

My Darkest Night; Hopefully Not Yours

Jim Elliff

At 3:30 a.m., I awoke to a black room, so dark that my eyes could not see even one inch away, much less to the other side. The simple room in a Romanian home in Brasov had one of those metal external shades that are lowered over the window, capable of completely deleting light. I was in the darkest place I had been in perhaps for years. And, since it was night and I was alone in the house, I thought.

"Outer darkness." I've been troubled by those words before—not blindness in this world where others may help, but "outer," away from all others, forever. I do not understand why hell is described as both "outer darkness" and a place of fire, for where there is fire there is light. Perhaps these are only feeble descriptors meant to approximate the reality, the best that words can do. Perhaps the darkness of "outer darkness" and the fire of "the lake of fire" cannot perfectly convey the emptiness and pain of that future place, but are only signposts to something worse. The signpost isn't the city itself. What if the worst we can think about hell would one day seem pleasant by comparison to the one experiencing it? What if the true hell can only be experienced, and not described?

What does a man think about in outer darkness? Could he think of, say, a day at the beach with his family? Impossible. For if he were to think of a day at the beach with his family he would immediately moan in agony for he will never see his family nor a day at the beach again, ever. If a man has no hope, nor any prospect of arriving at a place where the slightest wisp of hope could blow as a gentle breeze over him, how could he ever be happy again? Every joy is an eternal pain—a reminder of what will never be.

But then, a man has sins to think about. He will remember what brought him to this place. But he used to take pleasure in his sins—his fierce ambition, his sexual fantasies, his love for things. His eyes were always looking about for satisfaction. He longed for what he did not fully understand. When he lusted, he imagined that he enjoyed it for the moment, and others pretended they enjoyed these things as well, so he searched for more. Even then came sorrows, the smell of hell to come, but enough pleasure was there to do it again and again and again, all his life. He could not turn it off. His life was the sum of his lusts. He never fully arrived at them, but he tried and hoped for the satisfaction that would never come. Even now in this dark place, he tries to lust again, for

he remembers that he once had some slight pleasure in it, but his attempts are ruined, knowing that no pleasure can be in this place, forever. And, God being forever just, he will fuel his own agony by yet more sin.

He ponders his regrets. There is an eternity to dwell on them. Though he cannot wish to be better, he laments that he was a fool to bring himself to this place. He hates God who would damn him for so little, for only being a man. "Every man has lusts," he would scream. "I hate God. I hate him. I hate him." He gnashes his teeth. It is unfair to make me a man like all other men and then damn me for it, he surmises. He reflects on what could have been "if only." On the one side he will say, "If only I had come to Christ." But the next moment he will say, "But I hate Christ and would never come to him. I fear him but will never love him. I bow to him, but I despise him. I refuse to love him who punishes me so." And so it goes for one long, eternal night.

It would be a mercy of God to take a man's mind away in hell, but that surely is the agony of hell. Mercy was for another time, now so long ago. A man must live with himself, without the dignities of feigned kindness and pretended beauty. His mind is the most tortured part of him, regardless of what pains he is afflicted with in the body. Surely this is what is meant by the words, "his worm will not die." Crawling in and out of his mind is the alarming awareness that he is who he is forever and that he cannot change and therefore cannot have any hope or any relief or any joy or any love ever again. He will always wish to hate, and he can never again wish to love, though he will long for such a desire, and then will hate himself for longing for it because his hatred of God is so great.

I felt my way along the wall to the window and raised the metal blind a few inches so that light from the street lamp would again come into the room. I didn't want to sleep without it. I closed my eyes while saying to myself, "I will renew my trust in Christ who delivers me from such a place by satisfying such a terrible justice that a holy God must require. I will love the Savior even more who provides such a way of escape. And, I will do whatever I must for those who have not yet been pardoned. And, I will be kind to those who will never repent, for these few years on earth bring to them the last mercies they will ever know."

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