

Who is Jesus?
Messages from the Gospel of John
Message 4

His Accomplishments
John 1:6-18

Afraid of the Dark

Were you afraid of the dark when you were a little child? (I will not ask if you are afraid of the dark now!) Do you remember how hard it was to fall asleep in the darkness of your bedroom? Did you ever slip off to your parents' bedroom for comfort in the night? I have always been a great sleeper, so I never had this problem, but I remember being very frightened in dark buildings. You never know who is hiding around the corner to grab you and carry you off. In the dark you cannot see your enemy, nor can you see to run away. In the dark you are at the mercy of robbers and murderers.

Now that you are grown up, have you put away those childish fears? Do you now realize that the darkness is no more dangerous than the daylight? Or is it simply that you are seldom actually in the dark? For most of us, everywhere we go there is light. And if we find ourselves in the dark, we need only to flip a switch and light floods the room. In truth, darkness is still dangerous. Crimes happen more frequently at night than in the daytime. Darkness was much more frightening before the availability of artificial light. If you read pre-modern stories, you can get a sense of how frightening night was. Some of the prayers of the church convey this foreboding of evil when the sun had set. Listen to a few old evening prayers.

Be our light in the darkness, O Lord, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness.

Visit this place, O Lord, and drive far from it all snares of the enemy; let your holy angels dwell with us to preserve us in peace; and let your blessing be upon us always

O God, the life of all who live, the light of the faithful, the strength of those who labor, and the repose of the dead: We thank you for the blessings of the day that is past, and humbly ask for your protection through the coming night. Bring us, we pray, in safety to the morning hours; Through him who died and rose again for us, your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“In your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.” This prayer was not a mere formality. In an age when robbers and murderers were abroad at night, when there was no way to illumine your path, this was a visceral cry to Almighty God for His powerful protection. Darkness – real, total darkness – is truly frightening and dangerous.

Even apart from the presence of sin, darkness is a negative symbol. In the beginning the earth was dark – until God created light. Psalm 27:1 uses light as a metaphor for God:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?

Psalm 84:11 celebrates the goodness and glory of God by comparing Him to the sun.

For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD will give grace and glory;
No good thing will He withhold From those who walk uprightly.

Scripture declares, and experience confirms that darkness is dangerous and evil, but light is joyful and glorious.

Light of Every Man

Last week we saw in John's gospel that the Word, or more accurately the Speech, was God Himself. We saw in verse four that one identifying characteristic of divinity is possessing life in Himself – a uniquely divine quality. Now that same verse says that He is also the light of men. Last week we passed over that fairly quickly, but tonight it comes up again, and we learn more about this Light. Verse nine tells us He is the true light and that he enlightens every man in world. This raises the questions of what is meant by the light, what is the true, and what is the enlightening of the whole world.

Pastors and scholars have tended to see this light in John's gospel as meaning either man's ability to think and reason, or as the message of salvation. But let's think about light. The nature and usefulness of light is to enable us to see. If you enter a dark room you are likely to bash your shin against a table, but if you turn on a light, you can see clearly to avoid obstacles. Light helps us see clearly, but darkness clouds our sight and conceals things. This idea is behind both of these ways of thinking about light. Only by thought and reason is mankind able to "see" truth, and only the message of salvation shows the true way to God. Unfortunately, neither of these meanings is without its problems. John's gospel is not a treatise on man's perceptive abilities – it is about our salvation in Christ. So it seems unlikely that Jesus is here being credited with giving thought and reason to man. On the other hand, this light is said to reach every man in the world. We know from other scripture that not everyone in the world will receive salvation. So it seems forced to try to make light mean the message of salvation.

Furthermore, John gives us few clues here to know exactly what he means by calling Jesus the Light. Therefore, the best course is simply to take it in its general sense as that which enables us to see, whether ordinary things or spiritual things. In other words, what do you see? Do you see a room with people in it? This ability comes from Christ. Do you recognize their faces and understand the significance of this meeting? This insight also is given by Christ. Do you grasp the importance of the gospel and believe the message of salvation? This comes from Christ as well. All ability to see, whether literal or figurative, physical or spiritual, comes from Christ. Darkness, by contrast, is whatever prevents you from seeing clearly. It may be the ignorance of an uneducated mind, or the foolishness of a sinful heart, but in both cases, you are hindered from seeing the world as it really is.

What, then, is the "true" light? The Greek word here refers more to the genuineness of the light than to its falsehood. This light is the original, the source and pattern of all other lights. It's opposite would be a copy. The copy might be a false copy – i.e. a counterfeit – or it might be a true copy, but neither would be the original, genuine article. It's like when an artist paints a picture. Then it may be copied and given a wide distribution. If it is a good copy, it faithfully represents the original and we may form an accurate opinion of the artist. If it is a poor copy, it will poorly represent the original, and we may form an unfair opinion of the painter. But a copy is nothing like the original. Have you ever seen a print of a painting, and then seen the painting itself? The difference is overwhelming! A real oil or watercolor sparkles and moves, and is warm or hard. Eyes watch and swords threaten you. Meadows soothe, brooks delight, and storms terrify. An original painting reaches out and pulls you into the world of the artist. The original fairly bursts with light

and color and energy which is never present in the copy.

Thus it is with Christ. Others may help us see in some secondary way by teaching us or even by making glasses for us. Some may faithfully enlighten us and lead us to see accurately, and others may give us false light and lead us to see wrongly. Some of you here tonight are wearing glasses which enable you to see better. When you need a new prescription, the glasses are less faithful in helping you to see accurately. When you get the new glasses, the world is suddenly clearer. Some of you can remember a time when your understanding of God and the world was distorted, corrupt. Someone – your father, a teacher, a preacher – came and explained the gospel to you and your spiritual vision was vastly improved. Perhaps you have friends who were led astray by Mormons or some other false religion. Their spiritual vision was impaired. Your vision can be improved by others, but no one can give us sight like Jesus. When He enlightens us, what was at first dim and shadowy becomes bright and clear. Before Jesus, mankind saw as if in a room lit by a candle. When Christ came, it was as if all the shutters were opened and the sun streamed into the room.

How is it that Christ enlightens everyone in the world? By improving everyone's ability to see. It is hard for us to understand the darkness of the ancient world. Our history books tend to dwell more on the glories of Greece and Rome than their dark side. The movie *Gladiator* helps us to understand the violence, treachery, misery, and despair that was the ordinary lot of peasant and patrician alike. Along with its wonderful accomplishments, the ancient world was a dark, dangerous, and awful place. Those who lived through the transition from the darkness before Christ to the brightness afterward were very conscious of the dramatic change Christ brought to the whole world – a change that affected even those who did not believe on Christ. St. Athanasius, writing in the fourth century, captured the wonder of Christ's enlightenment of the world.

When the sun has come, darkness prevails no longer; any of it that may be left anywhere is driven away. So also, now that the Divine epiphany of the Word of God has taken place, the darkness of idols prevails no more, and all parts of the world in every direction are enlightened by His teaching.¹

Greece and Rome, as well as Egypt, Persia, and many other cultures achieved remarkable things. But the peace and comfort we experience could never have been reached apart from Christ. Most important, the salvation we know, our freedom from sin and the tyranny of idols, is totally a result of Christ's coming. In every dimension, Christ is the Light of the world.

The application of these verses is that we owe God our fervent and undying praise for sending Christ to enlighten the world. Go watch *Gladiator* again. Imagine a world where your own brother will kill your son, where rape is a political strategy, where friends turn on you for personal gain. Imagine a world in which the only help you might receive is from gods and devils who are just as unpredictable as your neighbors. The world we live in is a direct result of the light that Christ has brought. If you can leave your stuff out without your roommates stealing it, if you can get a fair grade without having sex with your professor – this is because Jesus came into the world. Remember this when you lie down tonight, and praise Christ for enlightening the world. Praise Christ when you awake that you live in a safe society. Praise Christ when you go to class that ordinary people can get an education without engaging in intrigues.

Above all, praise Christ for enlightening your mind and heart to receive Him as your Savior. If you have been enlightened by Christ, you will praise Him with all your heart. That is why we are here tonight.

¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, quoted from *Paradise Restored*, p 2.

Outside it is dark, but in here we praise Christ for the spiritual light He has brought into our lives. We take the time to come worship Him because of our great love and gratitude for saving us from sin. Let's make it a daily habit to praise Christ for our salvation.

Children of God

Isn't it great to go home? I suppose most of you are looking forward to going home for Pacing Break in a couple of weeks. So how would it be if Crissy, for example, bursts into her house, saying, "Hi, Mom, hi, Dad, I'm home!", and they look her over with a confused expression and say, "Yes, and who *are* you?" Crissy says, "I'm Crissy, your daughter," and they say, "I don't know, we don't remember that we had a daughter." What would it be like if you went home, but no one there remembered you? It would be a crushing blow!

This is what happened when Jesus came to earth. This is rightfully his home. He made it. His character is stamped on every part of creation. Man, especially, was made in God's image. But when God came, even man didn't recognize Him. Worse, His own family didn't even let him in. God had been caring for the Jewish people for thousands of years. They were his special people. He spoke to them over and over again through the prophets. But when He came to the Jews, they cast Him out. Just as there was no room for the baby Jesus in the inn, so there was no room for the mature Jesus in Jewish life.

But this miserable story takes a positive turn. Although Jesus' own people rejected him, a wonderful new people took shape around him. It's an unusual people. They weren't founded the ordinary way, by a common ancestor or ethnicity, or bounded by a common border. They consist of all those who receive Jesus. His original people did not receive him, but others did. They eagerly heard him preach, they agreed with what he said, and they began to live in the truth of his message. In other words, they believed in him.

These people constitute the children of God – the God's new family. But these children did not enter this family because of their bloodline. They did not get in because of who their parents were or what they did. Nor did their own efforts gain them entrance. No, they were born into this family, but by God's will and power. Their birth was a divine birth, as Jesus says in Chapter 3 – a birth from above, a new birth. God took a mixed assortment of people from all races and nations and "birthed" them as His children.

There are some people who have been involved in RUF for awhile, but have not received Jesus. It is not enough to think God is a good guy, to like Jesus, or to appreciate the Bible. If you have not received Jesus, you are not a child of God. The idea of receiving Christ can be hard to grasp. I grew up in a church where there was a lot of talk about receiving Jesus into your heart. It was hard for my childhood mind to conceive how Jesus would fit in there. The proportions seemed all wrong.

Tonight you and I have come to this room to speak and hear about Jesus. We came from our own places, and when the meeting is over we will return to our own rooms or houses. But 200 years ago if you wanted to hear a preacher, you would need also to put him up for the night – or the week – and feed him until it was time for him to move to the next frontier town to preach. Receiving a preacher meant more than agreeing with his message; it meant embracing him as a person. This also was the case in Jesus' day. Later when Jesus sent His twelve disciples out to preach, He instructed them only to preach in towns where someone would give them lodging. Receiving a messenger meant partnership, identifying with his cause – it meant loyalty. Not receiving a messenger meant you were opposed to his teaching and unsupportive of his mission. You might even be his enemy. Jesus' people did not receive Him. This ominous warning foreshadows a tragic end to Jesus' ministry.

But where do *you* stand with Jesus? Will you receive Him or reject Him? You see, Jesus came to move into your life. It's all or nothing. When he moves in, all other controlling interests move out. If you want Jesus as part of your life, you cannot have Jesus at all – and if you do not have Jesus, you are not a child of God. Do not drift through life in an illusion. Now is the time to drop your defenses and receive Christ. He is your maker and he came to die for you. Accept His teaching. Live by His words. Believe in Him so you will live.

God Incarnate

Our passage this evening continues, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) We have seen that the Word is God. The wonder of the incarnation is that God should choose to take on human flesh. We saw last week that the incarnation was offensive to Jews and Greeks alike. The Greeks considered flesh polluted, and the Jews thought it demeaning for God to become a man. But God loved mankind so much, He willingly took on human flesh and came to live among us. And here is the amazing thing – when we saw Jesus, we saw God.

Of all the Old Testament saints – Abraham, David, Daniel, etc. – I think Moses might be the greatest. Yet when Moses asked to see God, he was only allowed to see God's back. Now when Jesus came, men for the first time saw God's face. God humbled Himself, took on flesh, and experienced all the miseries of human life. Jesus came from heaven and lived among us so that we might receive heavenly birth and live with Him. Now the question before you is this: will you receive Him or reject Him? The choice is yours – life in the light of Jesus, or death in the darkness of this world. Choose life, and live!

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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