

Light in the Darkness

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on December 26, 2021.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:1–13)¹

In the Northern Hemisphere, the winter solstice, typically December 21st, is the point where the earth's tilt is farthest from the sun, resulting in the shortest period of day light and the longest night. Many of us greet as well as finish the day in darkness, perhaps leading us to cherish the daylight hours more. Yet, even in the nighttime the sun reminds us of its presence even with the sliver of a moon and the stars that light the night shine light throughout the universe.

The distinction of day and night, light and darkness, is by God's design. In the beginning, though "darkness was over the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:2), it did not continue. For "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Gen. 1:3-5a). The light overtook the darkness, "And God saw that the light was good." And so in the beginning, the first day of creation began with light.

So also begins John's Gospel, "In the beginning" (1:1), not with the first creation but the origin of a new creation. Like the first, light comes by the eternally-existing Word of God. He who was not created created, revealing himself in the creative process, not merely about life or its source but as life, and light. And life is in this light.

We may best understand John's metaphor of "light," by contrast with darkness. Although created good, creation was corrupted not gradually by evolution but spontaneously by transgression. Prior to the Fall, the only darkness of creation was night, but afterward the darkest recesses of creation were found in the heart of man. Although "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" and "day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge" (Ps. 19:1-2), the heart of man suppresses truth and dishonors God" (Rom. 1:20-21). Although the rising sun tells of the Lord's mercies (Jer. 3:22), man's ungrateful and foolish heart sees nothing new.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Thankfully man's heart of darkness does not define life. Because "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1), the final word on life is not darkness but light. Just as light overtook darkness in creation by the Word of God, so the Word shines light upon man heart of darkness, "and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5).

Light in Light

What John means by his borrowed metaphor of "light" surely is the essence of the gospel. As Jesus preached to the hard-hearted Pharisees, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). To follow is to trust and obey who leads, a disciple by grace. To walk is to live, in this case in Christ, who leads his disciple through faith. To have the light is to believe on it, possessing saving faith through which is life: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). For Jesus the Son is the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6), and salvation is found in no one else (Acts 4:12).

The darkness then cannot overcome the light, because the darkness is of man's sin but the light is of God. And light, unlike darkness, is not static but in its very essence shines. As One commentator observes, "light, in a sense, bears witness to itself, though every other object in the world requires light in order to bear witness to itself. Light always illuminates, is never illuminated."² So shining as light itself, Jesus came so that whoever believes on him "may not remain in darkness" (John 12:46). Those who do not believe love darkness over light, because light exposes sin which the darkened heart cherishes, but where the light of God's grace shines it prevails.

In the thirty-sixth psalm, David confesses to the Lord, "with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light" (Ps. 36:9). God is the source and sustainer of all life—all life is from him. So also light. All light is his, and it is his light to give. "We see the light," David sings, because it is the Lord's light. As this is true, we may also deduce that if we do not see the light, then it is not the Lord's light. There is light that is the Lord's light, and there is light that is no light at all. Or to put it another way, there is light that "shines in the darkness" and there is "light" that revels in it.

In warning the Corinthians of their susceptibility to false teachers, who disguise themselves as "servants of righteousness," Paul reveals a disturbing characteristic of Satan: he disguises himself as "an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14), as do his minions. Wickedly deceptive yet characteristically uncreative, Satan puppets God's light to deceive, not only the world but Christ's church as well. Don't miss this reality: Satan finds ways to infiltrate the church with so called "servants of righteousness" who masquerade as messengers of light with the sole intention of deception, to lead the children of light astray. Paul would not have warned the church were we not susceptible.

This is not a first-century matter to be merely acknowledged and forgotten. It is an on-going, successful ploy of the devil that dupes unsuspecting Christians consistently, which is far more

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 390.

Light in the Darkness

telling of our discernment than Satan's deception. Certainly we must never consider ourselves invincible to such deception, but to recognize darkness (and expose it) we must listen to God's witness to light.

Witness to Light

Of the last and greatest of the prophets, John writes, "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light" (1:7-8). Chosen from the womb, John the Baptist came delivering the prophetic Word of God, shining light in the darkness, not darkness impersonating light. While Satan's servants love the spotlight, John pointed others to the light. Considering himself unworthy to untie his Lord's sandal (John 1:27), his defining confession was, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). But those who masquerade as servants of light, exalt their worthiness with no intention of decrease.

As children of the light we must train our ears to listen for true witness, discipline our eyes to recognize the light, and we do this by exposure to the light of the gospel. Darkness loves to hide the good news of God's grace. It loves for us to revel in our works, our doing, our boasting. If you're trying to discern between light and darkness, look for the light of the gospel: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

When we look for the light of the gospel, we see that darkness tempts but light delivers. If you are tempted to believe that the power of your sinful flesh defines you rather than the atoning deliverance of Christ, you are not listening to the witness of light. Through the light of the gospel, we see that darkness accuses but light intercedes. If you are taught to obsess on your hopeless condemnation rather than the ceaseless intercession of our Savior, you are not listening to the witness to light. Through the light of the gospel, we see that darkness masquerades as "righteous", but the light is righteousness. If you are told to look first to the merit of your righteousness rather than the perfect righteousness of Christ, you are not listening to the witness to light.

John the Baptist served as a faithful witness to the light, but he is dead and gone. His witness, however, is not. The gospel he proclaimed we proclaim too, a witness to the light shining through you and me. We likely do not think of ourselves in the same category as the great prophet, and yet Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16). His light is our light, his radiance our radiance, even our good works are his (Eph. 2:10), and so is all the glory. We are living lights created in Christ Jesus to shine to the glory of God as children of light, preaching the light of the gospel to ourselves first and then to the world.

Children of Light

Paul writes to the Galatians, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). It is a succinct statement of Gentile inclusion into the covenant family of God, not by birthright nor merit but redemption and adoption. Naturally, we have no right to be called children of God, but supernaturally Christ secured our right. And we are granted such a privilege of grace through faith: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (1:12).

For Jew and Gentile alike, to be a child of God is a gift, bestowed before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), realized through the new birth (John 3:8), and received through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). To be given such status is to be brought from death to life (John 5:24) from darkness to light. As such, we participate, as the Apostle Peter puts it, in “the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4), transformed from creatures into children, children of light.

As a result, we are guaranteed never to walk in darkness because we have the “light of life” (John 8:12), and because we have it, it defines us. Yet, the world in which we live wages war against this truth, pressing to define you by what you eat, what you buy, how you amuse yourself, how you work, how you vote, even how you feel or by your impulses – by anything other than whose you are. It is no wonder that so many Christians feel disillusioned. Walk long enough in the darkness, and you will begin to believe it defines who you are. But it doesn’t. As Sandra McCracken puts it, “Darkness does not define you. It does not have the final word; light does.”³ Light has the final word because, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (1:4-5).

Therefore, we must look to the light to know the truth and expose and silence the lies of darkness by shining the light. Darkness says that you are defined by your desires. Light says your identity is in Christ (Gal. 2:20), who is light. Darkness says that you are defined by your past. Light says that you are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), who is light. Darkness says you are defined by what you’ve done. Light says that you are known by whose you are (1 John 3:1), a child of light. Darkness wants you to believe there is no light. Light says that the Lord has “called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Called into light, we walk as children of light, yielding fruit of goodness, righteousness, and truth (Eph. 5:9). And because our Lord is light and the light of the gospel is his light, then we may be confident that “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (1:5).

³ Sandra McCracken, *Send Out Your Light: The Illuminating Power of Scripture and Song* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2021).