

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

It seems that we live in a world of memes. According to Merriam-Webster, a meme, strictly speaking, is “any idea, behaviour, style, or usage that spreads from one person to another within a culture.” Most people have come to associate the word, however, with a captioned photo that is intended to be funny, often by ridiculing human behaviour. Every now and again, however, you come across a meme that is intended to be inspirational rather than humorous. One such meme recently reared its inspirational head on one of my social media platforms.

Sporting a black and white image of a young girl sitting by the seaside with a dog next to her, the caption, ascribed simply to “The Minds Journal,” read, “The biggest lesson I’ve

learned this year is that no one is really your friend or truly loves you until they’ve seen every dark shadow inside you and stayed.”

I understand the sentiment, and there is a measure of biblical truth to it. Solomon wrote, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). True friends are those who love you “at all times,” in good and in bad, not because they have to, but because they choose to. A brother may be “born” for adversity—it may be his “job” to stick by you, no matter what—but a true friend *chooses* to do so.

A part of what it means for a true friend to “love at all times” is for that friend to refine, rather than flatter, us. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Proverbs 27:6).

A true friend helps our growth in Christlikeness. When true friends see our sin, they lovingly correct us. Friends seek to sharpen us, just as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17, NKJV). And, as when iron sharpens iron, friendly correction often involves friction, and sparks fly. But friends are sometimes willing to hurt (but not harm) us in order to help us. Friends see the dark shadows inside us and seek to bring light to drive away the shadows.

But, of course, the biblically-minded Christian will immediately recognise the problem with the meme: *No friend has seen “every dark shadow”*

inside you. No one really knows *everything* about you. No one knows how truly sinful you are. As deeply as your best friend knows you, there are dark shadows in your heart that you have not revealed. You may

not even know every dark shadow within yourself. After all, “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

And yet, of course, there is a wonderful gospel truth that is contained in that meme. For, if you are a believer, there is a friend who has seen “every dark shadow inside you”—and he has stayed! Jesus once said to his disciples, “No longer do I call you servants ... but I have called you *friends*” (John 15:15). And how did he love his friends? “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them *to the end*” (John 13:1). Jesus knew the deep recesses of his friends’ hearts. He knew that, within hours, they would betray him and flee. He knew that none of his friends would stand by him until the very end—and



yet “he loved them to the end.” He stayed, even when they did not.

Jesus has seen *every* dark shadow in your life. He has experienced far more darkness from you than even your best human friend has known. John Newton captured the truth of this poetically when he wrote,

Could we bear from one another
what he daily bears from us?
Yet this glorious friend and brother loves us,
though we treat him thus.
Though for good we render ill,
he accounts us brethren still.

Paul considered himself to be the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), but he knew that the Lord stood with him when all others forsook him (2 Timothy 4:17). The Lord saw his every dark shadow, and stayed.

Solomon wrote, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). “Many companions” don’t guarantee that you have true friendship, for friendship is gauged by quality, not quantity. Jesus is a friend of supreme quality—a friend who sticks by you even though he knows every dark shadow. “When he laid down his life for his friends at the cross, he was forsaken, though he was loyal, so that we would never be forsaken, though we are disloyal” (Ray Ortlund). True friendship is realised most deeply in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We don’t like to admit the depth of our sin. We trivialise it. We hide it. We ignore it. God does not. Isaiah 59 perfectly captures God’s view of the dark shadows in us.

Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your

tongue mutters wickedness.... Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace.... Our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the LORD, and turning back from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.

These are our dark shadows. (And lest you think that these words applied to Old Testament Israel, but not to you, remember that Paul quoted much of this chapter in Romans 3, where he noted that “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [v. 23]). When we see our dark shadows, “we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom... We hope for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.”

God knows our dark shadows. And he does not ignore or trivialise them. “The LORD saw it, and it displeased him.” And what did he do about that which he saw and was displeased? “He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; *then his own arm brought him salvation.*” Where he saw only dark shadows, he sent the glorious light of the gospel to dispel the darkness.

This is the God of the Bible—manifested most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ. Those who are Christ’s are no longer his servants, but his friends (John 15:15). And though he knows every dark shadow, he is a friend who, because of the gospel, stays.