

The Term “Darkness” in Scripture

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This is a discussion of the term “darkness” as found in Scripture. Readers are encouraged to consider the context in which the word is found, and in most cases, that analysis will give understanding as to the intended meaning of the term.

Where/when did darkness originate?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep**, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

Genesis 1:1-5 NASB (Emphasis added)

I looked on the earth, and behold, **it was formless and void; And to the heavens, and they had no light.**

Jeremiah 4:23 NASB (Emphasis added)

Zowie, scholars love to debate this formless-void-darkness issue. What is Genesis teaching? Allow me to list three possibles for consideration and be aware there are others.

1. Creation was completed in stages so perhaps God’s starting point was described by Moses, the writer, in the best terms he could fathom.
2. Others believe a gap occurred between verse 1 and verse 2, and they define the formless-void-darkness as the impact of Satan’s rebellion after he was evicted from heaven.
3. F. B Meyer describes the darkness as a backdrop which would serve to vividly bring the stages of God’s creation to the forefront for display. I love this idea.

ALL great painters and poets whose works are of the first order have availed themselves of the force of contrast—that there should be a dark background to set forth some beautiful and radiant object. The Bible excels in its use of this striking method of laying emphasis. In the very first chapter the world is described as without form and void, whilst darkness broods over the face of the deep, and against that, as the background, is the creation of light, leaping across the void, and upon the background of chaos arises the cosmos of order and beauty.

Meyer, F. B. Samuel the Prophet. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. 1910, p 196.

God does not reveal anything before this creation moment and any theories people hold are mere speculation. Genesis 1:1 does mark the moment when Eternal God began human history, and His purpose in creating the earth is clearly given in Isaiah’s writings.

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (**He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it and did not create it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited**), "I am the LORD, and there is none else.

Isaiah 45:18 NASB (Emphasis added)

God created both light and darkness for the benefit of humans.

Scope this use of the word in this context to refer to the physical conditions caused by the sun disappearing over the horizon. Darkness happens. Nothing mystical or spiritual about it. The earth rotates so that some of its occupants no longer see the sun for a period of time. Meanwhile occupants on the other side of the rotating orb bask in the sun's warmth. And the conditions shift on a twenty-four-hour cycle just as God intended.

"I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. **I am the LORD, and there is no other, The One forming light and creating darkness**, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.

Isaiah 45:5-7 NASB (Emphasis added)

The creation of darkness and light gave rise to the concept of time. Though God is eternal, humans accomplish more and function best with an awareness that the number of days allocated to each of us is a finite sum. As my mother admonished me often, "You better make hay while the sun is shining!"

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

Genesis 1:3-5 NASB

Within that backdrop of darkness and light God added celestial entities. Here's a puzzler – according to the record of Genesis light existed (Genesis 1:3) before the creation of the sun (Genesis 1:14). Can we accept that God Himself is light, a fact He reveals to us more than fifty times in His Word?

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:14-18 NASB

Isaiah mentions "treasures of darkness," and we would do well to pause and consider some of the advantages that darkness brings.

"I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.

Darkness offers a perfect time to rest.

I understand why Grandpa went to bed early and awoke before daybreak. That habit provided the greatest use of his time since his house and outbuildings had few lights. He worked when he could see and slept when he could not. I gave thanks on my visits to his home that the two-seat facility down the path from the back porch had a single naked bulb hanging inside to serve as a beacon when one had to go.

Most of us set out to accomplish much and work to become efficient in using our time, but we also realize that we wear out quickly without rest. We need down time. The darkness of night represents the perfect time for recharging our batteries. Why not get some needed sleep, a blessing God the Creator offers to us?

Darkness helps remove distractions so we can focus on God's majesty.

Ever try to teach a child to pray? We urge them to fold their hands, bow their heads, and close their eyes? Why? To remove distractions, of course. Rare are the daylight minutes where nothing vies for my attention. I've formed a habit of rising early to invest time with God before my day begins. In those dark hours of the morning silence surrounds me as I study.

Pause and consider the night sky with its moon and stars, and on special moments, even a shooting star. God had purpose in arranging our environment in this way. During the night, with the distractions lessened, we can better focus on Him. David, outside all night caring for sheep, took comfort in that night sky and the message those twinkling lights communicated.

For the choir director. A Psalm of David. The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard.

Psalms 19:1-3 NASB

Have you tried counting the stars? Does their sheer number overwhelm? What about images from the various space-based telescopes shared by NASA? Who knew so much we cannot see with the naked eye could propel our curiosity...and our praise?

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him?

Psalms 8:3-4 NASB

Darkness tests our faith.

We've all wrestled with issues that drive away sleep. We toss, turn and search our minds for answers only to become aware of how loudly the clock ticks. God does not need night vision goggles. Grab on to this truth...

Darkness and light are the same to God.

Ponder that point next time a life challenge is vacuuming away your sleep.

Even the darkness is not dark to You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You.

Psalms 139:12 NASB

Another related and very encouraging truth follows.

God never slumbers or sleeps

God never sleeps. He made darkness for our benefit, not for His own.

He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber.

Psalms 121:3 NASB

Behold, He who keeps Israel Will neither slumber nor sleep.

Psalms 121:4 NASB

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable.

Isaiah 40:28 NASB

Why should I toss and turn if God is awake? Who is better qualified to resolve the dilemma? Me or Him? Why not put faith into practice, rest my mind on Him, close my eyes and snooze while He does His thing?

A Song of Ascents, of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, To retire late, To eat the bread of painful labors; For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.

Psalms 127:1-2 NASB

Darkness is used to describe a man's ignorance of God.

The cartoon creators of days past used a lightbulb above a character's head to indicate the birth of a clue or an idea. The word darkness is often used in Scripture to paint an image of those stumbling about with no clue of God, His expectations, or His love for us.

Therefore justice is far from us, And righteousness does not overtake us; We hope for light, but behold, darkness, For brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope along the wall like blind men, We grope like those who have no eyes; We stumble at midday as in the twilight, Among those who are vigorous we are like dead men.

Isaiah 59:9-10 NASB

Mankind's stumbling in the darkness is one gigantic reason that the birth of Christ, predicted by Isaiah the prophet, changed our world forever.

The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.

Isaiah 9:2 NASB

God's choice was to give the Light. But it remains our choice to accept His gift.

For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:6 NASB

Men think darkness will hide their sins.

Ezekiel was given a look behind the scenes to expose the corruption that permeated the leadership of the nation of Israel. In secret, thinking no one knew, those leaders worshipped all sorts of idols while feigning loyalty to God. Well, God saw. God knew. And one day God's judgment fell.

Then He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.'"

Ezekiel 8:12 NASB

God's light reveals the evil in men's hearts. He is the Judge, and the decisions He renders are 100% correct 100% of the time.

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

1 Corinthians 4:5 NASB

Jesus explained to his nighttime visitor, Nicodemus, that people who excel at doing wrong hate God's Light.

"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

John 3:19-20 NASB

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

2 Corinthians 6:14 NASB

Paul admonished the Romans to “lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” The expression “night is almost gone, and the day is near” refers to the lifestyle we should choose in light of the truth that Jesus might return for us at any moment. Be ready.

Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Romans 13:11-14 NASB

Darkness can be used to describe spiritual evil.

Solomon in his Proverbs painted a portrait of wicked men stumbling over obstacles in the darkness. They were unable to identify the pitfalls because their wickedness often masked the consequences.

The way of the wicked is like darkness; They do not know over what they stumble.

Proverbs 4:19 NASB

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

John 1:5 NASB

On the night of His arrest, Jesus declared that the power of darkness controlled the mob.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come against Him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as you would against a robber? "While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me; but this hour and the power of darkness are yours."

Luke 22:52-53 NASB

Paul revealed that for a believer spiritual warfare, battling the darkness of evil, is the norm.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12 NASB

Only God is the solution to spiritual darkness.

We moved to a new house in the country to a neighborhood that had no street lights. Finding my way through the box stacks at night represented a challenge, and I stubbed more than one toe. I had not learned the locations of the various switches nor the lights controlled by each. One of my first supply

runs included the purchase of several nightlights for key locations. I need that light. And in my spiritual walk I need the light even more. Here's the Source.

For You light my lamp; The LORD my God illumines my darkness.

Psalms 18:28 NASB

When I became a believer, Satan lost his control over my destiny. I belong to God who transferred me into His kingdom. Permanently. I am a child of the Light now.

giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son,

Colossians 1:12-13 NASB

Saul (later Paul) had an encounter with Light on the road to Damascus which left him blind for three days. In that time God revealed to Saul his new mission. Saul/Paul would become a tool in God's hands to turn people from darkness to light.

"And I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 'But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'

Acts 26:15-18 NASB

for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them;

Ephesians 5:8-11 NASB

Darkness is used as a descriptor of judgment.

Matthew used the term darkness to describe the eternal state of a man who dies without Christ.

but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 8:12 NASB

"Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Matthew 22:13 NASB

"Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 25:30 NASB

Here are examples of darkness as judgment.

The ninth plague God brought to Egypt triggered a darkness that could be felt. I experienced that type of darkness deep in a coal mine when the tour guide switched off the lights and left us crushed by the complete absence of light. Scary.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even a darkness which may be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings.

Exodus 10:21-23 NASB

An army sent from the King of Aram to arrest Elisha encountered blindness for a time. What a story to read and consider but I won't share any spoilers. Why not read it for yourself?

When they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Strike this people with blindness, I pray." So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.

2 Kings 6:18 NASB

Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey encountered a sorcerer, Elymas, who used his trickery to oppose truth. God brought judgment on this magician and he, too, experienced blindness.

But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? "Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand.

Acts 13:8-11 NASB

John the Apostle, in his blockbuster book Revelation, predicted God's judgment of darkness on the Beast and his kingdom.

Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became darkened; and they gnawed their tongues because of pain,

Revelation 16:10 NASB

Conclusion

As we have seen the term darkness can be interpreted in many ways as we read Scripture. Some uses refer to the physical. Some refer to the spiritual. Others refer to evil. Context is key to understanding which meaning is under consideration.

By way of review here are the major points made in this discussion.

God created both light and darkness for the benefit of humans.

Darkness can be used to describe a man's ignorance of God.

Men think darkness will hide their sins.

Darkness can be used to describe spiritual evil.

Only God is the solution to spiritual darkness.

Darkness is used as a descriptor of judgment.