, Taylor wasn't sure what to say. He stumbled around until one of the elderly deacons sitting in the back of the church cried out, "Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!"⁴

Indeed, that may be the time when we can see Jesus the most—when everything looks awfully dark. This morning, you may be sitting here in this fully lit sanctuary, yet be threatened and fearful about some overpoweringly dark circumstances in your life. Remember that the Lord is there. The Lord is there to be your lamp, to turn your darkness into light.

¹ Quoted in Mark Meynell, *A Wilderness of Mirrors* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) 128.

² William McDavid, Ethan Richardson, and Paul Zahl, *Law & Gospel* (Charlottesville: Mockingbird Ministries, 2015) 73.

³ Max Lucado, *Grace* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) 54-55.

⁴ As told by Timothy George in his sermon, "Unseen Footprints." PreachingToday Audio (Issue 290).