



BSFL: Ephesians 5:1-21

PAUL'S USE OF  
**Light**  
AND  
**Darkness**

BY GERALD L. STEVENS

**W**ITHIN THE FIRST FIVE VERSES OF the Bible, we already know that the daily rhythm of light and darkness defined human existence—and that light is associated with God’s will and is characterized as good. By simple extension, the God whom we understand as speaking the light of creation into existence is the God whose word lightens the path of the obedient (Ps. 119:105,130; Prov. 6:23).

### Light and Darkness in Jewish Scripture

As the children of Israel wandered in the desert, God provided a pillar of fire for travel (Ex. 13:21), and prophets later called Israel to walk in the light of the Lord (Isa. 2:5). The psalmist prayed that the light of God’s face might shine upon the congregation of the faithful (Ps. 4:6; see 44:3). Indeed, God’s presence reverses all the effects of darkness (Ps. 139:12).

Light, however, is even more than God’s will and good. Like a farmer who sees his crops bend to the angle of the sun, we can infer that light is life itself (Job 33:30; Ps. 56:13). For this reason, the psalmist equated salvation and light (27:1). The coming of Messiah was like light bursting forth upon those walking in a land of deep darkness (Isa. 9:2; see Matt. 4:16; Luke 1:79). Thus, the metaphor of light as life itself served as a major biblical theme (John 1:4-9; 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9-10; 12:35-36,46; see 1 John 1:5-7; 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:10).

Israel reflects God’s glory in the consummation of the kingdom, and, like plants drawn to the sun, nations will be drawn to the light of this new dawn (Isa. 60:1-3).<sup>1</sup> God Himself will eclipse any need for the sun and moon He created (vv. 19-20). In fact,

Right: Oil lamp from Ephesus. The hole in the middle allowed the lamp to be hung from a chain or to be put atop a stake.



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Zechariah anticipated a future time when a continuous day would break the old created order's cycle of day and night (Zech. 14:7).<sup>2</sup> As a reflection of God's glory, Israel was to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring into the light those who sit in the dungeon's darkness (Isa. 42:6-7; 49:6).<sup>3</sup> Thus, always inherent to the theme of Israel as a light to the nations is that salvation has a practical impact on the lives of humans. Feeding the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted is light arising in the darkness, when gloom becomes like the noonday (58:10).

Darkness is the negative side of this imagery. People may associate the emotion of joy with light, but gloom is like a surrounding darkness said Job as he lamented the day of his birth (Job 3:1-10). Job also described the journey to the afterlife as traveling through a land of gloom and deep darkness where even light itself loses its very nature and is more like darkness (10:20-22). Further, darkness shrouds even Sheol, the place of the dead (17:13-16). Evil works its designs under cover of night. Murderers, thieves, and adulterers rebel against light, because their evil deeds require the cover of darkness; evildoers are not acquainted with light's ways or paths, since they move about only in the night-shadowed alleys of life (24:13-17).<sup>4</sup>

Evil deeds of darkness eventually will be exposed. God's judgment is a turning of light into gloom and deep darkness (Jer. 4:23; 13:16). In Hosea, God shaved down His people with His prophets, killed them with the words of His mouth, as His judgment went forth as the light (Hos. 6:5). Amos turned the apple cart upside down, promising that the "day of the Lord"—so desired by the people as a day of deliverance—would bring even harsher judgment on them as a day of darkness, not light (Amos 5:18,20).

### Light and Darkness in Paul

Paul's imagery of light and darkness is thoroughly Jewish. Significantly, a light of revelation from heaven stopped him—a Pharisee determined to persecute Christians—dead in his tracks (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:13). Further, Paul identified his mission as a commission to lead Israel to be a light for the Gentiles (13:47; 26:23). Paul put an ironic twist to Israel's assigned task of being light to the blind in Romans 2:19. The God who as Creator spoke light out of the darkness shines in the hearts of believers with the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Paul contrasted righteousness and lawlessness as light and darkness (6:14), and he saw Satan as a deceiving angel of light (11:14). Satan deceives, Paul said, because the god of this world blinds the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see God's light of salvation in Christ (4:4). Being of the light is living righteously day by day; and no immorality whatsoever can be a part of the Christian lifestyle, just as light and darkness simply cannot coexist. The mere presence of light instantly banishes even the darkest darkness. Paul made clear this incompatibility of righteousness and immorality most especially in Ephesians 5:1-21.<sup>5</sup>

Paul's light and darkness language also has an eschatological component. Qumran documents such as the *War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness* illustrate the Jewish background of Paul's eschatological light and darkness language.<sup>6</sup> Since God is one who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16), then light is the inheritance of the saints (Col. 1:12). In this way, Paul harnessed the language of light as eschatological language, exhorting the Romans to lay aside

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**Left: The first theater at Ephesus was built in the 3rd cent. B.C. Through the years workers modified the structure, which reached its final form during the reign of the Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98–117). During Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, many people became followers of Christ and turned away from worshipping Artemis. These new believers no longer needed objects that honored Artemis. The silversmiths were incensed at the loss of revenue, so they drug two of Paul’s traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, to the theater to confront them (Acts 19).**



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**Upper left: Coin from the reign of Maximinus I (ruled A.D. 235-238); reverse depicts the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus.**



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**Left: Interior of one of the hillside houses in Ephesus.**

**Above: Baptistry at the Church of St. John in Ephesus; three steps lead down into the baptistry.**

**Paul taught that baptism illustrated a life that Christ had changed. Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5, HCSB).**

the works of darkness (Rom. 13:12). He also compared believers to being children of light not of the night or of darkness (1 Thess. 5:5). The light of God’s judgment in the future will reveal what is currently hidden in darkness (1 Cor. 4:5).<sup>7</sup>

In summary, strong biblical currents using the language of light and darkness are grounded in the creation story itself. Light is more than just good. Light is life. This life comes directly from God and reflects His fundamental character. Darkness is more than just gloom. Darkness is death. This death comes directly from sin and reflects evil’s fundamental character. These biblical currents flow into the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. New Testament writers such as Paul used this language to insist that immorality of any type is incompatible with the Christian life. These writers also turned light and darkness images into eschatological realities describing the character not only of this life, but of the life to come as well. **B**

1. Echoed in Tobit 13:11, a book by a Pharisaic author written in the time between the Old and New Testaments; see also Rev. 21:24.
2. Such an idea seems reflected in Rev. 21:23; 22:5.
3. See Micah 7:9; echoed in the New Testament in Luke 2:32.
4. A similar idea occurs in Sirach 22:11, a Jewish wisdom book of the Apocrypha.
5. Jesus used light imagery to teach the ethics of good works (Matt. 5:14-16). An unhealthy eye means great moral darkness for the body (Matt. 6:22-23; see Luke 11:34-36). Such teaching is reflective of Jewish writings, which used light and darkness as metaphors for wisdom and folly (Eccl. 2:13; see Sirach 22:11) and for good and evil (Isa. 5:20). New Testament writers clearly insisted that the claim to be of the light can be falsified by one’s actions toward fellow believers right now (1 John 2:9-10).
6. 1QM 1.1-16; 3.6, 9; 13.16; 14.17. Another Jewish example is *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, as in *T. Levi* 19.1 and *T. Benj.* 5.3. A great resource for access to the Qumran documents in English is Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, 2nd ed., trans. Wilfred G.E. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). We see other New Testament writers using similar imagery, such that turning from the power of Satan to God is turning from darkness to light (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9). Since darkness is a part of the crucifixion story (Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:45), darkness naturally is included as an eschatological sign of judgment portended in creation (Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:24). The theme of eschatological judgment and darkness is in Revelation (Rev. 8:12).
7. See John 3:19-21.

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