

# Excursus on the *Power of Darkness* in Colossians

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## Introduction

One of the most striking inspired descriptions of man's redemption is found in Colossians 1:12-14:

**Giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.**

My aim is to examine with you the phrase, *the power of darkness*, in verse 13.

## "Darkness" as a Figure

As with many Biblical words, *darkness* is first used literally and then takes on a figurative or symbolic meaning related to and derived from its literal meaning. Unquestionably, the literal absence of light is denoted in the first use of the term, describing the earth in a state of chaos (Gen. 1:2). Likewise, the plague of darkness which God brought upon Egypt was a literal darkness so thick it could be felt (Exo. 10:20-21).

When our Lord was crucified, "from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour" (when there should have been maximum light from the sun, DM) (Mat. 27:45). While this was a literal darkness, it surely had the additional connotation of symbolizing the depths of degradation to which men had finally sunk in crucifying the Lord of glory.

Naturally, *darkness* is also used to refer to the night, after natural light has faded away. However, most of these references to the nighttime are confined to the Old Testament. In fact, there are few cases of the literal use of *darkness* at all in the New Testament

*Darkness* is used as a figure or symbol of several different things. W.E. Vine lists the following (although there seems to be some unnecessary overlapping of categories):

1. Intellectual darkness (Rom. 2:19).
2. Physical blindness (Acts 13:11).
3. The place of punishment (Mat. 8:12; 2 Pet. 2:17, etc.)
4. Moral or spiritual evil (Mat 6:23; John 3:19, etc.).
5. Those who are in moral or spiritual evil (Eph. 5:8).
6. Evil works (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:11).
7. Evil powers that dominate the world (Luke 22:53).
8. Secrecy (Mat. 10:27; Luke 12:3).<sup>1</sup>

With only one exception (where darkness merely refers to secrecy) the ever-present quality inherent in the figurative use of darkness is that which is bad or evil.

*Darkness* is commonly used in symbolic contrast to light or to describe the absence of figurative light. "Darkness is often used symbolically in the Scriptures to express misery and adversity, as opposed to light, which is the symbol of joy and safety."<sup>2</sup> "In the Bible the main use of darkness is in contrast to light. Light is the symbol of God's purity, wisdom, and glory. Darkness is the opposite."<sup>3</sup> These descriptions precisely fit "the power of darkness" in Colossians 1:13, namely: (1) Darkness is a symbol of that which is evil, and (2) Darkness is set in contrast to light.

### **Figurative Uses of "Darkness" Throughout the Bible**

#### ***A Symbol of Ignorance***

Light is a symbol of knowledge and perception. Thus, Simeon proclaimed of the infant Jesus that he would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). Paul refers to light as a symbol of knowledge and understanding: "... The God of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them" (2 Cor. 4:4).

Consistent with the above, it is natural that darkness should be equated with ignorance and intellectual blindness. Matthew declared that Christ was the fulfillment of Isaiah 9:2: "The people that sat in darkness saw a great light..." (Mat. 4:16). Paul used *darkness* with this same symbolism as he chided the Jews for their hypocritical self-righteousness toward the Gentiles: "And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them that are in darkness" (Rom. 2:19). John likewise employs this figure: "But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in the darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because the darkness hath blinded his eyes" (1 John 2:11).

#### ***A Place or Condition of Punishment***

Ezekiel's warning of the wrath of God upon apostate Judah included the following description: "All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord Jehovah" (Eze. 32:8). Darkness is used to describe the Hadean realm in which the unrighteous await the final judgment: "... God spared not angels when they sinned, but cast them down to hell, and committed them to pits of darkness to be reserved unto judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).

*Darkness* is also used to describe the final misery of the lost in Hell. Jesus first used the term with this significance to warn the apostate Jews of their fate: "But the sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mat. 8:12; cf. 22:13). A similar usage is found in the Lord's declaration of the fate of the one-talent servant who proved unfaithful (25:30). The fate of false teachers will likewise be consignment to the "blackness of darkness" forever (2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13).

### ***Moral Or Spiritual Evil***

The Old Testament equates evil with darkness several times. Solomon spoke of those "who forsake the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice to do evil, and delight in the perverseness of evil" (Pro. 2:13–14). The Psalmist exhorted his contemporaries: "Rescue the poor and needy: deliver them out of the hand of the wicked. They know not, neither do they understand; They walk to and fro in darkness:" (Psa. 82:4–5). Isaiah uses darkness in contrast with both light and righteousness (59:9).

The New Testament makes frequent use of *darkness* to describe evil practices and those involved in them. Jesus first used the term in this sense in the Sermon on the Mount: "But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness" (Mat. 6:23). A similar identity is used in the context of the "Golden Text": "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil" (John 3:19).

Paul called evil deeds "the works of darkness" that should be cast off (Rom. 13:12). Darkness is the equivalent of iniquity, even as light is the equivalent of righteousness (2 Cor. 6:14). After listing numerous ungodly works in which men of the world engaged, he then wrote: "For ye were once darkness, but are now light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8). In the same context, he commanded, "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even repove them" (v. 11).

### ***A Combination of More Than One Figure***

There are some passages in which darkness appears to encompass both ignorance and evil. When the Lord said, "... I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12), He may well have included both ideas. The same broader meaning of *darkness* seems to be in John 12:35: "Walk while ye have the light, that darkness overtake you not: and he that walketh in the darkness knoweth not whither he goeth"

Peter describes the Lord's people as those who have been called "out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9) and this use of *darkness* could surely embrace more than one marvelous concept. John wrote: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5), which surely means that both ignorance and evil are foreign to his nature.

### ***Evil Powers That Dominate the World***

When the officers of the council, led by wicked Judas, came to arrest the Lord in Gethsemane, he said to them, "...but this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). This is the same expression used by Paul when he declared that Christians have been delivered "out of the power of darkness" (Col. 1:13). A similar reference is noted in the Ephesian letter: "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).<sup>4</sup> In this verse it is made clear that these world-rulers and powers are not physical, but spiritual beings (albeit they employ physical beings as their agents, of course). More specifically, the chief of these world-rulers of this darkness is identified in verse 11 as the devil.

It would seem that Paul had Satan in mind in his reference to "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4), that is, the one to whom most of the world gives its allegiance and service. Likewise, Christ spoke of the "prince of the world" (John 14:30; 16:11).

This brief treatment of the Biblical use of "darkness" will provide some background for more specific attention to Paul's employment of the phrase, "the power of darkness," in the Colossian letter.

### **The Power of Darkness in Colossians**

To fully understand what Paul intended to convey by *the power of darkness* in Colossians 1:13 one needs to notice the immediate context. To satisfy this requirement, we offer an exegesis of Colossians 1:12-14.

#### **Verse 12**

**Giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.**

It will be immediately recognized that this is the language of prayer, specifically, thanksgiving. This is a continuation of the thought introduced in verse 9 in which the apostle told the brethren in Colossae he was praying incessantly for them. A part of that prayer was

thankfulness to God that both they and he had been enabled to become "partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."

The phrase, *made us meet to be partakers* means to "make sufficient, render fit, qualify" according to Wuest.<sup>5</sup> Nicoll says the phrase, "made us meet," means "who qualified you"<sup>6</sup> The means by which anyone is qualified or rendered sufficient or fit to inherit the blessings of God is through the merit of the blood of the sinless Son of God (1 Pet. 1:18–20; Rev. 1:5). This blood is applied in its cleansing power as we comply with the conditions established by Christ Himself (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 John 1:5–7). This principle of qualification, being rendered fit for the promises of God, exposes the doctrine of *universal salvation* as a blasphemous heresy. Only those who become qualified will be recipients of the promises!

Although as men we must be obedient to the Gospel or be damned (2 The. 1:8–9), this obedience that brings salvation is not man's meritorious work in any respect, as Calvinists falsely argue. It is through the power of the saving Gospel (Rom. 1:16), given by revelation of Christ (Gal. 1:11–12), that men learn the conditions upon which they may be qualified for the inheritance. Thus, it is God who fits us or qualifies us through His grace in revealing the conditions to us. This is fully and beautifully expressed in Titus 3:4–7:

But when the kindness of God our Saviour, and his love toward man, appeared, not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly, through Jesus Christ our Saviour; that, being justified by his grace, we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

What is meant by "the inheritance of the saints in light?" The word *inheritance* literally refers to an allotment or portion that is determined by casting lots. Some commentators find in this term an allusion to the apportionment of the land of Canaan among the tribes of Israel, identifying it with Deuteronomy 32:9.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not this is Paul's intent, this is surely a reference to one's entitlement to the blessings of God through one's obedience to Christ.

*The saints* is a reference to those who have been redeemed, thus sanctified and set apart, by the blood of Christ through their obedience to the Gospel. The phrase *in light* belongs with *the inheritance* rather than with *the saints*.<sup>8</sup> The force of the grammar is to indicate that the inheritance which belongs to the saints is situated in "the light."

Is this a reference to the future glory of Heaven or does it refer to privileges and blessing received in this life? It would certainly seem that our "inheritance....in light" is intended by Paul to be equivalent to the "kingdom of the Son of his love" (v. 13). To be delivered from

"darkness" (v. 13) is surely the same as coming into the "light" (v. 12). Since one's deliverance from darkness relates first to that which takes place in this life, it would seem that the entrance into light would indicate the same. Indeed, John speaks of our need to walk in the light in this present world, as God is in the light in the heavenly realm (1 John 1:7).

Perhaps we should not attempt to limit this reference to either earth or Heaven. Just as the kingdom of Christ has its earthly state in which the children of God serve Him on earth and its heavenly, glorified state in the realm of eternity, so the blessings of our inheritance "in light" begin even in this life and will be consummated in that "... inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). I concur with the comments of Wuest:

The lot of the saints, namely, that which is determined upon the saints is future blessedness, not only in the future life, but also here on earth. The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18).<sup>9</sup>

### Verse 13

**Who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love.**

God has "delivered", that is rescued, those who are His from the power of darkness. This implies that he who has rescued us is more powerful than he who held us in bondage. Through the power of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16) God has accomplished this rescue through His Son. This power was activated when we "... became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye [we] were delivered; and being then made free from sin, ye [we] became servants of righteousness" (Rom. 6:17-18).

As earlier indicated, *the power of darkness* indicates evil powers that dominate the world. Some commentators want to personify this expression and make it refer specifically to Satan. While the realm of darkness from which we have been rescued is ultimately controlled by the awful arch-foe, I agree with Lenski's observation at this point: "We need not say that 'the darkness' is personified as we should scarcely say so much for 'the light'." <sup>10</sup> *The darkness* refers to that realm in which men are separated from and opposed to God in their ignorance, error, and evil. Through yielding to temptation, men allow Satan to hold them as slaves in his realm of darkness as they satisfy the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21). It took the death of Christ to "... bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and....deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15).

Men are enthralled by darkness by choice, not by total hereditary depravity, as affirmed by John Calvin and his disciples. Men are likewise empowered by the blood of Christ to escape the hold of Satan's domain through their own choice to "... turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive remission of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith" (Acts 26:18).

Men are not only **delivered out of** the power of darkness, but they are **also translated into** the kingdom of Christ. *Translated* is from a word used by the ancients to describe the removal of a conquered people to the land of the conqueror. Nicoll is correct in observing that "... the translation into the kingdom must have taken place at the same time as the deliverance."<sup>11</sup> Thus the deliverance and the translating are not understood as two separate acts, but as two ways of describing the same act. J.B. Lightfoot says that this translating or removing refers to "...when they were baptized, when they accepted Christ,"<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Lenski says, "In the verb, *to rescue* (*deliver*, DM), redemption and justification are combined."<sup>13</sup> They are correct, for this understanding of the deliverance and translation accords fully with New Testament teaching (John 3:5; Acts 2:38, 41, 47; Rom. 7:17-18; 1 Cor. 12:13, etc.).

That into which the delivered ones are translated is "the kingdom of the Son of his love." Some commentators make this reference apply to a future messianic kingdom, which plays into the hands of the devotees of dispensationalism and premillennialism.<sup>14</sup> In a forceful rebuttal to the future-kingdom view, Nicoll correctly argues that just as the reference to the kingdom in Romans 14:17 and 1 Corinthians 4:20 cannot be understood in any futuristic sense, "Nor, indeed, can it be so here, for the translation into the kingdom must have taken place at the same time as the deliverance."<sup>15</sup> It necessarily follows that, if men were translated into the kingdom in Paul's time, the kingdom was in existence then, and men who yet await its coming wait hopelessly.

Were the minds of men not blinded by false presuppositions, human tradition, ignorance, and irrational emotionalism, they could surely see that the church of Christ and the kingdom of Christ on this earth are the same entity (Mat 16:18-19; Heb. 12:23, 28, etc.). To be translated into the kingdom is the same as being added to the church (Acts 2:47). The Colossians were in the church by virtue of the fact that they had been translated into the kingdom of Christ, and so it is with all who have lived since the cross.

The kingdom is described as belonging to the "Son of his [God's] love" With Robertson we agree that this refers to Christ as the object of God's love, similar to the Father's reference to

his "beloved Son" (Mat. 3:17).<sup>16</sup> Paul may have referred so distinctly to the absolute sovereignty of Christ here to exclude the Gnostic idea that Christ was inferior to angels (Col. 2:18).<sup>17</sup>

#### **Verse 14**

**In whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.**

Paul here explains how God has delivered us from darkness and translated us into the kingdom of Christ. He did so through the redemptive work of Christ, by which means alone we have been forgiven of our sins. The concept of "redemption" is rooted in the Old Testament, especially in connection with God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The New Testament concept is one of release upon payment of a ransom (Mark 10:45). Paul wrote that Christ "...gave himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:6). Peter declared that we were "...redeemed...with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ" (1 Pet 1:18-19).

The wonderful result of redemption is forgiveness of sins. While Christ gave Himself to redeem and deliver all men, only those who are obedient to His Word actually partake of this deliverance and redemption, receiving the forgiveness of their sins. It is not all men apart from any conditions who are saved/redeemed, but "He that believeth and is baptized [that] shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). Christ is the author of salvation "...unto all them that obey him..." (Heb. 5:9). The wrath of God's vengeance will be poured out upon "...them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 The. 1:8). It is only in Christ that this blessed redemption is available, and it is only through obedience to His Word that it is actually received in the forgiveness of sins.

#### **Other Figures In Colossians**

The deliverance from darkness and translation into the kingdom of light is but the first of several figures employed by Paul in Colossians to describe the change of spiritual status involved in redemption. Before one is redeemed, he is alienated from and an enemy of God, but through the death of Christ he is reconciled to God (1:21-22). In the process of redemption, one is buried with Christ in baptism, from which he is raised as a child of God through faith in the working of God (2:12). Those who are unredeemed are dead in their sins, but in Christ they are made alive (2:13).

Paul makes it very clear that the privilege of moving from darkness to light and from death to life has its attendant responsibilities. Those who once walked and lived in such things as fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness when they were under the power of darkness must "now put them all away..." (3:5-8). (Incidentally, if one could "walk" and "live" in fornication in the first century, one could (and does) likewise "walk" and "live" in adultery in an unscriptural marriage today, despite false teaching to the contrary. This



behavioral change is also depicted as “putting off the old man” and “putting on the new man” after the likeness of Christ (3:9–11).

### Conclusion

In the brief context of Colossians 1:12–14 Paul describes our wonderful salvation in Christ in terms of “inheritance” “deliverance” from darkness, “translation” into the kingdom of light, “redemption” and “forgiveness of sins.” We must ever remember that God in His grace through Christ “...delivered us out of the power of darkness...” when we were incapable of delivering ourselves. While we contemplate the glorious privileges indicated by these terms, we dare not forget the responsibilities that inhere in them, as the Colossians had apparently done. Our spirit of gratitude for our deliverance should be expressed by our being “stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord...” (1 Cor. 15:58). The blessings presently enjoyed by those who are living in the light of the kingdom of Christ, as magnificent as they are, are but “a foretaste of glory divine”!

### Endnotes

1. W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966), v. 1, p. 268.
2. John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), v. 2, p. 68).
3. Alfred H. Joy, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1955), v. 2, p. 789.
4. For fuller discussion of this passage see author's chapter in *The Book of Ephesians*, ed. Garland Elkins, Thomas B. Warren (Memphis, TN: Getwell Church of Christ, 1984), pp. 231,235–236.
5. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Ephesians, and Colossians in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1954), p. 179.
6. W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980), v. 3, p. 500.
7. John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 31.
8. A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 19310, v. 4, p. 476.
9. Wuest, loc. cit.
10. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub House, 1964), p. 42.
11. Nicoll, p. 501
12. J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Lynn, MA: Hendrickson Pub., Inc., 1981) p. 141.

13. Lenski, loc. cit.
14. H.A.W.Meyer *Critical and Exegetica! Handbook to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, and to Philemon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., Inc., 1983, v. 8, p. 220.
15. Nicoll, loc. cit.
16. Robertson, p. 477.
17. Ibid.

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