

# I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

John 8:12

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, October 5, 2008

---

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12).

**O**f all the hundreds of times I have landed onto a runway in an airplane, perhaps the most memorable was a night-time landing at Jomo Kenyatta Airport in Nairobi, Kenya. I could not help but notice the difference between landing in Nairobi versus an American city. As an airplane approaches an American airport by night it is bathed by the light of a million sparks below. But as we descended closer and closer to the ground in Nairobi, I stared out my window into pitch black, only seeing the ground as we descended through the last few feet.

As our plane landed in the darkness, my mind traveled to the hundreds of Christian missionaries who came to "the dark continent" with the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same thing happened centuries before to my European ancestors, when the light of the gospel came to the darkness of Northern Europe – and before that when the gospel light came to Greece and Rome from ancient Jerusalem. Light is one of the great biblical images of salvation. Isaiah wrote, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Isa. 9:2). Light depicts the coming of God with saving life: "The LORD is my light and my salvation," sang David (Ps. 27:1).

It was with this in mind that the Lord Jesus Christ declared, "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12). Jesus came to a whole world in darkness. John uses the imagery of light to describe Jesus sixteen times in this Gospel, light being a fitting symbol for the coming of

God among men. As such, Jesus is the only remedy for the darkness in the world. It is only through faith in him that a darkened world may see and receive the light of God.

## A LIGHT FOR THE WORLD IN DARKNESS

If we want to understand the nature of the light and salvation that Jesus brings, we need first to understand the character of the darkness. What was the darkness in which Jesus found the world?

According to the Bible, darkness is the realm of *ignorance* and *folly*. Psalm 82:5 says that the ignorant “have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness.” The prophet Micah spoke of an age in which the prophets would be silent: “It shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination” (Mic. 3:6). To say that the world is dark is therefore to say it is lost in ignorance, superstition, and folly. Is this not the constant state of the world wherever Christ is unknown or the gospel is lost? Is this not the way it is now in the once-enlightened West: people made by God with high intellects and blessed with choice educations grope about in a darkness of the greatest ignorance and folly, making decisions and enacting policies contrary to wisdom or even common sense.

Darkness is also the realm of *evil* and *fear*. Children fear the dark, because in the darkness danger lurks. Proverbs warns against those “who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness” (2:13); “The way of the wicked is like deep darkness” (4:19). Jesus said, “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). Is this not precisely the case in lands where the light of Jesus has not yet shined, or where his light has been rejected? The world into which Jesus came was and is darkened by evil.

This being the case, darkness also speaks to *bondage*, *misery*, and *death*. Isaiah characterized the world as “distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish” (Isa. 8:22). He said, “Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom” (Isa. 59:9). Darkness is a biblical description of Israel’s time in their bondage in

Egypt; Paul said that mankind suffers presently in the slave-chains of Satan. He speaks of “the cosmic powers over this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12). The darkness of the world involves a bondage in sin and misery that culminates in death. The Psalmist laments: “He has made me sit in darkness like those long dead” (Ps. 143:3).

Lastly, the world in darkness sits under God’s *judgment* and is consigned to God’s *wrath*. Zephaniah spoke of “a day of wrath... a day of darkness and gloom” (Zeph. 1:15). Jesus foretold the judgment of sinners in the Day of the Lord: “Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 22:13). Hannah prayed, “The wicked shall be cut off in darkness” (1 Sam. 2:9-10).

This is the darkness into which Jesus came as a light. Darkness consists of a *lack of knowledge*: ignorance, folly, and superstition; it has a *moral dimension*: evil and fear; it is *experiential*: bondage, misery and death; and it is *judicial*: judgment and wrath. What is true of the dark world is also true of every life apart from the shining of the light of Jesus’ gospel.

Any sober and honest history of the world will show this to be true. Indeed, I challenge anyone to give a more accurate and comprehensive description of the problems in our world. But just as those who spend time in the dark acquire night vision, we have become nocturnal creatures – we have come to think that ignorance, evil, misery, and condemnation are not so bad. But the Bible gives us day vision and shows us that ours is a dark planet in need of light.

The world was not *created* dark; it was *made* dark by sin. Because of sin, mankind came under the judgment of God; since God is holy, sinful man was cast out from the light of his presence. This is the true story told in the early chapters of Genesis. Cast from the garden because of sin, man immediately fell into spiritual ignorance. Cain tried to approach God in the folly of his own counsel. When he was rejected, he turned to violence, slaying his brother Abel. God cursed his sin with misery and gloom, saying “You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” (Gen. 4:12). So it has been ever since. The first song ever recorded by mankind was about violence; Lamech sang, “I have killed a man for wounding me” (Gen. 4:23).

The world that God made good, and the human race created in glory as his image bearer, fell into darkness by sin. The world cannot escape the chains of this dark bondage, so in his great mercy God promised to send a Savior to free us from ignorance, evil, death, and judgment. John the Baptist's father, Zechariah the priest, spoke in these terms when he prophesied the coming of Jesus: "Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Lk. 1:78-79). Therefore when Jesus Christ called aloud in the midst of the city of Jerusalem – at the temple where that hope for saving light was deposited – he declared himself that Savior who frees us from our sin: "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12).

To a world that is ignorant of God, Jesus reveals the truth of heaven. To a world suffering the misery of evil, Jesus offers a cleansing renewal and peace. To those condemned in judgment for their sins, Jesus shed his own blood for forgiveness. Into a spiritually dark and dying world he shines the light of eternal life.

## THE TRUE LIGHT

John 8:12 presents the second of this Gospel's famous "I am" sayings, which one writer describes as a "Pocket Guide to Understanding Jesus."<sup>1</sup> Earlier, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (Jn. 6:35). He later adds, "I am the door" (Jn. 10:9); "I am the good shepherd" (Jn. 10:11); "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11:25); "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6); and "I am the vine" (Jn. 15:5). All of these sayings present Jesus as our Savior, by his person and work.

We need to remember that his expression "I am" is a formal claim to deity. Jesus' emphatic way of saying "I am" (Greek, *ego eimi*), recalls the reader to the great scene at the burning bush, when God revealed his name to Moses: "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:14). Jesus now declares himself as the great "I AM," the divine light that shines into our darkness for salvation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Johnson, *Let's Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 122.

Jesus did not identify himself merely as *a* light, but as *the* light. This means that he alone is the true light shining in the world. John earlier said, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (Jn. 1:9).

This reality is illustrated by the scene in which Jesus made this claim. The Jews had just wrapped up their religious festival, the Feast of Tabernacles, in which they had exulted in their religious traditions. One of the great events was the festival of lights that took place on the first night of the feast, and perhaps on subsequent nights as well. Four great candelabras, each with four golden bowls filled with oil, were lit in the temple court. The bright light from these sixteen bowls illuminated the whole temple and much of the city.

After the feast, those lights had gone out. Perhaps the lampstands were still present in the temple courts, the bowls having been taken away. Where the lamps had hung, Jesus now presented himself as “the light of the world.” He fulfilled what the ritual had symbolized: Jesus is *the* light: he alone provided the reality for which the people rejoiced in the feast. Yet even on such an occasion, the people had rejected him and their leaders sought his life.

This makes the point that religious traditions and practices contain saving truth only as they point to Jesus Christ. Judaism was a true religion, but it was made false when the Jews rejected Jesus. Jesus said, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me” (Jn. 5:46). Without his true light, the lights of their feast were false lights and would soon go out.

This is not merely true for Judaism. What the Jews looked forward to, the Christian church looks back upon. But we will light our candles in vain unless we stay true to Jesus himself and the salvation he offers by his death on the cross. Like the Jews of old, this requires us to humble ourselves as guilty sinners who trust only in Jesus to deliver us from darkness. We may enjoy the fun of singing, the humor of the preacher’s personality, or the encouragement of lifestyle training, but unless we follow Jesus in true faith the light will soon grow dark.

How much more true this is of pagan religions and philosophical humanism. The ancient Greeks had Plato and Aristotle, and they cast

a sort of light. But their lights masked the great spiritual darkness of that ancient world and in time they went out. Western humanism has enjoyed its so-called “Enlightenment”, with the truths of the Bible replaced by the false lights of evolution, progress, and tolerance. The result has been a bloody history of war, misery, and moral collapse. Lamech of old made his song about murder; today’s gangster rap exults in the pleasures of gunfire and rape.

The only true light this world has ever seen is the light of Jesus. The only true path of peace is the one shadowed by his cross. The only true way for God’s blessing is his way of discipleship. “In him was life,” John said, “and the life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4).

What, then, is the light that you need? Is it the false light of consumerism, psychology, or carnal, mystic spirituality? Or is it Jesus Christ? And what is the light that the world needs to see shining from the church? Is it the neon light of Hollywood glitter so we can at least enjoy the darkness? Is it the dim light of self-help teaching to help us manage our own dark lives? No, the only true light, the only true Savior, is Jesus Christ. “I am the light of the world,” he insists. Let us follow him; let us proclaim his light of forgiveness from sin and new life for salvation to a dark and dying world. As Jesus is the light of the world, let us be the lamps that shine his light to others.

## A LIGHT TO FOLLOW

When we studied Jesus’ great invitation of John 7:37 – “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink” – we noted that the water-pouring ceremony in the Feast of Tabernacles had a connection to events in the exodus – specifically, God providing water from the rock. There is a similar connection with the festival of lights and Jesus’ claim to be the “light of the world.” The light celebration recalled the pillar of fire that guided and protected Israel during their passage through the desert. Exodus 13:21 tells us, “The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.”

We see, then, why Jesus continued by saying, “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). This shows that while Jesus is the one true light of the world, we only benefit from his coming if we believe on and follow him. We follow Jesus the way the Israelites followed the cloud of fire. They trusted it to lead them and found protection under its shadow. As we follow Jesus, he relieves of us ignorance and folly by teaching us his Word. He protects us from the searing rays of God’s wrath, having paid the penalty of our sins on the cross. As he leads, we follow out from misery and fear and even from the curse of death. As the cloud of fire led the tribes of Israel through the barren, scorched desert and into the promised land, Jesus leads us in our passage through this wicked world and into the glories of heaven.

What, then, does it mean to follow Jesus? It means to trust in him and live as his disciple. When the cloud moved, the Israelites moved; when the cloud settled, they made camp. Likewise, we follow Jesus to his cross, dying there to our sin. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus taught, “let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23).

If we consider the uses of the Greek word for “follow” (*akolutho*), we can better understand what Jesus means. It is used of a soldier following his commander into battle; the Christian thus fights against evil in the armor of God and with the sword of God’s Word. It is used of a servant or slave who attends upon his master. William Barclay writes, “Always the slave is ready to spring to the master’s service, and to carry out the tasks the master gives him to do.”<sup>2</sup> It is used of one who accepts a wise counselor’s judgment. William Hendriksen writes that a Christian “must follow where the light leads: he is not permitted to map out his own course through the desert of this life.”<sup>3</sup> It is used of rendering obedience to the laws of the state; the Christian follows Christ by keeping his commands. And it is used of one who follows the line of his teacher’s reasoning. The follower of Christ is one who has gained understanding of his teaching and takes it into his heart. With all these in mind, J. C. Ryle summarizes: “To follow Christ is to commit ourselves wholly and entirely to Him

---

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:13.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:42

as our only leader and Saviour, and to submit ourselves to Him in every matter both of doctrine and practice.”<sup>4</sup>

Does it seem like a radical commitment to follow Jesus? It is! Too many professing believers have come to him without this commitment, and never actually follow him. But there is no other kind of saving Christianity. To have Jesus as Savior is to follow him as Lord. Paul wrote to believers, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The salvation Jesus offers is free; we receive simply by the open hands of faith. But following Jesus is none-theless costly. James Boice states, “The path that Jesus walked is the path to crucifixion. It leads to glory, but before that it leads to the cross. Such a path can be walked only by the one who has died to self and who has deliberately taken up the cross of Christ to follow Him.”<sup>5</sup>

## OUT OF DARKNESS, INTO LIGHT

**S**o why take up such costly discipleship? To escape the darkness! This is the great promise Jesus attaches to his call: “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness.” Isn’t that what we have seen in the Gospel of John? As Nicodemus turned his allegiance to Jesus, he was led out from the dark hypocrisy of the Pharisees. When the woman at the well believed, Jesus delivered her from the scandal and shame of her former lifestyle. This is what he offered to those hearing him in Jerusalem and what he offers us today: an escape from the guilt of our sin, from the corruption of our evil natures, and from darkness of the lives we have led.

Therefore I need to ask, Are you walking in darkness? As a pastor, I am often dismayed to see so many Christians still walking in the ways of this dark world: accepting the world’s values, serving the world’s priorities, dreaming the world’s dreams, and obeying the world’s requirements. If you are a young person, are you willing to stand out by your discipleship to Jesus? Or are you itching to take part in the sinful social practices so pervasive among the youth today? Are you drawn to the music, movies, and video games that celebrate sensuality

---

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:85.

<sup>5</sup> Boice: *Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, ), 60-61.



and violence? Are you dabbling in sexual sin, alcohol or drugs? If you are, this only shows that you are not following Jesus. He said, “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness.” This is what we must aim for in the raising of our children in the church – that they can walk through a dark world without walking in sin, and this only comes through a personal discipleship with Jesus.

Adults, do your lifestyle choices, ambitions, priorities with time and money, and habits reflect the standards of the dark world or the light of Christ’s kingdom? Are you caught up in materialism, egotism, or sensualism – things that belong to the darkness of this world. If you are, it can only be because you are not following Jesus. The same may be said of ministers and churches that mimic the ways of this dark world. Let us all repent in ways large and small, let us take up our cross, follow Jesus, and leave the darkness behind.

I mentioned my thoughts as our plane descended through the pitch darkness onto the runway in Nairobi, reflecting on the way the light of Christ has come to shine in Africa. During that visit to Kenya, I had the privilege of witnessing that light shining brightly, as I participated in an unspeakably moving ceremony to dedicate a new children’s cottage at a Christian orphan village in the town of Mwiki. This Christian village provides a loving home to 160 little boys and girls abandoned by desperate parents or orphaned by the AIDS epidemic. I sat together with American missionaries who had come to love, teach, and raise these children alongside their African Christian partners. We sang as one of the African “mamas” led us in praise of God’s faithfulness and love, and we prayed with thanks for the godly home they were dedicating and the beautiful children entrusted by God to their care. The world had cast these children into darkness, abandoning them to misery and death, but by the mercy of God they would instead grow up in the love of Christ to follow in the light as his disciples.

Not everyone is called to Africa as a missionary, although I envied those I left behind. That was just a snapshot of the light that comes when Christians devote themselves to follow Jesus. Never think that you will lose out by turning from the dark pattern of this world to follow the Savior in serious and sacrificial discipleship. Those who receive the light of Christ, who take their sins, along with their former

lives and priorities, to his cross and then follow after him, will never lose out in this life or the next. Jesus promises, “They will have the light of life.” Jesus offers us now a life of love, grace, and power for godliness, and in the age to come eternal life. He said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Lk. 9:24).

## I AM... THEY WILL

**L**astly, let us never think that it is our following that saves us. We are never saved by our works but only by Jesus Christ. It is because Jesus first says “I am” that he afterwards promises, “they will.” If we give our “amen” to his “I am” and follow him, he will give his “amen” to our “they will.”

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” He calls us to believe in him, receiving the light of his free gift of salvation. And then, starting wherever we are right now, we simply begin to follow him as he reveals himself through his Word. And as he leads us out of darkness into light, we will hear him say to us, “You are the light of the world.” (Mt. 5:14). For when the light of Jesus has shined in our hearts so that we follow him in trusting obedience, his light will shine through us to illuminate the dark world with his love.