On his Blindness

John Milton (1608-1674)

Greatest English poet after Shakespeare
On his blindness
The poet is blind.
This is a very religious poem.
On his blindness - John Milton

1. When I consider how my light is spent,
2. Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
3. And that one Talent which is dear to hide,
4. Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
5. To serve therewith my Maker, and present
6. My true account, lest He returning chide,
7. 'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
8. I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
9. That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need
10. Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
11. Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His State
12. Is Kingly: thousands at his bidding speed
13. And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest;
14. They also serve who only stand and wait.'
When I consider how my light is spent,

The poet is thinking of how he is spending his time.

His life

The time he has left to see.
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide

He is thinking of how he has spend his life before his blindness. Now he is spending his days in darkness.

Ere: before

Half of his life he could see – the other half he is now spending in blindness

Dark world: he is blind
Wide world: in darkness everything seems endless

Alliteration: world and wide
And that one Talent which is dear to hide

Matthew 25:14-26

And to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to everyone as he was able; and he went on his journey.

Straight away he who had been given the five talents went and did trade with them, and made five more.

In the same way he who had been given the two got two more.

But he who was given the one went away and put it in a hole in the earth, and kept his lord's money in a secret place.
Mat 25:19  Now after a long time the lord of those servants comes, and makes up his account with them.
Mat 25:20  And he who had the five talents came with his other five talents, saying, Lord, you gave into my care five talents: see, I have got five more.
Mat 25:21  His lord said to him, Well done, good and true servant: you have been true in a small thing, I will give you control over great things: take your part in the joy of your lord.
Mat 25:22  And he who had the two talents came and said, Lord, you gave into my care two talents: see, I have got two more.
Mat 25:23  His lord said to him, Well done, good and true servant: you have been true in a small thing, I will give you control over great things: take your part in the joy of your lord.
Mat 25:24  And he who had had the one talent came and said, Lord, I had knowledge that you are a hard man, getting in grain where you have not put seed, and making profits for which you have done no work:
Mat 25:25 And I was in fear, and went away, and put your talent in the earth: here is what is yours.
Mat 25:26 But his lord in answer said to him, You are a bad and unready servant; if you had knowledge that I get in grain where I did not put seed, and make profits for which I have done no work
Talent: that which is precious to him and God

Dear: precious, valuable

He had one Talent and like the man in the Bible, he buried that one Talent. He did not use it enough
4. Lodged with me useless,

The talent of writing poetry is now useless because the poet cannot see.

Lodged: he is stuck with this talent

Soul more bent: his soul now seems determined to use this talent.
5 though my Soul more bent To serve therewith my Maker

He wants to use his talent (writing) to serve his Maker.

Maker: God

and present: he wants to give to God something.
6. and present My true account, lest He returning chide,

The image of accountancy is used here.

My true account: The poet’s Talent is like money. He will present his books to God which will show how much money he made. It will show how much money he has in his account.

Ilest He: God

returning chide: God will return. He is afraid God will scold him for not proving what he has done with his talent.
7. ‘Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?’

The poet suddenly wonders if God is fair in expecting him to make something of his talent when he is blind.

Metaphor: God is compared with an employer: will God expect a worker to work when there is no light?

Will God expect work that you must do in daylight from him when he cannot see?
8. I fondly ask.

In the time that the poet lived you could not confront God with questions like this. It was a sin. That is why he uses the word “fondly”

fondly: showing affection and love.

He shows God he asks this question as someone who loves Him and not as someone who judges God.
But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies

Patience: Patience is personified. It becomes a person.

prevent: Patience wants to stop the complaint from reaching God to protect the poet.

That murmur: complaint in a low voice

Soon replies: answers the question quickly.
God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own
gifts

God does not need anything from man.
God does not need work or gifts.
Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.
The image of an ox being yoked is used here.

The one who copes well with the mild burden God has given them, serves God well.

The poet’s yoke is his blindness. If he accepts his blindness and copes with it, he serves God well.
His State is Kingly:

God rules like a true King. He is a king.

State: place of government, rulership
thousands at his bidding speed and post o’er Land and Ocean without rest

Thousands at his bidding: there are thousands of people that do what God commands.

Speed: move fast
Post: travel fast
They travel around the world without rest
They also serve who only stand and wait

You don’t have to travel around the world to serve God. If you only stand and wait, you also serve God.

Stand and wait: are ready.