

Truths that Transform
Shine Like the Stars in the Heavens

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 according to his good purpose. 14 Do everything without complaining or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe 16 as you hold out the word of life-- in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. 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.

Have you seen the stars lately? I am not talking about movie stars, sports stars or pop music stars. I am talking about the stars in the sky, the stars God has placed into the night sky to dazzle us with his glory.

Think of that time when you were camping or traveling in some remote area. You looked up at the stars in the night sky and were overwhelmed at their vastness and beauty. Our galaxy, the Milky Way, contains a hundred billion stars! And the universe contains more than a hundred billion galaxies! That's a hundred billion times a hundred billion stars!

Not too many years ago, my wife, Sue and I, camped on the northern end of the Door Peninsula in Wisconsin. The Door Peninsula is that part of Wisconsin that sticks out into Lake Michigan. So, we were really out in the middle of Lake Michigan. There were no city lights around. The sky was so dark! And night after night – oh my – the stars! We and many campers would sit up at night with heads craned looking up. I've never seen the Milky Way so brilliant across the night sky, or as many shooting stars. It was beautiful and breathtaking! How many stars are up there!

The reason we see the stars is because they stand out in the darkness. In a similar way God says through Paul in the Bible that

we are to shine like stars in a world of darkness. God calls this darkness *“a crooked and depraved generation.”* Those are really ugly words -- *“a crooked and depraved generation”!* We have more electric lights than ever, and yet we live in darkness. The darkness we live in is *“a crooked and depraved generation”*.

This darkness is in the hearts and souls and minds of people. This darkness is in words and actions and pride of people. This darkness shows itself differently from one generation to the next, but each generation is just as dark as the next. 80 years ago the darkness showed itself in places called death camps – Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, and others. The horrors committed there were unspeakable. The world was shocked at the dark evil that humans are capable of doing to one another.

60 and 70 years ago, darkness took the form of lynchings and the torture of blacks in America just for the color of their skin.

40 and 50 years ago, darkness appeared in legalizing the murder of babies in the womb, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, the free sex movement, and the dissolution of the family.

The next generation majored in extreme materialism. Cocaine and crack and opioids ruined lives with addiction. Fear of Islamic extremism gripped us.

Today, pornography is everywhere. Human trafficking is in every community, and fentanyl overdoses are out of control. Children are killed in their homes by the stray bullets of drive-by-shootings. Mass shootings at shopping malls and schools are an every-week event. And sexual perversion of all kinds is not only permitted, but publicly celebrated and displayed to children as a virtue.

A crooked and depraved generation? Yes! It is. We are. Its no exaggeration. And our response as Christians? We must speak the truth, even if it calls sin a sin. And we – you and I – are included in that bunch. We are sinners, just as guilty as the rest.

So we as Christians, must never be judgmental. Yes, we must speak the truth – God’s truth – about the sin, the crookedness, the

depravity around us. At the same time we must remember that is in us. We are in no condition to act holier than thou.

Instead of feeling smug and right when I see the darkness – the sinful darkness we live in – I find myself feeling just sad. Instead of hating people who curse God and hate Christianity, I'm filled with pity.

How awful it must be to not only choose for yourself some form of LGBTQ+ perversion, but even with crowds of people waving flags and cheering, to still feel so threatened by one person disagreeing that they call that person racist, a bigot, and consider dissenting speech violence against their person. How awful it must be to need to have no self-limitations, no constraints on who they love or how, that they are willing to even kill children in order to live so recklessly!

These are pictures of people who are hurting. People are empty! People are searching. They are looking for answers inside of themselves, and finding none. People engage in perversion looking for some peace and meaning inside, but they are finding the opposite. The violence, and hatred, and vitriol, displays the pain of looking inside oneself for answers and only finding the darkness of a sinful human heart. How awful and empty that must feel! I pity that!

Does our world need God? Psalm 36:9 talks about God when it says, ***“in your light do we see light.”*** Only in God is there light, not darkness. The “enlightened” are not people who embrace the latest version of “wokeness” or any other man-made solutions. Light, understanding, truth, hope, forgiveness, peace – are only found in God. How everyone needs Him!

John, the very close friend and disciple of Jesus, was moved by the Holy Spirit to write for us: ***“God IS Light. And in Him is no darkness at all.”*** God is pure goodness and love and meaning and peace and joy. In Him is no darkness at all, John tells us. This is God's Word to us. True! The answer all people need – the one and only answer to the brokenness and depravity of our lives is ultimately found in God.

Jesus talked a lot about light and darkness. He said that He is “the Light of the world.” Jesus used this imagery to make sure

that we understand that He is separate and distinct from the other kind of power at work in this world. That other power the Bible calls the power of darkness. This is the power of evil.

But Jesus has transferred you from darkness to Light by a gift of His love. God took you out of darkness and Jesus, the Light of the World, filled you with His wonderful light of forgiveness and hope and love. Jesus won this for you by giving His own life. He died for you on the cross as the only innocent person so He could pay for all the sins you've ever committed.

Shining by God's grace

You and I have a lot in common with the stars when you think about it. The stars in the sky had nothing to do with becoming stars. God made them and put them into place. They didn't work to *become* stars. They were made by God's goodness to BE stars. Their job is just simply to shine – to give glory to God who made them.

Our God has taken you and taken me, and made something of our lives. You and I have the power of darkness inside of us. We are sinners. We deserve to be cut off from God forever in hell.

But, like the stars, God has chosen you by his grace to believe in Jesus as your Savior and to live your life for him at this moment and this place in history. You had nothing to do with God's choosing you, and loving you. You didn't work to be saved by Jesus or to become a child of God. Like the stars, our course of life is known, and planned for us by our Father in heaven. God works in us according to his pleasure, his will and his purpose. Your God has planned how your life will shine for him and radiate his glory.

Listen to Paul's words to us today: ***“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.”*** He calls on us work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Notice that it doesn't say, “Work *FOR* your salvation” or “Work *AT* your salvation.” You can't earn or deserve forgiveness and heaven. You aren't good enough. Neither am I. Nobody is. Only Jesus worked *FOR* salvation. He won it all on the cross with His life and death. And He

gives it as a free gift to you. So, He calls on you to “work it out” that is, to let it out, to let it show in your life. Let the light of Jesus grace and love show in how you live among people who are not Christian.

Like stars that radiate light, you reflect light that comes from Jesus. You let out the love and compassion of Jesus. You show it in how you live your life, so others will become curious and want to learn about what Jesus has done for them.

And people NEED you. People who live in darkness are caught by the evil one, searching inside themselves for meaning but coming up empty. They NEED you and me to let the light of God’s love in Jesus to shine through you to reach them.

Do any of you eat garlic? I don’t. But I’m told that if you eat a lot of garlic, you will smell like garlic. It will come out of your body. Your sweat will smell like garlic as it comes out of your pores. When you are a Christian the love and freedom, and grace and joy, and hope you have in Christ begins to come out of you, almost out of your pores, in everything you do out of love for the Lord.

So we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done.” We want God to help us to let his grace and mercy OUT of us - to shine like stars.

Oh, please don’t get me wrong. I am not suggesting that this means putting on a fake “smiley face.” God is not telling us to act happy all the time. No. Be real. God is simply telling us to be who we are in Christ, and let other people see how thankful we are for our many blessings in Jesus.

SHINE: Reflect Christ.

Another way to say it is: shine like the stars by walking your talk. Don’t just SAY you believe in Jesus. Really follow Him. Do what He did. Too many people have turned away from Christ because of our hypocrisy. Your life must match up with your testimony. What’s the old saying? “Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying.” You must back up your witness with your life.

How do you do that? How do I live in a way that puts my relationship with Jesus on display? Well, Paul gives us some real practical ways.

SHINE: No complaining or arguing

He starts with a doozy when he teaches us to shine like stars: no complaining or arguing. Verse 14 says: *“Do everything without complaining or arguing.”* Philippians 2:14 Not do *SOME* things without complaining or arguing. Not do *MOST* things without complaining or arguing. Do **EVERYTHING** without complaining or arguing. That pretty much rules it out. Any complainers here today? All of us are! So let’s memorize this verse! *“Do everything without complaining or arguing.”* Philippians 2:14

That word “complaining” actually means “murmuring, whispering complaints, muttering under your breath.” So, friends, even rolling your eyeballs as if to say, “Boy are you ever stupid!” is out of place. Don’t give off an attitude of looking down on others, but talk to them with sincere respect.

Let me put it this way: God sent his Son Jesus to die for you. He forgave all your sins. He gives you his Holy Spirit to live within you and to guide you. He gives you new purpose and direction in life. He hears all your prayers and answers according to his wisdom, power and love. If all that is true – and it is – should we grumble, whine, and complain?

Complaining makes you unhappy, and it makes everyone around you unhappy. Do you really want to back up your witness with your life? Then do everything without complaining or arguing. People will notice the difference. You’ll shine a lot brighter!

SHINE: Stand out from the world

A second practical way to back up your witness with your life is to, stand out from the world. Verse 15 says: *“... so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.”* Philippians 2:15

God calls on us to do to be blameless and pure in a corrupt and crooked generation. Obviously we can never reach perfection in this life, but we want to live our lives out of love for the Lord in a way

that people who are still in darkness will not have any reason to think you are a phony, a hypocrite who only talks religious without living it. We are only pure and blameless before God through Jesus blood that washes us clean, but we want the people living in darkness to see our lives shine like stars.

At home, at work, with your neighbors, people know you are a Christian, right? So, don't use the bad language they are using. Don't build yourself up by putting others down. Don't gossip behind anyone's back. Someone is sick or in need, ask if you can pray for them. The bottom line is: live up to what you have been given in Christ so others will say, "I want that peace and that joy and that forgiveness that you have found in Jesus."

Too often we try to blend into the world around us. Too often we conform to the world around us instead of let God work within us to transform us to be more like Jesus.

Here at St. Paul, one way we are working on standing out as different is by our love for one another. People today are so mean and hateful to one another. Imagine the attraction of finding a community of people who love and care and pray for one another? That's what we want to be. That's what God calls us to be! What a welcome change to the dark selfish world around us!

Let's "shine like stars" in the midst of a dark sky. We are in the world, but not of the world. Can you imagine a night sky without any stars at all? That's what this world would be like if as Christians, we simply blend in with the world. Let's stand out from the darkness all around.

SHINE: Speak of the Presence, Pardon, and Power of Jesus.

The third practical way we reflect Jesus, Paul says, is to hold forth the word of life to others. *"... as you hold out the word of life Philippians 2:16*

The gospel is the word of life, and Jesus Christ is also the Word of life. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone Romans 1:16

How? Speak of the Presence, Pardon, and Power of Jesus.

Jesus came down to be a real human, and He is alive and with you always. Have there been low times in your life, times filled with troubles, sickness, loneliness, or pain when the only thing that carried you through was knowing that God is with you? Tell others about how precious the presence of Jesus is to you.

Maybe you've messed up in a big way. Lost your integrity, or your job, or your family. You carried guilt. What difference does it make to you that Jesus gives you pardon full and free? He died to win complete forgiveness. He has set you free from the chains of your mistakes. Tell those stories.

Jesus rose on the 3rd day and His power is alive in you. He has the power to transform lives from addiction to freedom; from self-centeredness to genuine love for others; from needing others' approval to secure in God's love. How has Jesus changed you? Tell those stories to others also.

Our heavenly Father placed the stars in the sky exactly where he wants them to shine. Psalm 19 tells us that they shine for His glory – to praise God. *“the heavens declare the glory of God.”* We miss it in our English translations, but in the original Hebrew, the action words are participles, which means they express continuous action: *“The heavens ARE DECLARING the glory of God; the skies ARE PROCLAIMING the work of his hands.”* Psalm 19:1 This is ongoing. Everyday. All the time shining to brighten the darkness.

Friends, everyday you wake up, everyday for the rest of your life, shine like the stars in the heavens. Burn so brightly that people see the light of Jesus' love in you, and they want Him too.

And I hope we would all agree and say, "I will. I will. I will."