

Shine Like a Star – *Philippians 2:12-16*

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Today we're going to talk about stars...and I'd like to start us out on this topic by sharing an experience I had many years ago in the country of Egypt. How many of you have been to Egypt? Well, after my third year of college at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, I had the opportunity to travel to the country of Egypt on a 6-week mission trip. Now at the time when I traveled there, my oldest brother, Jason, was living in Cairo, Egypt, serving as a diplomat for the U.S. government, as we talked about last week. So while I was there I also got to spend some time with him, and he took me on several excursions around the country to see some interesting sites and hang out with some of his friends.

One of the most memorable things we did together was to drive from Cairo out into the Sinai desert to go camping. Now probably all of you have heard of the Sinai desert, because many people believe it's where the Mountain of Moses is...the place where God himself gave the 10 Commandments to Moses and showed himself in glory and power with thunder and lightning and earthquakes to the children of Israel...they call it Mount Sinai in the present day and there's a monastery there and a lot of tourists!

Interestingly there's some compelling evidence these days that the Mountain of Moses is actually in Saudi Arabia...in fact there's a mountain there by that very name that fits exactly the description provided in the Bible. If you get a chance, watch a video called Mountain of Fire by Bob Cornuke, and you'll be amazed and inspired by what he shares on this topic.

But I'm getting sidetracked! My point was that my brother and I and some of his friends went camping on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. So, on this camping trip we drove way out into the desert far away from any city or town. As we got further and further away from cities and man-made lights, I began to notice more and more and more stars. I had never seen anything quite like it in my whole life. In fact it was the first time I ever consciously saw the Milky Way, and I remember asking my brother what that cloudy ribbon in the sky was. What I noticed was that the deeper into darkness we went, the more stars we saw.

The other thing that was very strange and unique to me out there in the desert was the complete and utter silence. When everyone finally stopped talking and climbed into their sleeping bags for the night, I noticed the intense quiet. There was no sound of a car going by, no hum of a refrigerator motor, no TV noise, no music playing, no birds chirping, no dripping of rain, and not even the sound of a cricket or any other insects. It was just complete and utter silence.

As I laid in my sleeping bag and listened to the complete silence and stared further into space than I had ever seen in my entire life, I was overwhelmed with amazement and awe at the One who created the universe and created more stars and planets and solar systems than we will ever be able to see and comprehend. I felt very small and humbled at the vastness of space and how I was like a speck of dust in the vast scheme of it all.

You see, as I had moved away from all the man-made noise and buildings and lights and cars and distractions, the stars in the darkness drew my attention to the glory of the One who created it all and who is so much bigger than I had ever understood. And yet as tiny as I am, he still cares about me and loves me and concerns himself with every part of my life.

But I want you to imagine for a moment what it would have been like if my brother and I had gone out into the darkness of the desert and there were no stars in the sky, no moon, no planets, but instead just complete darkness everywhere. What if when we arrived at our camping spot our car battery died and we realized we forgot our flashlight? Without some sort of light we would have had absolutely no idea which direction to go to get back from where we came from. All we would have seen is complete darkness. We would have truly been lost and unable to find our way. And if the sun never rose in the morning, we would have remained lost and wandering around in the darkness.

In Genesis 1:14-15 we learn that God created the lights in the heavens in order to separate the day from the night and to serve as signs, and for seasons, and for days and years and to give light on the earth. Fortunately God didn't leave us in complete darkness to wander around lost. He created the sun, moon, stars and planets to give light on the earth and to give us signs telling us about himself and what he's doing in the world, and to help us keep track of the passage of time.

But did you know that God has designed each of us to serve a purpose in the world that is very similar to the purpose of the stars in the sky? If you have your Bibles please turn to Philippians chapter 2. We're going to read verses 12 through 16.

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

So what I want you to notice first about this passage of Scripture is that to the world around you, you are to look like lights in the world.

Now the word translated “lights” in the original Greek is a word used to describe an illuminator or something that gives off light, and is most often used to describe the stars, the sun and the moon. So I think we can confidently say that each of us is called by God to be like a star in the dark night sky, pointing to God and to his truth and to his glory and helping people find their way through the darkness. Without us doing that, people will be left lost in the darkness...wandering around hopelessly and continually hurting themselves because they simply can't see the dangers and drop-offs and obstacles all around them.

So that sounds like a big job and a big responsibility doesn't it?...a lot like being God's ambassador, as we talked about last week. Well, as you've probably heard me say before, if you feel that way, you're exactly where you need to be. Because the only way we can be a light to the world around us is when we live and walk in humility and dependence on our God. It's a really good thing to feel inadequate for ministries that God calls us to, because then we we're ready to walk by his power instead of our own.

Notice in verses 12 and 13 of Philippians chapter 2 that we're told to:

...work out our salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

What I see in this verse is an attitude of humility and respect and dependence on God, realizing that the awesome and powerful God of the universe is dwelling inside you and me and he's the one that gives us the power to accomplish his will and be lights in the darkness...it's his light that shines through us, not a light that we can generate on our own.

Think about it...a person who is working in their own strength and confident of their own abilities and trying to do things FOR God without relying on his strength, is not going to be walking with an attitude of fear and trembling. They're going to be walking confident of themselves and unaware of their desperate need for God in every moment. They're going to be patting themselves on the back for all the great things they've done FOR God. They're going to be drawing attention to themselves instead of to God. And they're ultimately going to fail, because we can't do God's will in our own strength. Do you believe that today?

In contrast to being to being confident of our own abilities and operating out of our own human strength, the fear and trembling we're called to here indicates an extreme respect and reverence and humility before God, recognizing his power and his presence working within us...realizing that the only way we can accomplish his will is through his power and strength working within in us and changing us from the inside out.

So what does the daily life of a person who is living as a light in a dark world look like? Our passage today tells us that we are living right smack dab in the middle of a crooked and perverse generation. This means that the people around us who don't believe in God are not living their daily lives according to God's design. The words "crooked" and "perverse" speak of things like lying and selfishness and intentionally doing things that are clearly not right and that even their own minds and consciences tell them are wrong.

I get a picture in my mind of people who are living for themselves and for anything that makes them feel good and people who will do whatever it takes to

get what they want even if they know it's wrong. These are people who are looking for happiness in all the wrong places and who don't mind hurting a few people along the way if it means getting what they want. They may not even realize that they're hurting themselves as well in the way they're living and in the choices they're making. This is because they're living and walking around in darkness.

So into this darkness you and I are each called to be lights or stars...something that's completely different from the darkness and actually shows the way out of the darkness. So again I ask the question: What should the daily life of a person who is living as a light in a dark world look like?

We find part of the answer to that question in Philippians 2:3-4:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Think about those people we talked about that are living crooked and perverse lives. Then think about what it would look like for them to see a person who is not living for themselves, but is instead thinking about other people and caring about them and looking out for them. That person will look like a shining bright light in a world full of darkness and selfishness, won't they?

Selfishness is truly what we see all around us in the world, and we know that each of us also struggles with our old nature that wants the world to revolve around us and give us whatever we want. But when we allow God to so change our hearts and so bring us into contentment and peace and joy in him, that we are then able to start thinking about other people and start letting our own wants and needs take a backseat, then we will truly appear as bright shining lights in the dark world. When people see that kind of life in action, they will be ready to hear about what has made the difference in our lives and allowed us to be so different from the world around us.

This way of living is perfectly illustrated in the life and attitude of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is always our example and guide. Let's read verses 5 through 8 of Ephesians chapter 2:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

There's something significant I want you to notice about the example of Jesus. Did you see how he had confidence in who he was and in his value? Jesus knew without a doubt where he had come from and that he was the Son of God and he relaxed in that identity and didn't spend his time trying to exalt himself and find his value and get other people to give him the credit he deserved. Instead he was able to confidently humble himself and carry out the task that the Father had given him. He was able to be more concerned about the Father's glory, than about his rights as a human being or even his own reputation.

In a similar way, we ourselves can know our incredible value to God and be confident of our new identity in Christ as the very children of God. Secure in this new identity, we don't need to spend our time trying to find our value in the way that most people in the world do. So many people spend their time trying to give themselves value and to get other people to pat them on the back and tell them they're worth something. We all struggle with that to some extent.

But when we come to a deep knowledge and peace about who we really are in Christ and about our incredible value to God, we can begin to let go of our endless struggle to get other people to recognize us and tell us we're worth something, and begin to operate in the humility that God calls us to. It's that inner confidence of knowing who we are that will enable us to let go of that struggle and instead start putting other people's needs above our own.

There's something else that's really important as well as we allow God to make us into those bright shining lights. Look at verse 14 of Ephesians chapter 2:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing.

How are you doing on that one? That's a challenging task isn't it? And yet according to our passage, not grumbling or disputing is somehow the key to us being able to appear as lights to the world around us.

As I looked up the Greek words for grumbling and disputing, I actually came away quite surprised. When I think of those two words I tend to think about them in relation to people interacting with each other. I imagine arguments between people and people complaining to each other. But what I immediately noticed about the meaning of these words is that they both refer to an inner attitude. The word translated grumbling means a murmuring or a muttering and applies to a secret debate or a secret displeasure that is not openly shared with others. The word disputing, on the other hand, means an internal discussion or debate and indicates a deliberate questioning about what is true or an internal arguing.

So the interesting thing is that both of these words are used primarily to describe the inner attitude of a person. We get the idea of the grumbling and disputing talked of here being a grumbling and disputing with God. It's an attitude of the heart where instead of simple faith and trust in God, we are constantly arguing and fighting with him or complaining to him and trying to resist his work within us. So again this takes us back to the incredible importance of trust in and dependence on God and cooperation with his work within us if we are ever to be a light shining in the dark world.

I want to give you two examples of people who interacted with God in very different ways. Both of these people you will all be very familiar with. They were both real people who lived in ancient history. One of them spent his life grumbling and disputing with God, while the other chose to trust God with simple faith and follow wherever he led. As we talk about these men, I'd like to ask yourself, which one is closest to the way I'm living my life right now...the way I'm interacting with God on a daily basis and reacting to his instructions and guidance?

The first man was a prophet. He was a man who was receiving specific words and instructions from God himself that he was then to share with people around him. The only problem was that the latest word he had received from God, he didn't like at all. In fact he absolutely hated it. You see God had called him to go talk to a group of people that he was disgusted with and really, really, really didn't like. In fact, he hated them. They had done unspeakable atrocities to his people and this prophet had extreme bitterness in his heart toward them. In fact he was really looking forward to the day when God would finally bring justice and destroy this group of people forever. And now God had told this prophet that of all things, he

was supposed to go talk to these people and give them an opportunity to change their ways and avoid being destroyed by God.

Now this man knew that God was merciful and compassionate and forgiving and that there was a really good chance that the people he was going to share this message with would actually accept the message and change their ways and then avoid being destroyed by God. And the man wanted nothing more than to see them destroyed by God because he had so much anger and bitterness toward them.

So, as you can imagine, this man began grumbling and disputing with God in a big way. He actually decided that he would do the exact opposite of what God had asked him to do, and that never goes well, does it? Instead of going east, he went west and ended up in the belly of a whale, where he finally started having a good conversation with God. The only problem was that after the whale coughed him up and he finally went and did what God asked him to do, his worst nightmare came true and the people actually did change their ways, temporarily at least, and they avoided being destroyed by God. At which point he returned to his grumbling and disputing with God.

Have you ever been there? Has God ever asked you to take the first step and show mercy to someone who has hurt you deeply? It's not easy, is it? But guess what, God always calls his children to take the first step in forgiveness and reconciliation. Remember, he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. This applies to sharing the good news of Christ with nonbelievers, but it also applies to us in our relationships with each other. If we're harboring bitterness toward a brother or sister, God never calls us to just sit on it and stew about it and start treating another believer in Christ badly. Instead, we each have a God-given responsibility to take the first step in resolving the problem, rather than waiting for someone else to do it.

To say we're in a right place with God while we're harboring bitterness toward a brother and doing nothing to resolve it, is a really bad place to be. But when we, instead, humbly go to our brother and try to bring reconciliation and restored relationship, we shine like stars and the world sees a glimmer of hope in a dark universe.

The second man I want to tell you about is actually called your father in the Bible. We've talked about him quite a bit lately. He lived in a very different way than our friend, Jonah. He also lived in ancient times and grew up in a town where all the people around him worshipped the moon God instead of the true God. He was surrounded by corrupt and perverse people. Now when this man was a boy God called his family to leave the town of the moon God and set out for a place that he would show them. This man's name, of course, was Abram.

Now as we talked about in a recent message on faith, the most important quality of our friend, whom God later renamed Abraham, was that he trusted God. When God called him to do something, he did it and he did it without grumbling and disputing. And that is also why he's your father. The Bible tells us that he is the father of all who believe and trust God. He gives us an amazing example to emulate as we seek to walk by faith. We also see him walking in humility and putting others above himself. Like when Abraham allowed his nephew Lot to take the best land for himself, while he took what was left.

With Abraham there's also a very interesting connection to us being called to be lights to the world around us...to be stars in the dark night sky. In looking at Genesis chapter 15 verses 1 through 6 recently, we saw Abraham's beautiful attitude of trust and faith in God and how God rewarded that simple faith. You'll remember in that passage, that God promised Abraham he would have a child even though he and his wife were way past the age when people are able to have babies.

Then God took Abraham outside at night and said:

"Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you're able to count them." And he said to him, "So shall your descendents be." Then he believed in the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Here we see Abraham expressing simple and profound faith in God's promises. A confident faith that God was able to accomplish what seems impossible in human terms. Instead of arguing and disputing with God, he chose to believe and trust him. And God credited that simple faith to him as righteousness.

So this is the daily choice that is before each of us. Do we live like Jonah, with an attitude of grumbling and arguing with God? Or do we follow our father Abraham and choose to trust God and his good intentions toward us without complaining and arguing. Do we hold bitterness in our hearts and refuse to forgive people who have hurt us? Or do we go to them and work on forgiveness and reconciliation and restored relationship? Do we allow grumbling and disputing to characterize our church body? Or do we aggressively tackle issues together and work diligently to move forward in unity?

I think each of us knows the the better path to take, but taking it is often another thing. Are you ready to take it today? It's a challenging path that requires humility and courage, but it's the only path that doesn't lead to a dead end, where we're left wandering aimlessly around in the darkness like the rest of the world.

Let's be like Abraham and live a life of simple faith and trust and dependence on God, where we follow his daily direction and guidance, without grumbling and arguing and complaining, and walk in the power he's given each of us through his Spirit. Let's be the peacemakers we're called to be and show ourselves faithful with the ministry of reconciliation that's been entrusted to us by God. Let's hold fast to the Word of life, meditating on and knowing Scripture, and learning to walk it out in practical ways in our lives.

When we learn to walk this way we shine like those stars in the dark night sky that Abraham saw several thousand years ago. We become one of Abraham's many children who choose to walk by faith and are transformed into bright lights shining in a dark and hopeless world.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.