

EMBRACING THE DARK

TIME OF THE YEAR

The clocks have changed and the days are closing in. For our ancestors, the season of darkness, was a fearful time; for without the benefit of electric light, the dark held all sorts of real and imagined terrors. It also heralded a period of lack, and many perished in the cold.

For most of us today, in the western world, with our modern technology, and overstocked supermarkets, the winter months do not hold the same kind of fears; although there are those for whom the dark is still terrifying, and others suffer for the want of heating and hot food. For the majority, however, winter is just a period to be endured until spring breaks through, broken of course by the welcome festival of Christmas.

We are supposed to do more than keep going, though. Jesus came to give us abundant life, and it's our responsibility to take hold of what He purchased. In order to *live* through this season, rather than merely tolerate it, we need to see some of the 'treasures' of darkness.

Perhaps some of the following ideas can help us embrace rather than endure the winter months:

- 1. Slow down:** as the commercial festival season gathers steam, and consumers join the rush to be ready for Christmas, in contrast, the countryside is slowing down, settling, ready for its winter rest. It is good for us to take heed and align ourselves, periodically, with this natural rhythm. 'Slow time', at intervals, enables us to avoid succumbing to Christmas-induced stress. And there are always sights to gladden the heart: beautiful sunrises and pink November mists, the delicate outlines of leafless trees, and a thousand street lamps lighting up the night...
- 2. Enter the silence:** As the earth moves into its winter period, it seems that silence descends on the land. In fact some winter days are so motionless, it can appear that all life has leached away. In our noisy world, silence can be threatening, but if we can overcome our apprehension, taking time out to absorb the earth's quiet can be very rewarding. The natural world always invites us into an encounter with the Creator; by allowing the winter-stillness to settle on our souls, we can put ourselves in the way of God. King David encourages us: 'Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him...my soul waits in silence for God only; from Him is my salvation,' in Psalms 37:7 and 62:1(NASB).
- 3. Study for freedom:** As already noted, darkness can bring dread. In order to be free, we need to face our fears in the light of God's word. Using a traditional, or online concordance, a study of darkness and night could be made, which will show that as natural darkness was created by God, He is Lord of day and night alike, and His presence can be found in both. And although there are very real evil forces of darkness, it is not an equal struggle; the victory has already been won, Jesus has conquered all on our behalf. (Genesis 1, Psalms 18, 74, 91, 139, and Colossians 1 and 2 are good places to start).

4. Pray powerful prayers: Then let's invite the Lord to shine His light into our personal dark places. Light by its very nature always overcomes and dispels darkness. These negatives in our lives are usually strengthened by lies, that is, anything which is contrary to His word. Ask Him to reveal both these lies, and the opposing truth, for Jesus proclaimed, 'The truth will set you free' (John 8:32). We then can pray for ourselves, our families, our homes and our neighbourhoods to be filled with His light.

In Bible-times, the autumn-winter rainy period, known as the 'early rains', was seen as a gift from God, and a sign of His favour; it was greeted joyfully, as it had the purpose of softening the ground ready for planting. Let's pray for the 'rain' of the Holy Spirit to soften the hearts of the people around us ready to receive the wonderful message of Christmas. Soon the Word will go forth, in Christmas cards, carol singing, school plays, supermarket background music, and televised church services. To be sure, much of this is a poor rendition of the gospel—but it is *something*.

Let's pray for our friends and neighbours, that the silence we spoke of earlier may come upon them, and that they may hear the Lord's voice through His Word, and that revelation of His amazing love would come to them.

5. Draw the curtains and get cosy: It's a good time for hospitality. Invite people in for meals, and enjoy fellowship in the candlelight. Family and friends at the table, laughing, listening and sharing, provide powerful images of belonging, which feed the inner man. Serve up seasonal food, and decorate the table with seasonal themes; wherever possible bringing the 'outside in'.

Our ancestors whiled away the dark hours telling stories; we could follow suit. It's a good opportunity to retell the stories of the Lord's intervention in our lives, or the accounts of faith from our Christian heritage. We can also honour others by taking time to hear their personal stories. There is a desperate cry from many in our modern world, for a listening ear.

6. Dream dreams: The dark time of the year is also a time for dreams and visions. Although the winter landscape can look lifeless, underground, seeds are being nurtured and made ready for spring displays. We can be inspired by this, and dust off old dreams, the deep desires of the heart, unpack them again and pray over them, asking our Father to speak through the night hours. And perhaps there are things we can do, like new parents making preparations for the eagerly awaited big day: sign up for that course, make those contacts, do that research, collect that equipment; whatever is necessary to be ready for the fulfilment of our longings.

Embracing winter, with anticipation and faith, rather than playing a waiting game until our bit of the world warms up again, means we keep in step with our Lord who is also the Creator. He delights in revealing His nature and His ways through the different seasons, and continually invites us into transformational encounters with Him.