

Light in the Darkness: A Series for Advent

Part One—Darkness

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Darkness, to our sight, corresponds to silence, in our hearing. It is the absence of any stimulus to inform, direct or encourage us.

But darkness also entails a moral component. Darkness, by its very nature, spreads a covering over sin (see John 3:19-21; 8:12; 12:35, 46; Eph. 5:11-14).

Furthermore, darkness is symbolic of Satan and evil, as Jesus stated during his arrest in Luke 22:53: “This is your hour, and the power of darkness.” The Apostle Paul also referenced this theme regarding the depravity of the human heart in Ephesians 5:8, stating: “For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in the Lord.” Other passages that use the same imagery include Isaiah 5:20, Matthew 27:45 and Acts 26:18.

Beyond that, darkness may picture hell itself—even the eternal lake of fire (see Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

The word *darkness* appears 99 times in the Old Testament and 42 times in the New Testament. Darkness represents ignorance and frustration—even despair (see Isa. 42:6-7; 58:10; 59:9). Darkness is ominous and threatening—indicating impending danger (see Isaiah 8:22; 45:7; 60:2).

The declining daylight at this time of year reminds us in a tangible way of the darkness that God’s people felt as they waited for their Messiah to arrive. This was sensed most keenly during the 400 silent years that followed the last utterance of true, Biblical, prophetic revelation that was given before Christ.

When we comprehend how His coming as a human infant occurred in such a cold and dark world, it adds all the more to our understanding of His humiliation, and also to our amazement at His condescension. It also stirs our hope—as we, even today, still experience the brutality of a cold and dark world.

These emotions are captured skillfully in several beloved Christmas carols.ⁱ None have depicted it more clearly than Dr. John Morison (a Scottish minister who lived in the latter half of the 18th century) did when he wrote “The People That in Darkness Sat” in 1781. The first verse states:

The people that in darkness sat
A glorious light have seen;
The light has shined on them who long
In shades of death have been.

Of course, Morison based his text on Isaiah 9:1-2, which is also referenced in the New Testament in Matthew 4:15-16 and Luke 1:79.

Other great Christmas hymns that encapsulate this sense of longing and desperation to come out of the darkness are Christina Georgina Rossetti's "In the Bleak Midwinter," and the beautiful—almost mysterious—hymn, "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming."

Finally, the haunting carol "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" contains these lines:

O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Ever since the Son of God became incarnate, "the light shines in the darkness" (John 1:5). From that day to this,

It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts
to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6)

As the darkness deepens in our world—just as it did in the days after the prophets had vanished—the light shines brighter and farther.

That darkness confronts us this Advent season. May we celebrate Christ's first coming within it, and may it motivate us to ready ourselves for His return.

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ⁱ The texts of all the songs referenced here are in the public domain.