

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Philippians 2:12-18 on October 5, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Stuck

Today's Focus: Shining

“As the sky gets darker, stars shine brighter”

Welcome to all of you who are with us today in person as well as all of you who are watching online. This week I spent a couple days at the WFX conference in Dallas, a big technology/media conference for churches, where our team learned how to take our live streaming to the next level when we eventually move into our new facility. I'm really excited about that!

Now like we often do here if you have a question on my message today or you'd like me to clarify something please feel free to text me your questions and I'll answer a couple during the sermon Q and A a little bit later in the service.

But first, I've got a question for you. It's kind of an odd question: Who turned off the stars? This was actually the title of a blog post that I read on cnn.com about a year ago. It was about light pollution. Have you heard of this? Because of urbanization, the night sky is becoming so washed out by urban lighting in big cities all around the world that instead of seeing thousands and thousands of stars, some people are seeing only hundreds, some only dozens, and some day, perhaps none at all.

Can you imagine growing up and never seeing the stars? Of course it's still kind of magical when you go camping somewhere like northern WI away from the city lights, away from a cell phone signal, and away from the internet, right? I know that makes some of you a little nervous, like you're almost twitching just thinking about it, because you can't imagine what it's like to not have access to Facebook on your iPhone! But when you look up at the sky in a place like that, you can't help but be astonished. **As the sky gets darker, the stars shine brighter.** You can't help but think, "Wow, look at God's handiwork!" Because as the Bible says, *"The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands"* (Psalm 19:1).

Even the blog on CNN recognized that we as human beings are missing something when we can't see the stars. It said, "As we lose sight of more and more stars to light pollution, we lose a connection to the universe. We may even lose a little bit of our souls."

That's a fascinating comment, isn't it? But I think that's just the half of it because of what we're going to hear today, not from a blog post online, but from the Bible. You see the Apostle Paul talks about how we who are followers of Jesus Christ are to shine like stars in the midst of a dark world. This is how ultimately the message of God's love through Jesus Christ is to go out into the world. **As the sky gets darker, stars shine brighter.**

But sometimes I wonder, who turned off the stars? The world is no doubt missing something when people who are stuck in cities can't see the stars in the sky because of light pollution. But the world is missing something even greater when we people who are stuck in their sin can't see the light of Christ because we who are Christians shine just dimly or not at all. This is a problem.

I mean if I did not know you, could I tell by how you live that you are a follower of Jesus Christ? By the things that you say, the choices that you make, the way you interact with your family and your friends...would I learn a little more what Jesus Christ is like? What in your life would help me to see Jesus better? What in your life shines into our world in such a bright, evident way that it would attract me to learn more from you about what Jesus is like so that I would say, "I want what they've got"?

That's why Paul today helps us to identify a couple attitudes and behaviors in which we might get stuck, things which would prevent us from letting our light shine. And then he points us to power source that can get us unstuck and make us shine like stars in a dark world. He says...

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Friends, there are many ways in which we live in an increasingly dark world. There's Ebola. There's ISIS. There are people sick in hospitals and people dying in the streets. There are hostages being held by terrorists. There are threats of beheadings. This kind of darkness looms large in the headlines. But Paul in our sermon text identifies some other kinds of darkness, ways in which we too contribute to the darkness. He mentions grumbling. He talks about arguing. And he specifically mentions our need to hold on tightly to the word of life because apparently it's an easy thing in this dark world to let our grip on God's Word slip loose.

It's no secret. We live in a world where people all around us are loosening their grip on the word of God that gives life. We live in a world where God's Word is publicly mocked by many, a world where God's Word is twisted so often that almost anything goes so long as it makes someone happy. It's a dark world when right and wrong get all mixed up. Richard Dawkins, one of the foremost voices of atheism, recently doubled down on social media when he said that a little mild pedophilia isn't that bad and that it would be immoral *not* to abort a fetus with down syndrome. We live a world like the prophet Isaiah described, "*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness*" (Isaiah 5:20).

Yet in this world of darkness it is Christians who are to shine as stars amongst what Paul says is a warped and crooked generation. In other words, our firm grip on the word of God is what should cause us shine like stars so that we still have a true, pure message to share. Except we've got some problems too. Sometimes we get tired of letting our light shine. And sometimes we let our internal grumbling and arguing get in the way—usually not even about things that really matter but about things that don't. Without too much effort I'm guessing you could all probably share a horror story of someone within the church behaving badly and putting an ugly taste in the mouth of someone who didn't know Jesus. Am I right? And we may be shocked

at this person's behavior if you were to share that story, except we've all probably done the same thing at one time or another. I mean if I'm honest, sometimes by my own sinful attitudes and arrogance, I've become not the solution to the darkness but part of the pollution that causes the darkness.

So Paul says, ¹² *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.* Now let's talk about this because at first this sounds kind of scary, doesn't it? "Paul, are you saying that I've got to earn my way to heaven by my hard work and effort? Yikes man, because if that depends on me, I mean at all me, I'm starting to get a little nervous." But that's not what he's saying. The way to heaven is only and always by faith in the completed, perfect work of Jesus Christ.

That's what we heard last week—how Jesus, though truly God in every way, all-powerful, did not use his power for his own advantage like a mob boss. Instead he used his power as God to make himself weak, becoming one of us, truly human, to suffer and die in our place for all our sins. He embraced emptiness so he could fill us up with forgiveness. So completely did Jesus take upon himself the weight of our world's sin that the sky itself went dark as Jesus died. It was as if all the clouds of this world's sin had gathered together to try and destroy the light of the world as Jesus Christ made a once-for-all payment for the sins of the world. He made the perfect payment that only he could make—a sacrifice acceptable in the sight of God the Father which was demonstrated when Jesus burst forth gloriously from the tomb three days later just as he had foretold.

He became weak to win forgiveness so we can go to heaven. It's just that we're not in heaven yet, are we? So right after Paul gets done talking about the sacrifice Jesus made in 2:1-11, he goes on basically to say in verse 13, "Even though I'm not there with you, because I'm stuck here in a Roman prison after all, *continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*" In other words don't give up on God. Don't stop letting your light shine in this dark world because you're not in heaven yet.



Let me give you an illustration. Last month I got to run in the Brewers mini marathon with My Team Triumph. So here's a picture of me with Kathy from our church who lives in a group home here in Franklin that we get to serve. I got to push Kathy in the 10K race. A couple other people from our church also participated both as captains and as angels.

And for the most part it was a great race. A beautiful Fall day. Kathy was having a great time laughing and holding her pompom. And we were both excited to get to run through Miller Park at the end of the race. You literally run on the warning track around the outfield and see yourself up on the big screen. And when I entered the stadium pushing Kathy everybody cheered. It was so cool. I started celebrating. I said, "You did it, Kathy. You made it all the way!" Except as we exited the stadium I quickly realized, Oops, we're not at the end yet. We've still got to make this turn and go another quarter mile. And it was slightly up hill to the finish line. I thought, Oh no! Fortunately I had just enough left in me to push Kathy across the finish line.

But I imagine if I didn't. Suppose I just stopped and said, "I'm tired. I give up. I'm done." That would've been a bummer for me. But it would have especially been a bummer for Kathy. She needed me to help push her

across the finish line. She wasn't going to make it on her own. And making it to the finish line is kind of the whole point of running the race. It was only after crossing the finish line that we were each given a medal. How disappointing to run but not finish the race.

Now you may not be the type of person to run a 10K. But all of us are in the race of life. The goal at the finish line is heaven. And this race is a lot more like a marathon than a sprint, right? It's a long race. With hills. Sometimes it hurts to go on. You get tired. It gets hard. And this is a dark world. A world of woe and sickness and misery and pain. A world of sin and doubt. And not everyone's cheering you on. In fact a lot of people would like you to give up. You ever feel like that? But think what would happen if you gave up? Think what would happen if you gave up on God? It would be tragic for you. But so too would it be tragic for the world, for all those other people in this world, in your own neighborhood, in our own community, who don't know Jesus, who won't know Jesus unless we who are the Church of Jesus shares the gospel of Jesus with them. Friends, we're the Church. We are to shine like stars holding onto and holding out the only word that gives life. And while this might sound hard, it is by no means a hopeless task. Paul says,

¹³ *[F]or it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.* That's the key, isn't it? It is almighty God who gives you both the desire to and the ability to keep on keepin' on in the midst of a dark world. The same God who saved you through your baptism, he will continue to work energetically in you to sanctify you and to cause you to shine into this world and make a lasting difference. Why is this important? Because it's a dark world out there and the world needs to the light of Christ. Jesus is the light of the world. He shined his light into our hearts and lives and so we just can't help but want to shine with his light for others. And here's the thing, **as the sky gets darker, as our world gets darker, stars shine brighter!**

Now you can disagree with me on this but I think a great shift has taken place in our country over the last decade. Here's how I think about it. Ten years ago I believe when people realized that something was broken in their life and thought, "I have a problem"...they might have thought think, "Perhaps the church can help." And so the church just had to kind of be there. Do some nice publicity, make sure you get your name out into the community, and people would come. That sort of thing. "Come to us." But today, ten years later, people aren't thinking, "If I have a problem, maybe the church can help." More and more people are thinking, "Maybe the church is part of the problem." So all of a sudden, "Come to us" can't be a church's only outreach strategy. Now that might sound like a great obstacle to reaching out with God's Word. But I think that also sounds like a great opportunity. It's an opportunity to go and shine!

Because **as the sky gets darker, what happens? Stars shine brighter!** Now to shine Paul says we need to hold firmly to the word of life. We have no light to shine without it. So we can't compromise God's Word. We can't loosen our grip on the Bible. Instead we need to read it. We need to study it. We need to grow in our knowledge of it and affirm it for ourselves. Because the more time we spend in God's Word the more we're going to shine out with it into the world.

What does this look like—to shine like stars? I see our church going into more group homes here in Franklin and ministering to more and more people like Debbie and Kathy here who otherwise may not ever have anyone visit them. Did you know that 40% of people in a group home never get a visitor? And we've got almost 20 group homes here in our community. Right now we minister to one. These group homes are

hidden among us. The world mostly ignores them. The world is embarrassed by them. But we want to reach them. We want to go shine the light of Christ into them.

What does it look like to shine like stars? I see our church not being content to just rest comfortably behind the walls of our new building on the edge of the suburbs. Rather I see us using it as a training center where we rally around mission projects like Operation Jesus Cares so that we can also make a difference in the city. We need to go shine the light of hope into the hopeless. We've been doing this the last couple years with our Christmas project to help lift up one of the poorest neighborhoods on the south side of Milwaukee surrounding Christ-St. Peter Lutheran School and we want to do that again this year. As God enables us we want to shine with the light of Christ into the suburbs, we want to shine with the light of Christ into the city. We want to go shine with the light of Christ into this dark world.

And it starts with you—maybe even in your home, that the light of Christ would shine first and brightest there within the relationships that you have with the people in your family. What is it going to look like this week for you—to shine like a star? Don't let me limit all the possibilities. Let me just suggest one thing. Look for the darkness in the lives of the people you run across. Where has the darkness gathered in the world in which you walk? And when you see it ask God to help you shine into it the light of Christ. You are just the person God wants to use this week to shine hope into the dark corners of someone's life. So when you get that opportunity, just let it shine! Let God show you how. Remember, **as the sky gets darker, stars shine brighter!** Amen.

My Next Steps

Connect: Share a horror story of someone within the church (but don't call out any person or church by name!) behaving badly and putting an ugly taste in the mouth of someone who didn't know Jesus. We may be shocked at this person's behavior, but we've all probably done the same thing at one time or another.

Aha: Truth is, if we're going to be people who shine like stars in this dark world, it's going to have to be Jesus in us and shining through us.

Treasure: *It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose* (Philippians 2:13b).

Challenge: Spend some time this week thinking about the message you share with others about Jesus through your words, actions and attitudes.