

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

Have you ever gone spelunking? That is cave exploring. Or possibly taken a cave tour where they bring you to the furthest reaches of the cave and then turn off the lights. As you sit in the darkness and hold out your hand in front of you, it is then that you notice you can't even see your fingers wiggling. At least that is my experience...

[The Darkness]

You see, as a kid, I was in the Boy Scouts. And in the Boy Scouts, we would go on campouts all around the surrounding countryside of our small town of Hermann, MO. Mostly on the various farms and private land held by relatives of the scouts. We made it a point to at least go camping once a month, if not more.

One of our favorite locations was southwest of Hermann at a small cattle farm that included a large section of forested hilly Ozark terrain. This was one of our favorites, because, not only was it a good place to build outdoor survival shelters, but it also contained a natural undeveloped cave.

To get to this cave we had to walk up the hill from where we normally camped. Then at the foot of a small cliff, we would walk along its edge until we found a crack in the rock.

This crack, looking like a section of cliff that had broken off and slid a foot or two down the hill from the main cliff, was not much. But it was here that we climbed down to the bottom and where we'd see that the cliff itself didn't go all the way to the ground. Instead, there was an opening that allowed us to crawl back into the cave.

Once we crawled on our hands and knees for about 10 or 12 feet the ceiling would go up and we would be in a medium sized entry chamber. The ceiling here was a little over 5 feet, so the younger scouts could sometimes stand, but most of us had to at least hunch over a little bit.

However, from this chamber, we could crawl under another ledge and go into the main room. In this main room, we could stand easily and even reach our arms up

without being able to touch the ceiling. There were a few stalactites and stalagmites, but mostly just smooth damp limestone that would glisten as our flashlights and headlamps shone on them.

There was really only one shaft that came off of the main room and another smaller shaft that came off of the entry chamber. We would go into these shafts as far as we could, but we never did find another room. So, this wasn't a large cave, but it was an undeveloped and un-commercialized cave all the same. That being said, after exploring in the light we would often play in the darkness.

In fact, the darkness was the main draw of this cave. It is hard to “truly” experience complete darkness anywhere else.

In your bedroom at night with the blinds pulled over the windows, there is still almost always some sort of light from a clock, a cell phone charger, or possibly a night light. Given enough time your eyes adjust to the dimness and you can at least see shapes and silhouettes.

However, in this cave, once we turned out the lights the world would vanish. We couldn't even see our own hand waved in front of our own face. We would no longer be standing in a cave, but in a black abyss, formless and empty.

It was during these times of complete darkness that some of the older scouts would bully and play jokes on the younger innocent scouts.

I'll let your imaginations come up with the things that took place. Imagination was really the only thing limiting those bullies. However, eventually, someone would turn the lights back on and expose the works of those scouts.

At the dawn of the light, the bullies would yell at the other scouts and tell them to turn the lights back off. Those bullies “loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. (Jn 3:19–20).

[*God's Light*]

And this is the judgment: The Light of the World has stepped down into darkness.¹

Jesus has come to earth to be our light. He is the light of God sent to reveal and expose our wickedness. The wickedness that we do when we think no one can see. When we are

¹ John 3:19 & “Here I am to Worship,” by Michael Smith

focused on our own will and desires and ignore how our actions hurt our neighbor or how our actions grieve God.

Jesus, the Light of the World, shows us what it means to live in the light. He shows us, through God's Word and Commandments, that to live in the light is to live a life of service to our neighbor. To love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But we have loved the darkness rather than the light.

In fear, over our sins, we have fled back to the darkness hoping to keep the evil things that we have done hidden.

We fear what our spouse, our kids, our friends, our neighbor would think if they only knew what we have done.

We fear allowing our works to be exposed to the light. And in that fear, we hold onto the burden of our sin.

We love the darkness rather than the light.

But Jesus, the light of the world, has stepped down into the darkness of our sin. He brings to light the things that we have done and says to you and me, "Repent and turn to the light, return to the Kingdom of God." He doesn't condemn us, but instead, he forgives us.

[*God's Will*]

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned" (Jn 3:16-18).

God's Will is that we believe his words. That we trust and believe in the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. That we believe and are baptized, because:

Through baptism, we can see the light of forgiveness.

Through baptism, we have been given faith in the Son of God and have eternal life.

Through baptism, we have been placed into the light of salvation.

Therefore, when you step out of the light and into the darkness of your sin. Remember your baptism. Remember "whose" you are and you will see the light shining from afar.

Then in repentance and faith come back to the light. Expose your sin to the Light of the World and let God remove your burden.

God forgives your sin because Jesus has destroyed the darkness of your heart with his light.

Not because of anything you have done, but because God loved you. He wanted to lift the burden of your sin, so he sent his son. He sent Jesus to take the burden of your sin upon himself. To die and be forsaken by God because of the sin placed upon him. To take the punishment for your sins.

Because God's will was for Jesus to die in your place so that his light of forgiveness could shine into your hearts. To restore you to him. Because, "whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God" (Jn 3:21).

In your Baptism, the Light of God has opened up your eyes. As redeemed and forgiven sinners, I urge you, brothers and sisters, to live in the light and let your works be clearly seen. Clearly seen to be done in love as an agent of God. Amen.

"Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." (Heb 13:20-21)
