

One spring several years ago, I noticed the first flower to bloom in our yard. It was the first bit of new life in our brown yard—a promise that spring was coming after a long barren winter. All we had to do was wait. I found that flower hope-giving. So, I snapped a picture of it and posted it on Facebook, captioning it with the Latin phrase “*post tenebras, lux.*” My friend, a simple small-town pastor from Kentucky, replied, “I don't know what that says, but it looks like a daffodil to me.”

Those words—*post tenebras, lux*—are Latin for “After darkness, light.” Like that daffodil, I’ve found that phrase comforting. The hope we have in Jesus is that there will be light after darkness. We were born into sin's darkness, but God has shown us the light of his glory in the face of Christ. We live now in a land of darkness, but one day the light of God’s glory will cover the earth. No matter how dark this life gets, we have the sure promise of light in Jesus. We only need to wait for it in faith.

It was only a few weeks or so after I posted that picture on Facebook that I got a call from another pastor friend. He had bad news: my friend Tommy had taken his own life. We were all in shock. I thought of his reply, “I don't know what that says, but it looks like a daffodil to me.” I wished I could go back in time and explain to him the meaning of that phrase—there will be light after darkness. I wondered what darkness he had been walking through in secret. What darkness had so overtaken his soul that he thought death was the only way out? I never found out, but I wished I could have reminded him of the hope of Jesus—“that light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” I wished I could have walked with him in his darkness and assured him that the light would come soon—we only had to wait for it in faith.

Some of you may be where my friend was, walking through the dark night of your soul. Life hurts. Suffering never seems to end. Maybe it’s a terminal diagnosis, chronic pain, or relentless depression. Perhaps you’re snared in some dark sin, unable to imagine any freedom to be found. The cost of stepping into the light is more than you can bear. Or maybe you've lost all your worldly possessions, or your friends, or your family, or your dreams. Whatever it is, all you see is darkness with no hope of light. You've begun to question whether the gospel is true, whether God cares and keeps his promises. There is no redemption in sight, and despair seems to be your only option. I hope if that is you, you find in this passage the assurance that there is light after darkness.

Throughout Isaiah, we’ve seen that God is devoted to making his people holy. That means they will suffer. But their suffering, though bitter, is controlled by God, has a good purpose, and will soon end.

Isaiah 29 opens, “Woe to Ariel, Ariel, the city where David camped.” “Ariel” means “altar hearth,” the place the fire was lit to consume sacrifices. This draws attention to Jerusalem as the religious center of Israel, home to the Temple and its altar. “Continue year after year; let the festivals recur.” They had not forsaken the external forms of worship. They

observed seasons, festivals, and sacrifices. But these were only a shell masking a heart of stone. So, the Lord would purify Jerusalem with a fiery ordeal. “I will oppress Ariel, and there will be mourning and crying, and she will be to me like an Ariel”—an altar hearth engulfed by the fire of God’s wrath.

Jerusalem was the city of God—and the Temple, the house of the Lord. It would have been easy to assume the Lord would never destroy his own dwelling place. *Who burns down their own house?* They may have thought that, since they were God’s people in God’s place, they were immune to suffering. Such a belief misses a clear truth: Judgment begins with the house of God. That only makes sense: if these were his chosen people, then dealing with their sin would be the first priority.

Peter says, “the time has come for judgment to begin with God’s household.”ⁱ What is this “judgment?” Peter says earlier, “Dear friends, don’t be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you.”ⁱⁱ God sends fiery ordeals to test his people like fire tests precious metals. Affliction reveals our imperfections. Through suffering, God is forming Christ in us. But that’s difficult to see in the midst of it. Surrounded by Assyria, it would have been tempting to give up, lose faith, and turn away from the Lord.

Christians face the same temptation. That’s why Hebrews tells suffering believers: “Don’t throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you need endurance, so that after you have done God’s will, you may receive what was promised. ...But we are not those who draw back and are destroyed, but those who have faith and are saved.”ⁱⁱⁱ The call to suffering Christians is the same as the call to the Israelites—put your hope in the Lord’s salvation and wait for it in patient faith.

Verses 5-8 remind us that after judgment comes salvation. The Lord would send Assyria to discipline and purify Jerusalem. “Then suddenly, in an instant, you will be punished by the LORD of Armies with thunder, earthquake, and loud noise, storm, tempest, and a flame of consuming fire.”^{iv} Like a cloud of dust or chaff as the grain is threshed, Assyria will be everywhere all at once, engulfing the city. But there’s good news: as suddenly as Jerusalem’s judgment arrived, it would go away.

In verses 7-8, Isaiah says the attack “will be like a dream, a vision in the night.” It’s over so quickly, you ask, *Did that really just happen—or did I dream it?* In a few chapters, we’ll read about the immediate fulfillment of that prophecy. But Isaiah has something much grander in mind—“So it will be for all the many nations who go to battle against Mount Zion.” This will be the end of every enemy that opposes God’s people. The message for Israel is that, even when things are at their worst, and it appears all hope is lost, they should depend faithfully on the Lord and look for his salvation.

Our salvation is sudden and surprising. Jesus appeared suddenly as the Messiah. Then, suddenly, he was arrested, executed, and buried. The one in whom you put all hope of salvation is *dead!* What could be more hopeless than that?! But then, just as suddenly, he is

alive, risen from the dead! Sin is atoned for. Death, overcome. Satan, crushed. God's kingdom has triumphantly invaded the world. Jesus saved us—as he will save us—in an instant.

Paul writes: "Listen, I am telling you a mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed."^v Two thousand years ago, in a moment, death was conquered, and sin was canceled. One day soon, in an instant, we'll be changed. So how do we live between what is already and what is not yet? Peter writes, "So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good."^{vi} In our suffering, discipline, and testing, we entrust ourselves to Christ in faith.

But for those who will not trust Christ, listen to what Peter also says. "For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God?"^{vii} If the salvation of God's people means they must trust him through fiery ordeals, how much worse must it be for those who disobey the gospel? Our choice is to suffer with Christ now or without Christ forever.

So, don't lose heart in the darkness. Jesus gave his life for us—and soon, we shall be changed instantly. Like waking from a dream, our sin and suffering will be so far gone that we would think it was all a dream if not for a Savior with scars to prove otherwise.

In verses 9–16, Isaiah's vision shifts from the city of Jerusalem to the people living there. "Stop and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind. They are drunk, but not with sin; they stagger, but not with beer." Those who would not trust God's promises would be left to their own choices. They chose to be astonished. They blinded themselves to the truth. So, as punishment, the Lord will make this their reality. "For the Lord has poured out on you an overwhelming urge to sleep; he has shut your eyes (the prophets) and covered your heads (the seers)."^{viii} Their prophets and seers will be unable to see and understand. They chose sleep, so God would put them in a coma.

The entire vision—Isaiah's message of salvation through judgment—will be sealed up. To benefit from a sealed document requires two things: (1) authority to break the seal; (2) ability to read it. But God has shut their eyes due to their rejection of his authority. They have neither authority to open his word nor the ability to read it. Those who refuse to love the truth are punished with a lie.

Paul writes, "They perish because they did not accept the love of the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a strong delusion so that they will believe the lie, so that all will be condemned—those who did not believe the truth but delighted in unrighteousness."^{ix} Is that you? You reject the truth and delight in sin. Don't tempt the Lord or take his grace for granted! At any moment, he could send a delusion on you so that you will only believe a lie and be condemned.

In verses 13-16, Isaiah explains their rebellion. “These people approach me with their speeches to honor me with lip-service, yet their hearts are far from me...”^x Their chief sin was hypocrisy. They approached the Lord with wonderfully polished expressions of worship—but it was only words. The Lord was neither their ultimate love nor their ultimate authority. “Human rules direct their worship of me.” “Human rules” likely refers to human elements loosely tied to scripture but not contained in it. They expected people to obey traditions that didn’t come from God’s word. Because they chose the traditions of human leaders over his word, God would take away the wisdom of those leaders. They will be fools following fools.

We should be careful about what we teach others to do in Christ’s name. Human tradition can only produce vain worship. That’s why our statement of faith says, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it.”^{xi} All we can ask and expect of each other is that we would believe and obey what God calls Christians to believe and obey in his word.

After quoting Isaiah, Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You have a fine way of invalidating God’s command in order to set up your tradition!”^{xii} The Law instructed them to care for their parents. But they wanted to use that money to give large offerings in the Temple. Big offerings would bring them status and honor among people. So, they made up a rule that if you made an offering devoted to God, you didn’t have to use that money to care for your parents. They tried to hide their sin in an external display of “righteousness.” In verse 15, we see this happening in Isaiah’s day. “Woe to those who go to great lengths to hide their plans from the Lord.”^{xiii}

Trying to hide our sin from the Lord may be a worse sin than those we’re trying to hide. To believe you can hide something from the Lord, you must deny that he is God. Verse 16 shows us this. You must make God a creature, saying he can’t see what’s done in the dark because his eyes are as weak as yours. You make God an equal, as though the potter were the same as the clay. You deny he made you and declare that he doesn’t know what he is doing. When we try to hide from God, we deny his supremacy, sovereignty, and wisdom. We declare that he is not God. We do this whenever we try to camouflage our selfish and sinful behaviors with the religious language of glorifying God.

In verses 17-21, the Lord asks: “Isn’t it true that in just a little while Lebanon will become an orchard, and the orchard will seem like a forest?”^{xiv} Soon, God will transform an entire forest into a magnificent garden. The Day of Salvation is near—the blind will see, and the deaf will hear what God says! The humble and poor (those who know their weakness and trust in God) will experience great joy in the Holy One. The wicked, who mistreat God’s people, will vanish entirely. So why all this hiding, conspiring, and hypocrisy? Why not wait for just a little while in faith?

The Israelites often grew impatient waiting for God to act and turned instead to their own ways. Too often, we pay lip service to God’s Word but turn to human traditions or hypocrisy because we don’t simply trust God to save his people. Scripture “[the gospel] is the

power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”^{xv} And, “His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”^{xvi} Everything—*everything*—required for life and for godliness is given to us by God through the knowledge of Jesus. God works out our salvation from beginning to end through the power of the gospel received by faith. He calls us to do the same.

But we get anxious and impatient. We want to see the church grow and lives changed—and we want to see it *now*. We don’t believe the gospel is sufficient. So, we create sanctification shortcuts—human systems, methods, habits, and disciplines. Then we declare that these things are God’s will for everyone who wants to follow Jesus. It sounds spiritual and may even have a good goal. Still, it is nothing more than human tradition—or, worse, hypocrisy.

In Colossians 2, Paul warns us: “Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ. For the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily in Christ, and you have been filled by him...”^{xvii} He goes on to outline how Jesus dealt decisively with sin and the devil on the cross. He tells us not to let anyone judge us about keeping Old Covenant forms of worship—or by following religious systems that someone just made up!

If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch”? All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are human commands and doctrines. Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.^{xviii}

These seem like reasonable steps to sanctification, but they have no value in restraining sin. But everything we want—life and peace and wholeness—is given to us in the knowledge of Jesus. Isn't it true that, in just a little while, we will see Jesus and be forever changed? Wait for it in faith!

In verses 22-24, the Lord pictures Jacob looking at his descendants and being ashamed. He sees their ungodliness and the color drains from his face. But one day, Jacob will see what the Lord has done and not be ashamed. His people will honor God’s name, honor the Messiah, and stand in awe of God. The Lord is speaking about us—the true children of Abraham. When we believe the gospel, we are united with Jesus and become part of God’s true people who worship him.

I don’t know what darkness you’re walking through. I don’t know how painful it is. I don’t know how strong sin, death, and the devil seem to you. I don’t know how close you are to giving up. But I do know this: God offers hope to all who will trust in Jesus. In him, we have every reason for hope. God has fully punished our sin in Jesus. He’s not angry with us. He is *for* us. If he’s given his Son for us, he’ll certainly give us everything else with Christ. As broken and

weak as we are, God is devoted to saving us. One day, very soon, Jesus will make us entirely new, perfect, and incorruptible.

So if you are weak, poor, sinful, and foolish—rejoice in Jesus! We don't need human power, wealth, and wisdom, for they are nothing. Christ himself has become our strength, our riches, our sanctification, and our wisdom from God. We only need to wait patiently in hope for our Lord to do his work, in his power, through his Son, in his time, and in his way.

ⁱ 1 Peter 4:17

ⁱⁱ 1 Peter 4:12–13

ⁱⁱⁱ Hebrews 10:35–39

^{iv} Isaiah 29:5–6

^v 1 Corinthians 15:51–52

^{vi} 1 Peter 4:12–19

^{vii} 1 Peter 4:17

^{viii} Isaiah 29:10

^{ix} 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12

^x Isaiah 29:13

^{xi} The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), XVII. Religious Liberty

^{xii} Mark 7:9–13

^{xiii} Isaiah 29:15

^{xiv} Isaiah 29:17.

^{xv} Romans 1:16–17

^{xvi} 2 Peter 1:3

^{xvii} Colossians 2:8–10

^{xviii} Colossians 2:16–23