

My friends in Christ,

It's been quite a few years, but I remember a visit or two to Colossal Cave (about 10 miles east of Grace's location in Vail). Like on any number of cave tours, I suppose, once they get you well into the cave, they turn off the lights so that you can briefly experience total darkness—something that is hard to find unless you're deep under the surface of the earth!

You can then imagine what you would do if you were stuck down there with no flashlights or fires or light of any kind. What would you do?

Some (maybe most) would try to feel their way along to find a way out to the light of safety.

If two people were side by side trying to find the way out, they might have a difference of opinion as to which way to go as they feel the cold walls of the cave but can't see which way is right—if *either* way is right!

Others may resign themselves to "This is just the way it is. There's not too much I can do, just hope for the best—maybe someone will come along, otherwise wait and see."

And for others—it's a total freak out! Fear of the dark. Who knows what will happen? That darkness is extremely uncomfortable. They are troubled, worried, afraid.

You realize this is how many people go through what God calls the "darkness" that is living in this world without a knowledge of God, without an understanding of him, without a trust in him for salvation?

Some try to feel their way along, trying to find the way that leads to God and life after death.

Some feel that *this* way is right; others feel another is the way to go.

Other people kind of give up—"There's no way to be sure. I'll just hope for the best and see what happens."

And there are those who are going through life freaking out. Maybe they express it and maybe they don't but inside they are uncomfortable about themselves and guilt that they feel...and wonder who God is...and what happens if they die...and all sorts of things.

Maybe you can personally relate to one or more of those approaches to God and life. Certainly there are people all around you living them right now! If you've been there, you know that's pretty scary for your friends and your neighbors and some family members and people you know casually or through work or school. And even if you can't personally relate, you have to appreciate the uncomfortable feelings that come with not knowing God or being certain about life after death.

But I'm here to tell you this morning something related to this that can be pretty scary for you and me as Christians. It shouldn't be scary, but we can make it that way sometimes. It sounds ridiculous that it could even be scary because there are these awesome, wonderful things behind it. The thing that sometimes makes a Christian afraid is this:

### **God Has Made You His Light In A Dark World**

This is the highest honor a person can have—to represent Jesus in this world—but Christians often have difficulty doing so. I don't believe any of us have done this perfectly over our lives and we may all struggle with

some aspect of it, so it's pretty helpful to be able to look into the life of the Apostle Paul and his Christian friend Barnabas to see how it's done and understand the great things God will do through our witnessing!

Barnabas went along with Paul on his first large-scale mission trip that took them up into the area northwest of Israel, up around the Mediterranean Sea into what is modern-day Turkey. It was a region called Pisidia and the city was Antioch.

As you read the book of Acts and hear about Paul's mission work in many places, you notice a pattern. He would enter a city and make a bee-line for the synagogue. It was wise to make this the first stop because there he would meet people who were well-versed in the Old Testament Scriptures and specifically the promises of a Savior who would be sent by God to pay for the sins of all people. And just like all the children at Grace learn in Sunday School from a very young age how Jesus came to be our Savior, Paul would meet people who had grown up learning how God was going to send that Savior. Paul told these Jewish people the good news that God made good on his promises and that Jesus was that promised Messiah—they had a Savior from sin!

So Paul and Barnabas made their way to the synagogue in Antioch and sat in the service, listening as the Scriptures were read. Then the leaders of the synagogue said to them, **“Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.”** Well, Paul wasted no time. Without hesitation, he launched into a sermon that would forever change the people who were there—both Jewish and non-Jewish (or Gentile) people. He talked about highlights from Israel's history and then moved on to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, explaining to them that he was the One the Lord had promised through the prophets.

And so our lesson today picks up where Paul announces the wonderful news of forgiveness in Jesus. There was some law—warning them not to disregard what he was saying—and gospel—that faith in Jesus does what all of God's laws could not do—that is, make us right with God. Well, this sure got their attention! They had not heard this before! It was time to go but they wanted to know more about this, so they invited Paul and Barnabas to speak again the following week. And so they did.

It went a little less smoothly the next Saturday, however. The staunch Jews were prepared for them, rejecting their gospel message and publicly speaking against Paul and Barnabas. Now they were sorry they ever invited them to speak in the first place!

Paul's response to the unbelief of the Jews there was that since they rejected Jesus—and therefore lost eternal life—he and Barnabas were going to devote their time and attention to the Gentiles who were listening and believing. As he spoke, he quoted something that those Jews knew from the prophet Isaiah: **“I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”** They should have remembered that Isaiah was recording the Lord's words to the Messiah, who would bring salvation not just to the chosen people of Israel, but to the Gentiles. We heard Isaiah's words in our first lesson this morning and how God explained that it would be too insignificant a thing for the Messiah to be only for the Jews. He would be the Savior of all. Paul applies this same verse to their work of sharing the Messiah with all people; they were called by the Lord to share the saving gospel with everyone.

And so we hear fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy as the non-Jews in Antioch were filled with joy at this preaching of the gospel. They respected Paul's message from the Lord and they put their faith in Jesus! And because of those Gentiles who believed, the saving gospel of forgiveness of sins and eternal life by faith in Jesus spread throughout the entire region!

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For Christians—for you and me—this bit of early church history is not what's scary. We are not rejecting Jesus as the Savior. We are not jealous of our preachers and we're not speaking abusively against the pastors. We aren't like those Antioch Jews who had only themselves to blame for their eternal death in hell.

The scary part is found where Paul applied these words to himself: **"I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."** *"Well, that's Paul, not me,"* we might say. *"Of course he was supposed to be a light for people lost in a world of darkness without Jesus. Of course he was supposed to share salvation everywhere—we read all about it in the New Testament."* But it's not that simple. He was a special worker for God, no doubt, but we're all called to share Jesus with others.

The disciples were special too. We heard in the gospel today how Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world began to attract his first disciples—those who would follow him and then serve as "lights" in the world, showing people the way of salvation in Jesus.

But you have to know that you are special to God also! In Ephesians, Paul wrote, **"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. (Ephesians 5:8)** In that same section we are called **"dearly loved children"** of God (5:1). God has given us faith just as he gave faith to those Antioch Gentiles. We are dearly loved by him and he calls us "light" also, light that is to be obvious and evident in a world that lives in the darkness that we were in before God saved us! So it's not just Paul and Barnabas who were light for others; we are too!

And so in other places in God's Word, we are called God's witnesses, his ambassadors—and this one: **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)**

There is no question that God has done a beautiful thing by giving us Jesus, who forgives every sin of ours and answers that nagging question of *"What will happen to me when I die?"* He promises us eternal life. This brings joy to our hearts like it brightened the hearts of the Antioch Gentiles. And there is no question that God calls you and me to be lights that reflect the Light of the world, Jesus Christ. We are to shine—to put on display with our lives and our words—the light of salvation through Jesus.

And right about there it gets a little scary. First of all, because we know that even though we have this incredible privilege of being God's children...even though Jesus' blood paid for my sin—and I know this full well—I still sometimes live like what God wants for his children doesn't matter. I sin against the God who loved me when I didn't deserve it. I rebel against the God who has rescued me from a life of groping in the darkness and an eternity of suffering in hell. I am not fit to be a reflective light of Jesus, the Light of the world!

I have to remind myself what I'm going to tell you now—Jesus paid for exactly those sins along with all the rest. Lack of appreciation for the love of God in Jesus finds forgiveness at the cross. Lack of follow-through on our good intentions to live more like God commands his people finds forgiveness in the outstretched arms of Jesus. This news warms my heart once again and I hope the same is true for you. The forgiveness Paul preached in Antioch is preached to you and me as well.

But there still is one scary thing: though I'm grateful for all of that, I am not always the outstanding light who tells others what they need to know to be saved. I want to. The new person of faith that lives inside me wants to tell others. But it can be so hard...so scary. It feels like taking chances with my life. A person may not want to hear it. They may not like me because of it. The gospel may not take root in their heart. I may be embarrassed. It may feel really awkward. And yes, there are times my sinful nature wins the battle of wills and I really don't want to be this light God calls me to be.

We may think only lightly about the importance of getting that saving gospel out to all people. Maybe we sing the hymns about it and politely listen to the lessons and sermon about our role as disciples of Jesus in this world, but do very little to bring salvation to those who need it. Forgiveness for these things is found in Jesus too. And in this state of forgiveness and peace with God, we are able to see the encouragement that is here for us.

It is helpful to see a shining example like Paul. He was not worried about all that other stuff. He had “thick skin” when it came to sharing Jesus with others. We know from the accounts of his life that he wasn’t worried about the money he spent to carry out gospel work. He wasn’t concerned about the time it took or even the hardships he would endure. He knew he was made by God to be his light in a dark world. Despite opposition and harassment, he continued to tell people about forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus, the Lamb of God, who brought salvation for all people of the world.

It’s helpful to see the shining example of those people in Antioch who trusted in Jesus and then functioned as God’s lights in the dark world around them. It’s helpful to see that God blessed Paul’s witnessing and that he blessed the witnessing of those who came to faith in Antioch.

And it is helpful to see that God and his method for bringing light into a dark and lost world have not changed. **God Has Made You His Light In A Dark World.** You and I can start fresh today, with hearts forgiven and prepared to share Jesus with others. With love for others and hearts filled with compassion, we can put away our fears and do something that can eliminate the fears others have as they wander about in a dark world.

It might be a good idea to *not* drop your worship folder off at the door for recycling on your way out today. Maybe it would be better to take it home so that it can remind you of your calling to be God’s light in the world. Put it where you’ll see it so that you can think about who it is in your life you can help by sharing with them the forgiveness and love of Jesus.

May God bless us as we find forgiveness and the encouragement necessary to be the lights God has made us to be. Amen.

<sup>38</sup> “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. <sup>39</sup> Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. <sup>40</sup> Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: <sup>41</sup> “ ‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.’”

<sup>42</sup> As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. <sup>43</sup> When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

<sup>44</sup> On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. <sup>45</sup> When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

<sup>46</sup> Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup> For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “ ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

<sup>48</sup> When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. <sup>49</sup> The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.