

Jesus: The Light of the World

Within the first four verses of John's gospel Jesus is described as light. *In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it* (John 1:4). In the second chapter of the gospel of Luke, when Jesus is brought to the temple by his parents to be consecrated as their firstborn son, the prophet Simeon recognizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's great prophecy of the one who was to come who would be *a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel* (Isaiah 42). In Matthew's gospel Jesus begins his public ministry in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, the area Isaiah prophesied the Messiah would go to. *Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned* (Matthew 4:15-16).

Then in John 8, Jesus himself claims to be this prophesied messianic light that was to come into the world, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life* (John 8:12). Jesus makes this statement either during or perhaps immediately following the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jews most joyous feast, which celebrated the presence of God dwelling with them in the wilderness. During this feast at night the city of

Jerusalem would be ablaze in light from the thousands of torches held by the people in the streets and huge golden lampstands lit to illuminate the temple. Rabbi Segal, a modern rabbi devoted to renewal among Jewish people, writes about this feast, *Masses of people would gather to dance, sing, perform, and throw precious water on each other. Special mammoth lamps were lit so that the party could go on all night. These lamps were great golden menorahs set on bases fifty yards high. Each menorah had four branches terminating in huge cups filled with oil. Four ladders were placed against each menorah and four young priests continually ascended these ladders to keep oil in the cups and to keep the fires burning. The wicks were made from worn garments of the priests. The Talmud records that these lamps illuminated all of Jerusalem.*

It was in this kind of context, so charged with messianic promise, the Jews so aware of the symbolic meaning of the light of God's presence, that Jesus makes his amazing claim to be the "light of the world." So what does it mean for Jesus to be our light? What relationship is offered to us? There are so many rich possibilities to explore here. I want to look at just one. In each of these passages there is the contrast of living in the light and living in darkness. To understand what it means to live in the light, we need to know what its like to live in darkness. I learned that at an early age.

I guess I was about 6 or 7 at the time. I remember waking up in my room and seeing a shadow of a man walking around in my bedroom. I couldn't make him out clearly, it was too dark, but I soon became gripped with the terror that there was a burglar in my bedroom and probably any minute he would come over and kill me. As I lay there reflecting over what I was sure would be the last few minutes of my life, I tried to think of how I could escape. About that time my little sister began crying in her room and I immediately saw my opportunity for escape. As I slowly began to get out of my bed, I said as clearly and distinctly as I could, "Oh no my sister is crying. I better go see what is wrong." So that the burglar would understand that even though I was getting up and leaving my room he didn't need to worry because I would soon be back and he could kill me when I returned. Amazingly it worked. I got up and left my room without incident and walked passed my sister's room and into my mom and dad's room. I went over to my father and quietly but urgently whispered to him, "Dad, wake up, wake up. There's a burglar in my bedroom." What dad said next has always kind of bothered me. He rolled over and told me, "Go back to bed!" Aware that he wasn't fully awake I ignored his command to go back to my death. Louder I said, "Dad, wake up, wake up. There's a burglar in my bedroom." Finally awake Dad got up and went into my bedroom. I could not have been more terrified and excited. I knew there was going to be a great

confrontation. Of course I was convinced my dad could beat up any burglar, but still one can't help but worry a little. Dad went into my bedroom and he turned on the light. There was no burglar to be found. Obviously he had left before we got back. Dad told me to go back to bed. I asked if it would be okay to leave the light on? Dad said, of course. And I slept peacefully in the light. To this day I sleep better with the light on than in the dark.

Fear of the darkness is almost universal. Which one of us has not taken out the trash in the dark of night or walked to our car in an unlit parking lot and felt a creeping panic grip us for fear of some malevolent presence lurking in the surrounding darkness. So what might it mean for Jesus to be our Light. I would suggest that Jesus is to our spiritual fears what light is to our physical fears. To enter into relationship with Jesus as the light is to have a similar experience I had when my dad turned the light on in my bedroom. The light chased away my fear.

There are all kinds of fears we wrestle with. This morning I want to mention three that Jesus especially came to take away. Probably the most basic fear we have is the fear of punishment for our own wickedness. John writes in his letters, *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love* (1 John 4:18). We all wrestle with this fear because we all are sinners. Mark Twain

wrote, “I once sent a dozen of my friends a telegram saying “Flee at once. All is discovered. They all left town immediately.” Which one of us has not driven around a turn and upon seeing a DPS officer set up with radar not feel our blood suddenly go cold and our legs weak. It doesn’t matter whether we are speeding at the time or not because we know how often we do speed when we drive.

People who are guilty are fearful people. But John tells us that perfect love casts out fear. Not our perfect love. If that were the case we would be forever fearful. It is the perfect love of God that extinguishes our fear. Jesus came to reveal the perfect, forgiving love of God, the love described by Paul when he wrote to the Ephesians, *Praise be the the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiriutal blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding* (Eph 1:3-8).

Many people have a default image of a God angry at us because of our sin and ready to throw the book at us. J. D. Phillips calls this god the resident policeman. Why is this image of God so common? Probably because all of us

have disappointed people, hurt people, let people down because of our own selfish behavior. The usual response from people isn't forgiveness but condemnation and criticism. Philip Yancey calls this "un-grace." Even the best of parents and teachers and children and friends and bosses and employees will often respond to our sinfulness with something less than love. And the response of many others is much harsher. So it is not surprising that our natural inclination is to assume God would respond similarly. God certainly does not love our sin, but one of the revelations that comes with the Light of Jesus is the revelation of God's grace.

It is interesting that the prophets specifically foretell that this light to come would come to Galilee. The Galileans were particularly known for living in darkness and sin. That prophecy indicates that the love of God does not come to us because we are not sinners, but because we are. Certainly Jesus' words indicated that. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick." "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more." "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." The woman at the well, the harlot who washes the feet of Jesus, the prodigal son who returns home, the sinful publican who goes into the temple to pray, the laborers who come to work late in the vineyard, the thief on the cross, the street people invited to come to the wedding banquet, the debtor whose immense debt is cancelled,

the soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross. All of these stories show the unbelievable, undeserved, unprecedented love of God. This perfect love of God brilliantly displayed by the Light of Jesus casts out the fear of punishment from a God who despises us because of our sin. And as John goes on to say, it is that love given to us so undeservedly that enables us to love others the same way. “We love because he first loved us.” His perfect first love enables our own imperfect attempts to love. Without the light of Jesus we would know much less of the love of God.

And that leads to another kind of fearful darkness vanquished by the Light of Jesus. When we have the approval of God, we are emboldened to live with confidence, unintimidated by others. In his letter to Timothy, Paul writes, *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline* (2 Timothy 1:7). We are intimidated when we covet the approval of others more than God’s. We are hesitant to speak out against beliefs, behaviors we believe to be wrong but the world enthusiastically promotes for fear of being rejected by others and losing their approval.

During my very short time running track, my least favorite memory was setting our training times. We had to run the hundred, the 220, the 330 and the 440 as fast as we could and from our best time coach would set our training time, just a little slower. Then on successive days we would run 10 100s, 10

220s, 6 330s and 4 440s under those training times. If we didn't beat the training time, we had to run more. The faster the training time the harder the training. I had a teammate named Fergie. He was very popular, very fast and very lazy. He told us not to run fast so our training times would be easier. I was happy to go along because he was popular and I was scared of him, but my friend Boyd wasn't intimidated. "I don't care what Fergie says, I'm out here to get faster. I'm running my best time ever." Boyd's words inspired me and I decided not to be intimidated by Fergie either. So when we ran our 440 we were soon ahead of Fergie. Well if there's one thing Fergie hated more than running hard, it was losing a race so he kicked in and passed us in a flash and ended up running one of his best times ever. Later that day a very angry Fergie caught up with me. He cursed me and yelled at me for "setting him up" and roughed me up pretty good. But that day my relationship with Fergie changed. I was no longer intimidated by him. It wasn't fun getting beat up but Boyd helped me understand that I didn't need to live in fear of losing Fergie's approval.

The light of Jesus empowers us to stand up to problems we might otherwise be hesitant to do so. Having the approval of Jesus makes not having the world's less intimidating. Living in the light we're less concerned what might happen if we do what is right and more concerned what might happen if we don't. Edmund Burke long ago said it best. "Evil triumphs when good men

do nothing.” Bonhoeffer perhaps said it better, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil.” However, one caution should be mentioned. Believing you are right doesn’t mean you are right. Living in the light of Christ’s approval doesn’t produce arrogance. Conviction doesn’t give us the right to shout at others. It gives us the confidence to converse with others. It may be we are not right about an issue and so we should always be humble, willing to learn. But if our actions are truly done to please our Lord, we need not be intimidated by opposition.

Finally, perhaps as much as anything, people fear death. Woody Allen said, “I’m not afraid of death. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Vanquishing the fear of death as much as any other reason was why the light came into our world. In Hebrews 2 we read, *Since the children have flesh and blood he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death* (Heb 2:14-15).

Jesus is the only teacher who has the authority to teach about death because he’s the only one who has conquered it. Without Jesus we are in the dark about death. Jesus enlightens us about death and in doing that gives greater meaning to our life. In the light of Jesus we understand that death is not merely not existing, it is also death to exist for the wrong reason. The salvation Jesus offers is not just a way to avoid dying but a way to maximize living. Paul

writes, *you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world... gratifying the cravings of our sinful natures and following its desires and thoughts...But because of his great love for us God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved.* The word salvation is almost meaningless to us we hear it so much. Perhaps a better word would be salvage. *By grace you have been salvaged.* Because that is what has happened. Jesus has salvaged the rusty, broken spare parts in the scrap heap of our meaningless existence. From them he restores meaning, beauty and purpose in Him. Living in the Light of Jesus enables us to see that this life is not the only life. It is only what C. S. Lewis called “the shadowlands” a shadow of the reality that is to come. Living in the light of Jesus our lives are no longer overshadowed by fears, no longer anxious about our guilt, no longer imprisoned by intimidation, no longer enslaved by the tomb.

Because Christ bore our darkness, we now bear his light. At the cross Christ descended into the darkest place imaginable. That descent into darkness made it possible for us to ascend from our own darkness into the brilliant light of God’s glory. As one poem expresses it, We are the children of light, offsprings of glory. Radiance and brilliance conceive and bring forth an

illuminated people. No easy labor it was to deliver light out of darkness. Only one eternal moment when the light of the world went out!

Jesus is the light of the world. He chases away every fear because by his light we see what is real and what is true. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, our belief in Christ is like our belief that the sun has risen, not only because we see it but because by it we see everything else. Jesus invites us to live in the light, his light. Even more than that he invites us to be the light for others. “You are the light of the world.” Let me close with Jesus’ challenge to us as it is translated in “The Message.” *You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!*

I don’t know the different fears you are struggling with this morning, but I do know you are struggling with some fear. We all are. I pray Jesus comes into every one of our dark rooms and turns on his light and with that light chases away all of our fears.