

WHY DID JESUS HAVE ENEMIES?

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people 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. (John 3:19–20)



JESUS OF NAZARETH, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, and the friend of sinners, had many enemies. Pick up and read any of the Gospels and you will quickly see the theme of conflict emerging and stamping itself upon the scene.

Begin with Matthew's gospel and very soon you will read of the scheming of a bloodthirsty tyrant, Herod the Great, who seeks to snuff out the life of the infant Jesus. Mark tells us early in his record that "the Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (Mark 3:6). Even the cozily familiar birth narratives of Luke contain Simeon's prophecy that the child Jesus was "appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed" (Luke 2:34). In John's gospel the theme of enmity is so prevalent that the author stops and dwells on it in his prologue:

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:10–11)

Moreover, the conversations between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, which dominate the central chapters of John's gospel, invariably culminated in the sharpest of disputes. Above all, see how all four Gospels devote such copious space to the sufferings and death of Jesus. His life ended in abominable cruelty, which the gospel writers recorded in considerable detail.

Before we begin to look at the opponents who confronted Jesus throughout the course of his life and ministry, we need to ask a most important question: why did Jesus have enemies? What caused this hostility and hatred? We need to answer this question correctly from the outset of our investigation.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Our three young children enjoy watching cartoons. However, they invariably become quite agitated whenever there is an onscreen argument between two characters. "Who's right?" they will ask. They need to know who is in the right and who is in the wrong. They feel it necessary to engage in a childish form of "conflict resolution." Today conflict resolution is big business across the world. In a variety of professional and commercial fields, considerable resources are expended in achieving agreement between disputing parties, aiming ideally for a "win-win" solution that will be to everyone's satisfaction. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) seeks to resolve disputes between employers and trade unions. Although methods of conflict resolution vary across different cultures, the concept itself is a widespread one.

Now imagine that a team of specialists in conflict resolution were to be hired. Their brief: examine the evidence presented by the New Testament and seek to answer the question, "Why did Jesus have enemies?" They would quickly discover that a wide range of groups were gathered together in common cause against Jesus. The apostles of the early church listed

some of these parties: “both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel” (Acts 4:27). We have already seen that the Pharisees and the Herodians, two contrasting sects in Israel, held counsel against Jesus. What conclusions could be drawn from the observation that so many contrasting groups were opposed to this one man, Jesus of Nazareth? Surely the problem lay fairly and squarely with him. He had a habit of alienating people and often seemed to be in a minority of one. Might he not have been well-advised to address this issue as a matter of urgent importance? The way things look from a distance, a “win-win” solution would seem out of the question.

However, the argument presented in this chapter, and throughout this book, is that we have no need to call in today’s conflict resolution specialists because Jesus himself explains why these conflicts exist. He himself is the specialist. In John 3:19–20, towards the end of his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus issues the pronouncement that is quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people 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.

With these words, Jesus delivers the divine verdict upon the state of the whole human race. It is a verdict of resounding guilt, a conclusion of comprehensive condemnation. In verse 19, the word *judgment* means the divine ruling, God’s pronouncement. It could equally, and more pungently, be translated “this is the condemnation.” The reason for this enmity between Jesus and his opponents is then concisely summarized—people “loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

When Jesus talks about light and darkness—and in John’s writings these are very recurrent themes—he is speaking in a way that is wholly consistent with the rest of the Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments. The Bible has a knack of confronting us with a stark set of contrasts that is very much at odds with our contemporary view of morality. The categories of right and wrong, of good and evil, are nonnegotiable as far as the Bible is concerned. While today there are some actions that almost everyone in our society rightly regards as wicked—for example, cruelty to young children, institutional racism, and drug dealing—for the most part people are reluctant to speak in such absolute terms. Moreover, different generations have differing views as to what ought to be condemned and what ought to be condoned.

The Bible is the authoritative disclosure of the mind of God, and therefore it never shrinks from making clear pronouncements. Right at the beginning of human history Adam and Eve were faced with the exclusive choice between good and evil. They could obey God, which would lead to life, or they could disobey him, which would result in death. There was no middle ground, and there were no other considerations to bear in mind. It was either obedience or disobedience. In Deuteronomy 28 we read the long list of God’s blessings for obedience and his curses for disobedience. There is nothing that falls between these two categories. In the books of the kings of Israel and Judah we see that there were a number of kings who did “what was right in the eyes of the Lord” whereas others did “what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

This is the general pattern of Scripture: there is light and there is darkness, there is life and there is death, there is heaven and there is hell. Therefore this passage in John 3 is wholly in keeping with this biblical pattern of dealing in contrasts. See how clear and exclusive the division is made in

verses 20 and 21: on the one hand there are those who come to the light, and on the other there are those who do *not* come to the light. There is nothing in between, no middle ground, no sitting on the fence.

Light and darkness are surely among the most obvious contrasts known to all of us, unless we have never been able to see. Light and darkness are opposites of which we are all deeply conscious from an early age. Moreover, they quickly take on added associations and suggestions; they become considerably more than the mere physical responses of our retinas. Children who are often afraid of the dark ask their parents to leave their bedroom door ajar so that some light will be admitted. As they grow up, light and darkness take on different, more mature associations, but the pattern continues. Light increasingly becomes linked with joy, gladness, all that is pleasant and lovely. Darkness signifies depression, gloom, sorrow, and despair. It is well known that Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) afflicts many people in countries like the United Kingdom, where the winters are long and dark. It is possible to purchase devices that create the appearance of sunlight in the dark mornings of early January; there is a market for such gadgets because so many people find the darkness oppressive. Further, light speaks of knowledge and understanding; darkness of ignorance and superstition.¹ Our conversations abound with colloquial expressions that illustrate these wider associations of the themes of light and darkness. “Her face lit up,” we say, or “A dark mood came over him.”

In Scripture the associations of light and darkness are amplified considerably more, so that there are the clearest moral and spiritual meanings attached to them. What is suggested by the human psyche is grounded in the revelation of divine character. For light is a major theme of the Bible. It is the first creation of God and the subject of God’s first recorded words (Gen. 1:3). We see that the presence of God

with his people in the wilderness was symbolized by the burning light (Lev. 24:2). A great light was prophesied by Isaiah to a people who dwelt in darkness (Isa. 9:2), a passage often read at Christmas.

Ultimately light symbolizes the presence of God himself and darkness symbolizes his absence. The apostle John brings this subject to a head in his first letter: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). For this reason, light in the Bible is always very closely related to truth. Where there is light, there is the capacity to see what is real and true. The nineteenth-century Scottish Bible commentator, John Brown of Edinburgh, wrote that light is “truth, calculated to make men wise, and good, and happy.”² But darkness is the very opposite of these things: it prefers “ignorance to knowledge, error to truth, and sin to holiness.”³

LIGHT AND DARKNESS IN CONFLICT

There is a further, consequent aspect of light and darkness that we need to consider. They are not only opposites; they are opponents. The conflict between darkness and light is strong, violent, and bitter. The apostle Paul asked the Corinthians, “what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14) Darkness seeks to overcome light. The late New Testament scholar Leon Morris wrote that “the strife between good and evil is no tepid affair, but one that elicits the bitter hatred of the forces of evil.”⁴

As we have seen, light and darkness are recurring and powerful features of John’s gospel, and so is the conflict between them. The light that is being spoken of in our passage is Jesus Christ himself. John has already said as much in the prologue to his gospel. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:9). Yet no sooner has John told us about this true light than he goes on to tell us about how this light has been rejected.

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John is describing people who are walking around in darkness when the light is already shining all around them. Later in the same gospel, in 8:12 and in 9:5, Jesus refers to himself as “the light of the world.” Both these passages are located within contexts of bitter opposition, even hatred, from his countrymen.

This then is the point: Jesus Christ is in the midst of his people, showing himself by all his words and actions to be the true light, but the darkness of the people’s hearts means that they will not and cannot receive him as such. Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of light, of truth, knowledge, and love, but the vast majority of the people with whom he has come into contact have rejected him. They still do so today; and today, as two thousand years ago, this results in bitter conflict.

ACTORS, NOT SPECTATORS

This is not mythology; this is not fiction. Jesus’ words about the conflict between light and darkness are a present-day commentary on the natural state of the human soul. The Word of God always and directly addresses the conscience of those who are reading or hearing it. We are not in some kind of spectators’ gallery looking on at an evil world. We are all implicated; it is the evil in *us* that contributes to the evil of the world.

The trouble is that we are used to living in a spectator society. Many of the great dramas that intrigue us take place among people we have never met and are never likely to meet, or even among people who never existed. We may be fascinated by a television soap opera, or we may be caught up in real-life events going on in the public arenas of sport or politics, but the effects are the same. We sit in the closeted safety of our own living rooms and state our opinions at a safe distance. But if we bring

this mind-set with us to the Word of God, then we are guilty of a fatal error. We are participators, not spectators, in the unfolding events of this present world. We can't press the pause button or eject the DVD from its player. Neither can the DVD have its contents deleted. The DVD is about every one of us.

This is the terribly solemn fact—men and women are by nature on the dark side of the plot. They have taken up rebellious arms against the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. Jesus tells us plainly that men's deeds are evil. Our deeds are evil because they spring from evil natures.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, put together by the leading British churchmen of the mid-seventeenth century, asks in Question 18, "Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?" The answer given is that "the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, *and the corruption of his whole nature*, which is commonly called Original Sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it" (italics mine).

This is the cause of the judgment, the condemnation, of which Jesus is speaking: original sin, which includes the corruption of the whole human nature. Troubled Job posed the question "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" and answered it, "There is not one" (Job 14:4). Man's whole nature is corrupted. He is unclean through and through; every aspect of his nature is both guilty and polluted. Why is all humanity affected in this way? It is because our very first ancestors chose disobedience rather than obedience. Adam, by his deliberate actions in disobeying God, introduced the poison of rebellion into the human race, and every one of us inherits this original sin. Like a polluting chemical introduced into a stream in the high Andes, the vast Amazonian basin of the whole human race is utterly contaminated. Not one of us is exempted. A toddler throws tantrums and acts out of pure

selfishness not only because of his immaturity, but primarily because of his sin.

LIGHT SHOWS UP EVIL FOR WHAT IT IS

Jesus speaks of the way people love darkness “because their works are evil.” A sinful, corrupted nature will give rise to evil deeds. Then in John 3:20 Jesus goes on to show that people hate the light because it shows up their evil deeds for what they are. The New Testament commentator William Hendriksen likens this behavior to that of “loathsome insects that hide themselves beneath logs and stones, always preferring the darkness, and terribly frightened whenever they are exposed to the light.”⁵ Perhaps you have lifted up stones in your own garden and seen this for yourself. Bugs and grubs of all kinds start scurrying and burrowing away for the comfort of darkness. The light blinds and terrifies them, but under the cover of thick darkness they are secure and can go on being “loathsome insects.”

This is stark and accurate biblical psychology. By nature people hate and fear God’s holiness, the brightness and purity of his moral law. Every encounter with God’s holiness makes sinful man want to shrink away in fear, shame, and terror. A life that is characterized by sin, whether that sin is open or secret, will by its very nature want to run away and hide from God.

Even at a merely human level it is a most fearful thing not only to know that I *am* guilty, but to discover that someone in legitimate and powerful authority *knows* that I am guilty. Perhaps you are familiar with that flushed sensation of desperate shame—like hot pins and needles in your head—that comes when you know that your wrong actions have been found out. Fallen human instinct dictates that we flee and hide from such a situation. We are most reluctant to expose our misdemeanors to people in authority because we hate that sense of shame.

If this is true in human relationships, how much more solemn this must be in the sight of God! This is just what motivated

Adam once he had sinned and knew that God was present in the Garden. He fled from God, he tried to hide from him, he covered up his nakedness. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Hitherto, Adam and Eve had enjoyed God's presence. They were created for joyful fellowship with God and had no idea what shame was. But as soon as they sinned, their entire relationship with God—and with one another—was upset, distorted, and characterized by shame and fear.

This history of Adam and Eve and its consequences for the entire human race set the scene for the ministry of Jesus in Israel two thousand years ago. Jesus spoke about light and darkness on a number of other occasions. The following passage has a strong relationship to the verses in John 3 that we have been considering:

No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. (Luke 11:33–35)

Jesus uses the familiar picture of a lamp to demonstrate the meaning of his own presence in the world. What is a lamp for? It is for enabling the occupants of the house to see what is in the house or room where the lamp is situated. The lamp should be located where the people are found. This imagery stands the test of time, of long centuries and millennia; it really makes no difference whether we are talking about a candle or an electric lightbulb. If you were to put the light in the basement while there was no one there, or under a basket or bucket, you would be wasting the light, acting both illogically and foolishly.

Imagine a family living in an average-sized house, paying a substantial amount each month for electricity. And then imagine that the lights they switched on in the living room and kitchen

were always covered with bowls and buckets so that they could not be seen. The scenario would be absolutely absurd. People would be bumping around blindly, unable to see all the good and useful things in the house, endangering life and limb, health and safety, while they could simply uncover these lights so that all this inconvenience and danger could be avoided. Now we can see the point of this parable that Jesus told. The people he was contending with were extinguishing the light that they had been given. The light was among them; it was right in front of them; it had never shone so brightly—but they were covering it up, obscuring it. “The true light, which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9) was in the world, “and people loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19).

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

Then Jesus develops the figure of speech somewhat in Luke 11:34. In case we failed to understand it the first time around he brings it closer to home and applies it more personally to the people. He moves from a lamp to the human eye, “your eye.” What is the eye? It is the bodily organ that admits light. The eye performs the function of a lamp as far as our bodies are concerned, and therefore the eye guides the rest of the body in everything that it does. Now imagine a slightly different situation. You are in a room that is dark and dim, and you find it hard to make out its contents. What might the problem be? There are various explanations. Maybe the light is not working properly; the bulb has gone, the fuse has blown, or the power is cut. Or maybe there never was any artificial light in the room at all. Or perhaps it is the middle of the night, or possibly daytime but for some reason it is dark outside—there could be a heavy thunderstorm, or even a total solar eclipse.

But then suppose that you have carefully eliminated all these possibilities one by one. There can be only one explanation remaining. Your sight is failing you. Think how disabling it

would be for any of us if our sight were rapidly taken away! The control, the freedom, the mastery we usually exercise over our surroundings would be removed. Although blind and partially sighted people may, in time and by various helpful means, be enabled to adjust very well to their disability, the fact remains that our capacity to function effectively in this world depends to a great extent on our sight. What if those of us who need glasses or contact lenses suddenly lost these accessories, or they became unavailable? Driving and many other activities that require excellent vision would be impossible.

We need to ask these important questions again: Why did the majority of people in Jesus' day resist and oppose him, ultimately plotting and carrying out his death? Why do men and women today shut their hearts and minds to the gospel of Jesus Christ and say they are not interested? The answers to these two questions are one and the same. People love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil, and therefore they willfully shut out the light.

Although they will come up with all sorts of excuses why they do not want to be Christians, in the end it is only the Lord himself who gives the correct verdict. Why do people not want to follow Jesus Christ? Is it simply that they have not heard the gospel, and that if they did hear about Jesus they would immediately love him and follow him with all their hearts? Experience proves that they will not. They will say that they do not believe in Jesus or the gospel; certainly they will not submit to Jesus as their exclusive Lord and Savior.

Some will say that we simply lack proof. This, essentially, was the plea of the famous English atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). There is insufficient evidence. God has not made himself clear enough. He should try to do a better job of convincing us. In a world with such a number of different religions there are simply far too many rival claims, and we cannot know what to believe or whom to believe. We could add

to this the great question of human origins which, for many, appears to cast doubt on the opening chapters of the Bible. The authority of the God of the Bible seems to be undermined as soon as we turn to its opening pages. And everyone surely knows that it is religion of various kinds that causes strife, war, and persecution—look at history, look at modern conflicts in the Middle East and, until recently, in Northern Ireland. On and on we could go; if there were a good God, he would not allow all the suffering that goes on. Therefore people refuse to believe in him.

Many of us are used to hearing protests of this kind. What they all have in common is that they say there is something defective in Christianity itself, that the claims of the Christian faith are weak, inadequate, contradictory, or untenable; or that Christians are ignorant, naive, perhaps bigoted and harsh; or even that God—if he exists—is unfair or unkind. All this can leave Christians with a sense of defeat and deflation. They run out of arguments, they feel squashed and wonder how they will ever persuade unbelievers of the truth. The unbelieving world says, “You Christians haven’t done a good enough job of convincing us—come up with some better arguments.”

But we need to say it yet again: the Lord Jesus Christ completely reverses the situation. The boot is on the other foot; the fault lies not with Jesus or with his message, but with the people themselves. That is why he speaks as he does in these verses. The problem is not with Jesus or the gospel but with the human heart. Why do so many people, then as now, reject Jesus and refuse to believe in him? Because of something lacking in him or in his message? No—because of their own dark and sinful hearts. That is the verdict.

CONCLUSION

We began with the question “Why did Jesus have enemies?” and we have reached the conclusion that we are all, by reason

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of belonging to Adam's fallen race, Jesus' enemies. We need to see the universal extent of this condemnation. The whole world is the arena in which this light shines, and it is the whole of fallen humanity that is implicated in this charge of rejecting the light.

So this book is about Jesus' enemies, but it is written so that readers, who may be discovering for the first time that they *are* enemies, might learn how Jesus summons us to become his friends.