

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part two

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THE LIGHT SHINING IN THE DARKNESS

John 1:3-5 - "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. [4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

I know we've already studied the third verse of this opening chapter. But I've included it in today's text, not for mere repetition, but because I think it reveals something of John's continuing argument. John's point, it seems to me, is not only that we can be rescued by Christ in this present moment of history, but that we've been **created** by Christ at the beginning of history, and we will **return** to Christ at the **end** of history. Jesus Christ is the **point man**, the **central figure** - in the entire unfolding of history.

So when you're trying to sort out your life - as you turn from expert to expert - theory to theory - religion to religion - Jesus Christ and His will and rule is where you came from. He **designed** and **made** you. He set the terms for life abundant. And He's also where your life is headed eternally. He is the ultimate Judge of all. He will be Lord over His whole new creation.

That's the logic behind the plea of John and the gospel. "**Come to the Word who has come to bring you life. You were made by this Word. Now return to this Word!**" That's the case John is making. It is what separates Jesus from a host of other religious options by a country mile. John's gospel begs the question, "**Who else could possibly restore us other than the One who first made us? Who else can know what true life is meant to be other than the designer and originator of all life in the first place? Of course, come to Jesus Christ. Who else makes any sense?"**

But not everyone comes to Jesus Christ. And that's the key issue verses four and five drill down into. There are two ideas processed here:

1) **AUTHENTIC LIFE CONTINUOUSLY FLOWS FROM JESUS LIKE LIGHT CONTINUOUSLY FLOWS FROM THE SUN**

John 1:4 - "In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Don't miss John's big point here. He doesn't merely say Jesus **had** life. The point is Jesus **was** life. When John described Jesus he described Him as someone who **was** life and light the way the sun is light, not the way the **moon** receives and reflects light, but has no light in itself. Obviously John means to proclaim the **impossibility** of life apart from Jesus Christ.

In the very next verse John will elaborate on the nature of the **darkness** into which Jesus came in His incarnation. We'll dig into that in just a minute. But right now he fastens the terms **life** and **light** uniquely to Jesus Christ. And John means by this to show that there is a life from Jesus Christ that **answers to** the darkness we are all in **without** Jesus.

That's what makes John call the **life** in Jesus Christ the **light**. It's not an accidental play on words. He is **light** in the sense of being the **opposite** of the **darkness** into which He came. He is the only remedy to our own fallen, self-deceptive, self-destructive **darkened** desires and instincts.

This is important. John intends to tell us there is a darkness in this world and in fallen hearts that won't be dispelled by anything **other than** the redemptive life given by God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Education won't eradicate this darkness. Government and the rule of law, while **restraining** this darkness, can't remove it. Science, with all of its great advances, can smooth out some of the bumps of civilization, but can never turn back the power of the darkness in this world or in our hearts. And that's because all of these **human** attempts and resources are also bound up in the same darkness. Our **best** attempts to **fix** the darkness are still **part of** the darkness.

Take note of some of the big ideas in this fourth verse:

First, John means to link together the original life we received from Christ the Creator with the sustaining life we need from abiding in His presence and grace

John isn't the only one to develop this theme:

Hebrews 1:3 - "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power...."

Colossians 1:16-17 - "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

The idea repeated here is this universe wasn't just **created** in a one time act by Christ. It - and you and I along with it - **continues** to receive its very existence by His gracious power.

John **reminds** us of this truth because there's an application to **spiritual life** here as well. This is why John links together the two concepts of both **life** and **light** in Christ. Just as there would be no life at all on this planet apart from Christ's original creative power, there can be no ongoing depth of spiritual life - **illumination** - apart from abiding in the very same Christ.

That's what I meant when I said life continuously flows from Christ just as light continuously flows from the sun. This is the **reason** John tethers **life** and **light** together in this verse. He's **exposing** the foolishness of supposing a disciple can just make a **one-time decision** to receive spiritual life from Christ and then seek life on his or her own terms.

When John says "**In Him was life....**" he means to communicate that Jesus doesn't **dole out life** like you and I give Christmas presents. Those gifts that we give, even if given in love, are not a **part** of us. They are gifts that are **external** to our own beings. But John says the life and light Jesus gives are never detached from Himself - "**In Him was life....**" He means spiritual life can never be received **independently** from the Person of Christ Himself.

This isn't just theological blah, blah, blah. This truth **means** something for the church. There are many who try, for example, to just take **forgiveness** from Jesus as a stand alone gift without also giving place to the sanctifying **power** of Christ for a life of holiness and separation from the life-patterns of the godless culture in which they live.

Here's another important truth from this fourth verse:

Second, we should be encouraged to trust in Christ in the face of our repeated sins and failures. Because He **is** life in Himself - because life and light flow from Him as the source the way light comes from the sun - it impossible for Him to **tire** or **begrudge** mercy and grace and spiritual life to those who seek Him.

There is **darkness**, to be sure. John will talk about this in the next verse. And there are those, to be sure, who won't come to Christ for life and light and grace. John will talk shortly about those who refused to "**receive him**" (1:11). But for those who fasten their broken lives to Christ His grace isn't given out according to some finite bank account. No. His life and light are who He unchangingly **is**. He can never be otherwise. And because He is the One who is mighty enough to sustain all things by His own power, His life and light can never be depleted.

Third, no one can understand his daily life properly until he sees the finger of God upon every detail of it. For all who draw breath the meaning of life can never be fulfilled until they bring Jesus Christ into it.

"**In Him was life....**" This is the fountain - Jesus Christ - of everything else significant about life. This insight and conviction is what keeps life from being **misspent**. This is the foundation of **accountability** that shapes care and holiness and hope and a sense of meaning and destiny. Life can't be lived to its proper end or in its proper joy **disconnected** from the conviction that "**In Him was life....**"

2) THE NATURE OF THIS WORLD'S DARKNESS AND ITS ONLY SOLUTION

John 1:5 - "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

John's gospel is **realistic** right out of the gate. The greatness of Christ is placed against the curse of sin. The **light shines**, to

be sure, but it shines in the middle of unimaginable **darkness**. And the **reason** John won't hesitate to spell this out is no one will treasure the light until he or she trembles and quakes at the nature and depth of the darkness. Take away the darkness through denial or ignorance and the gospel becomes nothing more than moral and religious cosmetics.

So the immediate question arises - **what is this darkness?** And the questions go deeper. Why did the Son of God have to come into this world? This has been John's declaration. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. But why was all of this necessary? Why wasn't the world transformed through the law of Moses? Why wasn't the world changed by the teaching of all the prophets? Why hasn't the sermon on the mount made any difference? That's the issue here as John describes the **darkness**. Something is clearly wrong.

Notice also the way John uses the term darkness to describe the chief **characteristic** of the world into which Christ came. It is the **dominant** feature of this world - so much so that its whole existence can be summed up in that one word - **darkness**. So John means to say, at the very least, that **everyone** is affected by this darkness. It is a universal condition. There is no one who escapes this darkness.

We also know this whole world was originally created **good**. God said so. Obviously something has happened. It has all become **darkness**. That's where we are. But what is the **nature** of this darkness? John lists some of its main features:

First, the darkness manifests itself in mankind's constant stubborn rejection of the truth. John has just reminded us that **"All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made"**(1:3). But this world chooses to ignore that truth.

Paul states the very same thing in **Romans 1:18-20** - **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his 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."**

So Paul says the creative power of God is visible and plain. He says this world deliberately **"suppresses"** this revelation (1:18). That's what John means by the **darkness** of this world. We don't want to face up to the **implications** of not being self-owned and self-ruled.

Second, the darkness manifests itself in the way they always think of life in terms of themselves rather than God. This is why John begins his gospel declaring the **creative rights of the incarnate Christ**. The darkness John describes lives as though Jesus Christ was not God, the Creator of all things.

Look at our world. People struggle against their own nature when they turn from God the Son. They confuse life and frustrate its purpose. By exalting themselves they insult themselves. This is exactly what Paul means in **Romans 1:22** - **"Claiming to be wise, they became fools...."**

When people forget they have been created in the image of God they think they can build their lives the way animals build theirs. They build their lives around **accumulation** and **desires**. Giving little place to Jesus Christ, the Creator of all and the only one in whom there is life, they turn to worship movie stars and celebrities and entertainment and pleasure. This is the kind of **darkness** John describes.

Third, the darkness manifests itself in the way people reject the light even when it is shown to them. It is bad enough that people should love darkness. For many it is all they have known. But the real tragedy - the true nature of the darkness - is revealed in the way it causes people to disregard the very thing that could bring them light.

In verses we will study in depth shortly, John is absolutely emphatic about this. **John 1:10** - "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him." Or, **John 3:19** - "And 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."

Such is the power of sin in this world. This is how it works inside human hearts and minds. It bends our interests and affections in the wrong direction. It robs our choices of good sense. It locks us into future sins by actually causing us to flee the light of Christ, the one in whom there is light and life.

Does that describe your heart today? Do you find yourself wanting freedom and life in Christ on one level, but constantly choosing sin and rebellion over repentance and life? This is the darkness of sin. This is the deep splitting of the human will and personality that the darkness brings. This is proof of the truth of John's potent words.

3) **IS THERE HOPE IN THE FACE OF THIS DARKNESS?**

This is the important question. And I want to draw our hearts deeply into two hope-giving thoughts from **verse 5** - "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

At the risk of being branded too theologically dense for a Sunday morning sermon, I want to read a wonderful quote from one of the great new commentaries on John's gospel by **Frederick Dale Bruner**. I just knew I couldn't make the point in better words. Pour your brain around them:

"The present-tense verb in that fifth verse is very important. It would actually read 'shines on' [the light shines on in the darkness]. And the present-tense verb teaches several important truths: a) that though then, to all outward appearances, it seems that Jesus was terminally executed and that darkness has won a decisive victory; and b) that though now, too, by most outward indications in the present world around us it honestly seems that darkness, not light, is winning, and that, indeed, it is darkness that 'shines on still,' and finally, c) that nevertheless, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, it will always be the deepest fact in all of history that, in John's inspired words, it is 'this light that shines on in the darkness, and the darkness can not put it out."

This is what faith banks on. This is John's final word. The light just "**shines on**" - period. And we have good evidence from the rest of God's Word that John was right. If John were alive today, I'm sure it would bring him the greatest joy to stroll over the face of this whole earth and hand this sign around the necks of about one billion people - **Ephesians 5:8** - "....for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord...."

And the light is still shining. God isn't finished yet.