

The Wired Word

Darkness & Light

Sunday, September 13, 2020

9:00-9:45am

Student Handout

Dear Class Member,

Almost the whole story in today's news can be told in the headline below: "Villagers Light Runway With Their Headlights, Enabling Medevac Plane to Land at Night and Shuttle Child to Hospital." Of course, there's a bit more to it, but the story lends itself to a discussion of the biblical motif of darkness and light. In this case, however, we've chosen to focus on what might be called "later light," the light of God that finds us in our maturity and causes us to change direction. So that will be the topic of our next class.

During this time of social distancing to control the spread of the virus, *The Wired Word* is including in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version.



Villagers Light Runway With Their Headlights, Enabling Medevac Plane to Land at Night and Shuttle Child to Hospital

The Wired Word for the Week of September 13, 2020

In the News

When head tribal clerk Ida Nelson heard an airplane flying low over her Alaskan village of Igiugig (pronounced Igggy-yaw-gigg) after dark, she knew something was wrong. Igiugig, located in the southwestern part of the state, is remote and has a population of about 70 people, and it's not a place one normally flies to during the night.

The plane was a medevac flight called in to pick up a child in need of medical attention. But its repeated circling over the village indicated it was having a problem with landing, and Nelson knew what it was.

Normally, at remote airstrips that are not routinely manned, pilots are able to turn on the runway lights from the airplane by means of technology designed for that purpose. But at Igiugig that night, the lights had been damaged, and not only would they not come on by the airplane controls, neither would they turn on from the manual controls on the ground.

Nelson alerted a neighbor, who contacted others, and within 20 minutes, several villagers, ranging in age from 8 to 70, had lined the runway with their cars, trucks and four-wheelers, all with headlights blazing.

A pilot in the village jumped in his own plane and used the radio to communicate the plan to the medevac pilot, and soon, the medevac plane was able to land, pick up the sick child and take off again.

The child, a girl, required advanced medical care and was flown to an Anchorage hospital. She has since improved and has been released.

The runway lights were not out due to neglect, but because of vandalism. They had been run over by an all-terrain vehicle.

Shannon K. McCarthy, a spokeswoman for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, which owns the airport, said that maintenance workers inspected the damage last week and began planning repairs.

"Vandalism on Alaska's small airports does occur every year," McCarthy said. And the state has been working to educate all Alaskans as to the importance of protecting the infrastructure. "We respond to any reports of damaged runway lights and repair them as quickly as we can," McCarthy added. But often, the maintenance workers have to fly in from elsewhere and it can take days for repairs to be accomplished.

She also said that most cases of vandalism are treated as felonies because of the cost of the lights.

In a Facebook story, accompanied by a photo, the airlift service commended the villagers. "What appears to be a blurry, dark photo is actually a view of what an amazing community can do with a lot of determination," LifeMed Alaska said in the post.

Alaska DOT crews have repaired the lights, and they are now back in service.

Nelson commented that the action by the villagers is "an ordinary thing to happen here in such a small community," Nelson said. "And what I'm finding out is that it's extraordinary to other people -- it's kind of a normal deal."

More on this story can be found at these links:

The Runway Lights Failed, So Villagers Used Their Headlights to Aid an Airlift. *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/30/us/Lifemed-alaska-flight-runway-landing.html>)
When the Runway Lights Failed, Alaska Residents Used Their Car Headlights to Land a Medevac Plane. *CNN* (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/01/us/alaska-village-medical-evacuation-trnd/index.html>)
Pilot-Controlled Lighting. *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilot-controlled_lighting)

Applying the News Story

Darkness and light is a strong motif in scripture, and TWW has done a previous lesson on that topic (see "Astronomers Detect Evidence of First Light Ever in Universe," the TWW first lesson for March 11, 2018). But we are aware that some people don't see the light of God until later in life, or until an especially dark episode in their lives causes them to seek the light. So the topic for this lesson will be "later light."

The Big Questions

1. In what ways, if any, does the metaphor of God as "light" -- or Jesus as the "light of the world" -- connect for you? Why? Or *not* connect for you? Why?
2. How old were you when you first experienced the light of God? Or if that imagery doesn't work for you, what terms would you use to describe that encounter?
3. When have you had a "light-bulb moment"? What caused it and what change did you make as a result?

4. When have you looked back on your youth and said, "If I knew then what I know now, I would have ... (or would *not* have ...)? What is the value of hindsight going forward? In what ways is God present for us in our hindsight discoveries?

5. How important is it, in terms of retaining the light of God, that people be introduced to Jesus in their youth? Why might later light be better retained?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 23:42-43

Then [the thief] said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." [Jesus] replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (For context, read 23:32-42.)

Acts 9:3-5

Now as [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." (For context, read 9:1-19.)

Speaking of "later light," the repentant thief, dying on a cross next to Jesus and asking Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into his kingdom, is the ultimate example of a "deathbed conversion," or what we might call "last-minute light."

But the conversion of Saul -- who became the apostle Paul -- is also an example of later light. There he was as a full-grown adult, actively persecuting followers of Christ. But then, on the road to Damascus, traveling for just that purpose, he was overtaken by "light from heaven" that "flashed around him." While in that case, the light sounds like a literal illumination -- one that may have been responsible for Paul's sudden and temporary blindness -- it was also the opening salvo in a process that led to an inner enlightenment and a wholehearted commitment to follow Jesus.

Whatever the case, Paul's Damascus-road experience speaks of this light as something *God* turns on, and that suggests that we are well advised to respond when such happens to us and not wait for the closing moments of our lives -- assuming our end is protracted and not sudden, and we are in our right minds at such time. As Jesus put it, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17), or as the Bible put it elsewhere, "See, *now* is the acceptable time; see, *now* is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:2, italics added).

Light seems the right word for all of this, for the light that God turns on is a means for us to discern -- to "see" -- what is real and true.

Questions: What do we miss by not seeing the light of God until we are already mature and have been involved in the strains of life? What do we gain by seeing it as a grown-up?

Isaiah 9:2

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined. (For context, read 9:1-6.)

This reading from Isaiah talks of a "people who walked in darkness" who have subsequently "seen a great light." In the context of conversion, whether late in life or earlier, the "darkness" can represent one's life without consideration of Christ's claims on it, and the "light" can represent the opening of one's mind and heart to those claims.

Importantly, the text suggests that darkness -- troubles, problems, pain, disappointments, etc. -- are what position us to see the light.

Question: In what ways might the darkness of our own struggles create a place where we can become aware of the light of God?

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (No context needed.)

In this encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman, Jesus seems to have had a light-bulb moment -- some later light. Jesus initially responded to the woman out of his sense that at this point, his message and ministry was for the Jews. Some Christians see this as Jesus having limited vision, while others see it as an indication that Jesus' purpose required his message to be planted first with his own people. The former may see the woman calling him on his "racist" statement (I don't give the food to dogs), with Jesus then seeing the light and understanding that she too had great faith. The latter see this as Jesus' giving a message to his followers: Yes, the Jews are the people whom God has chosen to use, but God's salvation is for all the people of the world, not just the Jews. In both of these interpretations, there is a "light bulb" going on: either Jesus realizing that non-Jews could have great faith or the disciples realizing that the salvation -- "from the Jews" -- was meant for all people.

Questions: How can you ascertain the validity of light-bulb discoveries? What message might we who are already walking in the light of God draw from this biblical incident?

Lamentations 3:19-23

*The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (No context needed.)*

Note how here this biblical writer admits that his affliction is a continual weight bowing him down. But he finds hope because God's love "never ceases" and God's mercies "never come to an end." Thus even as one gains age and is nearer to the end of one's life than to the beginning of it, God's mercies are "new every

morning," meaning that God's light is still available.

Question: What hope, pertinent to your problems, do you hear in this text?

For Further Discussion

1. Is there an active struggle between light and darkness going on right now? How does this struggle look to you?
2. It's perhaps significant that some people who have first come to Christ in full adulthood, have done so while struggling with certain darkness in their lives. Discuss the following examples:

Joy Davidman (d.1960), an American poet and writer who eventually became the wife of C.S. Lewis, was initially an atheist. Her first marriage was to a man named William Gresham. It was already a troubled relationship when one day he telephoned her, telling her that he was having a nervous breakdown, and didn't know when he would return home. She says she then had an experience that she described as follows: "... for the first time my pride was forced to admit that I was not, after all, 'the master of my fate'... All my defenses -- all the walls of arrogance and cocksureness and self-love behind which I had hid from God -- went down momentarily -- and God came in."

Mortimer J. Adler (d. 2001), was an American philosopher, educator and popular author who was agnostic for most of his life and even described himself as a "pagan." During an illness, however, he sought solace in prayer and accepted God's grace. He professed his belief "not just in the God my reason so stoutly affirms ... but the God ... on whose grace and love I now joyfully rely."

Peter Hitchens, brother of the well-known atheist Christopher Hitchens, is an English journalist and author, and is as well known in the United Kingdom as his brother was here in the United States. He too was an unbeliever in his youth and early adulthood. In fact, he tells that at age 15, he actually set fire to a Bible his parents had given him. But he explains that later, as he advanced in his career, he lost his faith in politics and his trust in ambition, and he became fearfully aware of the inevitability of his own death. He says, "I was urgently in need of something else on which to build the rest of my life." Somehow, in that mood, he "rediscovered Christmas," which, he says, he had "pretended to dislike for many years," and he attended a carol service. He began to be aware of the light. He was also engaged to be married, and something moved him to choose to be wed in a church service instead of a civil ceremony. Of that he says, "I can certainly recall the way the words of the Church of England's marriage service, at St. Bride's in London, awakened thoughts in me that I had long suppressed. I was entering into my inheritance, as a Christian Englishman, as a man, and as a human being. It was the first properly grown-up thing that I had ever done."

3. Read and comment on the later light received by George Wallace (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-george-wallace-taugh_b_6647468).
4. Have you heard of "Naïve Artists" (not native artists)? Naïve artists have no formal training, but late in life come to bring their different sense of perspectives to their art. Grandma Moses is exhibit A. What different sense of perspective do you now bring to your work and life as a result of the light you now have seen?

Responding to the News

Whether or not you are already walking in the light of God, be certain that God has more light for you as you face the troubles of life and even the routine of life. Be sure to look for it.

Prayer

O God, who started creation by saying "Let there be light," thank you for the light that brings us rebirth, the light shows us the way, and the light that shines even as shadows are falling. Help us to always be people of the light. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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