

“The True Light”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 1:1-18; Isaiah 42:1-9

In John’s purpose statement (chapter 20:30-31) he tells us why he wrote his gospel. “*These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” If Jesus’ preaching and miracles prove that he is the Christ and the Son of God, why is it that people (including his own people, the Jews) reject him? John will tell us why people do not believe the gospel using the familiar metaphor of darkness and light. The reason why people reject the creator and redeemer of the world is because our deeds are evil. We hate it when the light (the truth that is in Jesus Christ and as expressed in the law and gospel) exposes us for what we are—sinners in need of a Savior.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we are making our way through the prologue (the first 18 verses) of this gospel. As we saw last time, John’s prologue is densely-packed with important theological truths, all designed introduce us to the central figure of John’s Gospel—Jesus Christ, the eternal word of God (*logos*) made flesh. Virtually every point made by John in this prologue will reappear later on in the body of the gospel. So, if we are familiar with John’s prologue, we will better understand the events which unfold in John’s Gospel, which opens in verse 19 of chapter one when our Lord begins his public ministry. By knowing who Jesus is as he is revealed prologue to John, we already know that Jesus is God in human flesh, that one through whom God reveals himself to his people.

In the opening words of John’s prologue we learn that Jesus is the word (*logos*), and that the word was God, yet distinct from God. We also learn that the word created all things. As John tells us: “*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.*” From this important declaration come the Christian doctrines of the deity of Jesus Christ, the distinction between the Father and the Son (underlying the doctrine of the Trinity), and the fact that it was through Jesus that God created all things. In fact, you cannot be a Christian without believing these things. More to the point, you cannot truly understand John’s gospel without knowing these things before you read it.

As we read in verses 4-5 regarding the *logos* (Jesus), “*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.*” Throughout John’s Gospel the terms “life” and “light” will be used in connection with our salvation from sin, but in the opening words to the prologue of John’s Gospel we see these terms used specifically in connection with creation. Echoing the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3, John tells us that Jesus is the source of all things, including life, having the source of life in himself (cf. John 5:26). In fact, it was through Jesus Christ that God created all things. Furthermore, Jesus is the light, which, as we saw, may be a reference to the fact that each one of us are created in God’s image, or to the fact that Jesus is the one who illumines our minds so that we know and understand truth. John may even be referring to both.

But verses 4-5 of John’s prologue also serve as a bridge between creation and redemption, and they introduce to us two important terms (darkness and light) which will appear through this gospel in connection with human sin and God’s graciousness in saving us from our sin. Having learned that Jesus is the life and the source of light (in creation), in verse 5 John introduces a distinction we will find

throughout the balance of this gospel—that between darkness and light. Against the backdrop of the creation account in Genesis 1, it is apparent that darkness is the absence of light. John’s point is that before God created anything (including the heaven and earth) there was nothing but darkness—until that moment captured in the words of Genesis 1:3, “*and God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.*” It was in the midst of this darkness that the light (the *logos*) shined, overcoming the darkness.

This imagery is rich and vital to understand. First, before God created the heaven and earth there was nothing but darkness, only the Triune God, who has existed eternally in inter-Trinitarian love as each of the members of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) enjoy the most intimate and perfect fellowship with one another. God was not lonely, pining away from lack of companionship when he created us—as though he was bored and needed us to love and adore him. God is not in any sense dependent upon the creation, rather the creation is dependent in every sense upon God for its existence.

Second, light and darkness are not two eternal forces warring against each other. Darkness is the absence of light. Darkness doesn’t exist, so it cannot fight against the light. Darkness is but another way of saying that there was nothing at all until the heavens and earth were created through the *logos*, who in his act of creating all things overcomes the darkness. This also means all things have a beginning—including heaven. There is no eternal dualism between spirit and matter (as we see in pagan religions). It means that there is no world of eternal forms as in the philosophy of Plato.

It also means that we must give up the idea of heaven as the place where God lives, as though God’s presence was localized to some remote place far away with golden streets and angels playing harps. It is not as though God’s head were at one end of creation, and his feet at the other. Rather God fills all of creation with all of his attributes and divinity simultaneously present throughout everything he has created—both things visible and invisible. God is revealed to us in heaven, but heaven too is created (and therefore not eternal). Heaven is that realm of real but spiritual creatures (the angels) and the home of those souls of those who have died and are now in the presence of the Lord. Some have argued (I think correctly) that this is best understood in terms of a distinction between things visible and things invisible. Darkness was all there was until God created the heaven and earth through the *logos* who is said to be light. In this sense then, the *logos* overcomes the darkness as the agent of creation.

But in verse 5, John’s use of light and dark takes on an additional meaning—a metaphorical shift has taken place from what was before all things were created (physical darkness as in the absence of light) to what has happened to Adam’s race after our fall into sin (darkness as the human condition after Adam’s fall into sin). When the human race fell into sin, the light of creation returned to darkness. When we are speaking in terms of redemption, darkness is not just the absence of created things, darkness is John’s preferred metaphor for evil and ignorance of the truth. Some ten times in this gospel and in his epistles John will speak of evil as “darkness.”¹ So, for John, light (the *logos*) dispelled the darkness when he created of all things. But when Adam fell into sin, darkness came upon all things. But light once again dispels the darkness through that redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ who is the word made flesh.

The stage is now set for the important explanation John will make about human sinfulness in chapter 3, verses 19-20. “*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.*” Darkness is an ethical quality—the

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 119.

willful refusal to see and understand what is true because of our sinful prejudice against the things of God. Because people are sinful by nature, we prefer to live in darkness (ignorance of the truth). Apart from the light of Christ, people do not, and indeed cannot, understand the true nature of things.

This is why the Jews do not accept Jesus as their Messiah when he comes (despite the fact that his miracles and teaching prove he has been sent by God). This is also the explanation John would give us as to why people reject Jesus today, and why there are so many false religions, philosophies, and ideologies. Since people are sinful, their deeds are evil. And because their deeds are evil they prefer darkness to light (ignorance to truth). People who live in ignorance assume they are not accountable.

Non-Christians do not see things as Christians do, and this has nothing to do with bad-eyesight or intelligence. It has to do with a moral prejudice against the things of God. Because people are born with a sinful nature, they reject the things of God. The light of truth exposes people's innate sinfulness by reminding them of God's holiness. People sin because we like to do evil. People reject Jesus because we hate the light he brings, and which he represents. People hate the things of God because we do not want to be confronted in our sin, nor told what to believe. So, before John's Gospel begins to tell us the story of Jesus' messianic ministry, we know that even his own people (the Jews) will be hostile to Jesus and his message. We already know why Jesus will be rejected. Light comes to darkness and we hate it.

But notice too what John says when the theme shifts from creation to redemption—*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*” That one who created all things—who replaces the darkness of nothingness with the light of creation—will also overcome human sinfulness. Jesus may suffer and even die. But human sin will be defeated and overcome. So even before we begin reading of Jesus' messianic mission, we know his miracles reflect the power of God, and Jesus can claim to be God (“I AM”) because he is God. We also know that his own will reject him and even put him to death, but he will overcome in the end. Jesus will indeed rise again from the dead having secured our redemption. He will ascend into heaven, and he will send us the blessed Holy Spirit. Light overcomes darkness.

In verses 6-8, John now moves from eternity past to that point in redemptive history when the messianic age begins with the account of John the Baptist, that great witness to the word made flesh. John tells us of this shift in redemptive history from the old covenant to the new when he writes, *“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 word was eternal and created all things. But the word (*logos*) left eternity past, took to himself a true human nature, and came to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The coming of the Messiah to establish a covenant of righteousness was the expectation of Israel's prophets, such as Isaiah, who, as we saw in our Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 42) speaks of the messianic age in terms of light dispelling darkness. *“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”*

Before Jesus Christ moves to the center stage of redemptive history, our Lord was first introduced to Israel by John the Baptist. John does as the other Gospels do (Matthew, Mark, Luke), when he introduces John the Baptist as the messianic forerunner of Jesus. John (the disciple) does not identify this different John as “the Baptist.” This is a good argument that everyone receiving this gospel already knew that John the disciple is recounting these events in this Gospel which he himself had written and

that we was not John, the messianic forerunner.²

In any case, in verse 6, John tells us that the Baptist was sent by God. This divine commissioning was an important factor for any Jew who knew that God similarly called and commissioned Moses (Exodus 3:10-15) and all of the Prophets (take for example, Isaiah 6:1, or Jeremiah 1:4 ff). As John will tell us later in this gospel, Jesus was also “sent by God,” a requirement of any true prophet. John the Baptist was not some sort of self-proclaimed holy man, teacher, or religious zealot. John the Baptist is sent by God as the last of the Old Testament prophets, greater than any who had gone before him. His appearance tells us that the old covenant is coming to an end, and the new covenant era is about to begin.

This point becomes clear when John tells us that the Baptist comes as a witness to Jesus Christ. The idea that John the Baptist is a witness who bears testimony is a legal one. The Israelites are God’s chosen people, who relate to YHWH through the terms of that covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai. Under the terms of the Sinai covenant, Israel was promised blessings for obedience and threatened with curses for disobedience. Israel was given a covenant mediator (Moses) who represented the people before God, and who brought the word of God to the people. Whenever Israel disobeyed, God sent his prophets, who were commissioned to warn Israel to repent, or else face the covenant curses. The ultimate covenant curse was removal from the promised land which had happened during the Babylonian Captivity, and again in the years after 70 AD when John writes his gospel. When John tells us that the Baptist comes to bear witness, any Jew who was considering the claims of Christ, knew full-well that this witness was a declaration from God that covenant blessings and curses are about to follow. The Baptist is the last person sent from the heavenly court and commissioned by YHWH to warn Israel that the dawn of messianic blessing/curse was at hand because Messiah had come.

John (who was not the light—but was the messianic forerunner) was to bear witness about the light (Jesus) so “*that all might believe through him.*” It is John the Baptist who warns Israel that the Messiah was about to be revealed, and who after being warned by the Baptist that the time had come to repent, Messiah will announce the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand (as in the synoptics) or that through faith in Jesus, we receive eternal life (John’s Gospel).

In verse 9, John writes, “*the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*” As we will see shortly, John will speak of the true light as being given only to those who believe—indeed it is only because light is given to those whom God chooses to receive eternal life that they are able to believe the gospel. But here, John speaks of Jesus as giving light to everyone—in the sense that Jesus is the source of all truth, whether people acknowledge that truth or not. Paul puts it this way in Romans 1:20. “*For [God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*” Or as James puts it in James 1:17. “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*” Because Jesus is the light (the only source of truth) there is no one who lacks sufficient light to see the truth. People choose to reject light and live in darkness. And it is Adam who turned off the switch.

As John will explain, the reason people do not believe is not because non-Christians are less intelligent than Christians and lack the capacity to understand truth. We all know very brilliant and thoughtful non-Christians. The problem is that non-Christians hate the light because the light exposes their sinfulness.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 120.

It is not a matter of intellectual wattage. It is a matter of sinful prejudice. The human heart is sinful to the core, and this colors how we think, and what we think about. Non-Christians do not like or want the light Christ brings into the world. But as the Baptist proclaims, “like it or not, the light (Jesus) has come into the world.” In other words, we are now all without excuse! The light will shine upon our darkness.

Repeating himself for emphasis, in verse 10, John makes three summary points to his reader, “*he was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.*” First, Jesus (the light) has come into the world. John’s point is that the creator has now come as our redeemer. Second (virtually repeating verse 3), John says that Jesus created all things—the world and everything in it, owes its existence to Jesus Christ. Third, the world (which loves darkness) did not even know (recognize) its creator when he came to earth. As we saw with the word “darkness” so here John uses the term “world” (*kosmos*) in two different senses. In the first two points, the world (*kosmos*) is the earth and everything in it—every material thing which Jesus has made.

But in the third point, the term “world” (*kosmos*) is now used in an ethical sense of those specific people who came into contact with Jesus (i.e., those Jews and Gentiles in first century Palestine), but who are estranged from God because of humanities fall into sin.³ Therefore, like the word “darkness” the word “cosmos” (world) can refer to the earth, or it can be used in an ethical sense as a reference to fallen humanity. John’s point here is that Jesus came into the midst of the world (the fallen mass of humanity), but those individuals whom Jesus encountered did not know him for who he is. The world did not recognize Jesus. Many people who saw Jesus perform miracles and heard him preach, did not acknowledge Jesus as their creator and redeemer. Light came into the midst of darkness and people (even Jesus’ own people, Israel) prefer darkness to light. The scene, as John paints it, is one where Jesus comes to that world which he created but he went unknown, not because *he* was a stranger, but because the world was estranged *from him*. Therefore, the only way to overcome the world’s estrangement from its creator, is through the miracle of the new creation—a point to be addressed shortly.⁴

Because of the fallen world’s love of darkness, and because of our estrangement from God, when Jesus comes on the scene after John the Baptist has called Israel to repentance, what is Israel’s reaction? In verse 11, we read, “*he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*” The creator of all things, the eternal world made flesh, comes to Israel (his own people) as the only redeemer of all those who have sinned, and are now trapped in darkness. The only one who can overcome the darkness of human sin has come. The creator, as one writer puts it, “has come home,” not as an alien (or a foreigner), but to his own people and to a world he has made. And when he does, instead of being received for who he is, he is rejected. The indifference of verse 10 (“did not know”) has become an act of hostility in verse 11—he was not “received,” or as the Greek text makes plain, Jesus was rejected by Israel.⁵

But the messianic mission of Jesus did not fail—John will speak of the fact that some people did believe in Jesus. In verses 12-13, John tells us why this is the case. “*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.*” I’ll bet that many of you who were raised in

³ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, 95-96. Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 44.

⁴ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 44.

⁵ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, 97.

evangelical churches are well-familiar with verse 12, which is the basis for many an evangelistic plea—“to as many as received him, who believed in him, he gives the right to become children of God.” When quoted like this, verse 12 is not only cut loose from John’s explanation of why people believe in verse 13, but verse 12 is quoted as though people living darkness have the power within themselves (just enough light) “to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior.”

There is no question that those who do receive Jesus as the word made flesh by “believing in his name” do in fact become the children of God and receive eternal life. But there are several important things we need to consider. First, God is the one who gives those who believe the right to become children of God. People do not have the power within themselves to become children of God, unless God gives it to them. Second, it is characteristic of John, not to speak of those who believe as “sons of God,” (that title is reserved for Jesus—the eternal and divine son), but as “children of God.” It is only because God gives people the right to become his children (members of his family by adoption) that we do so.

Third, John will speak in detail of the new birth (regeneration) in chapter 3. But in verse 13 of the prologue, the doctrines of regeneration and the new birth are introduced for the first time—before Jesus begins his public ministry, so that we understand from the beginning that God acts to save sinners trapped in darkness through the light of Jesus Christ. God does not help us save ourselves by giving us light (truth) and then leaving it up to us as to whether to not we should decide to believe in Jesus. Because we love the darkness, we will not receive Jesus. We will reject him because the light exposes the sinful things that we do, as well as the sinful prejudices we all have against the things of God.

The children of God are not born into God’s family because we are naturally children of light and have the power to decide whether or not to believe in Jesus. Rather as fallen, we are born as children of darkness. God’s children *were born, not of blood* [that is, by natural birth] *nor of the will of the flesh* [sexual desire, perhaps tied to the Jewish desire to trace biological descent from Abraham] *nor of the will of man* [not from any human decision to accept Jesus as our Savior], *but of God.*” To become a child of God, we must be acted upon by God, who, in his grace and mercy, gives the right for those whom he chooses to become his children. Jesus tells us in John 15:16: “*You did not choose me, but I chose you.*”

This is not a physical birth arising from human procreation, but a spiritual birth (the “new birth”) brought about by divine procreation—i.e., being born of God.⁶ John cannot be any clearer or more direct when he says this is not an act of the human will, but the new birth and inclusion into God’s family as his children, is an act of God. Eternal life is all of grace (God acts upon us even we are trapped in darkness and prefer to stay there), and eternal life is given us by God when the light of the gospel, shines in the darkness of our hearts and creates faith. Just as the *logos* spoke and created the world from nothing, so too Jesus speaks the word of his gospel and he creates new life in our hearts when there had been nothing but darkness. Only when God speaks life do we believe and become the children of God.

This is why the terms darkness and light figure so prominently in this gospel. Before God created the world, there was nothing but darkness. The *logos* spoke and the darkness was overcome. Before Jesus came into the world, there was only the darkness of human sin. It will take the word of Christ to give us the right to become children of God and create new life. This does not come about by blood (birth) through the flesh (human desire) or through human willing. The only way we become children of God is when God speaks, casts out the darkness of our hearts, and grants us the life and light of Jesus Christ, the

⁶ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 47.

word made flesh.