

See This Thing

"Light of the World"

John 1:9-13

Mark Vroegop

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:9-13).

It is not by coincidence that the idea or symbol of "light" has such a prominent role in the Christmas narrative. Just think with me about all the places that it shows up:

- The shepherds, who are the first to hear the news about the birth of Jesus, were "watching their flocks by night" when an angel appeared and "the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Luke 2:8-9).
- The wise men arrive in Jerusalem looking for the new-born King because they have seen "his star when it rose" (Matt. 2:2).
- The wise men find the residence of Jesus in Bethlehem as the star "came to rest over the place where the child was" (Matt. 2:11).

Lights announce important events. Think of what goes through your mind when you see a series of spotlights circling in the night sky. Light is used to focus attention, and to highlight something as distinct from all others. Light introduces important news.

The Light of Advent

We are taking the weeks of Advent (which means coming or arrival) and focusing on how John introduces the incarnation of Jesus. We're talking about this and giving you the "See This Thing" devotional so that you can fight against the gravitational pull of this season from a cultural standpoint. In other words, we want you see the theological and spiritual significance of this season.

Last week, we learned about six foundational truths regarding Jesus under the banner of this signature statement: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). Next week, we'll see how the Word becomes flesh and why that is so important.

This week we learn about the nature of Jesus' mission, and we see how he is portrayed as the light of the world – a metaphor directly linked to Israel's history and its divinely given purpose. John

1:9-13 shows us the beauty of Jesus' mission: **the light of the world has come to rescue rebels through regeneration.**

This is the beauty of what we celebrate this season. Christmas is the celebration of the miracle of the incarnation of Jesus Christ which resulted in the miracle of the new birth.

The Mission of "The Light"

John 1:9-13 show us the mission of God behind the incarnation, and it involves three key concepts: rescue, rebels, and regeneration. The Light of the World has come to rescue rebels through regeneration.

1. God comes to our rescue (v 9)

John doesn't just use light to announce an event; John describes Jesus as light. We saw this last week in verse 4-5, where John identified Jesus as life which was "the light of men," and that the light "shines in the darkness."

Verse nine continues this theme by calling Jesus "the true light." The light motif has its roots in the Old Testament understanding of the mission of God through the people of Israel. Just listen how Isaiah talks about it:

2 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).

60 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. 3 And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (Isa. 60:1-3)

The nation of the Israel was to be a light of salvation to the nations, fulfilling the promise given to Abraham that "in your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise. Through him, Israel would fulfill its ultimate purpose, and the Gentiles would receive spiritual light. At Jesus' dedication at the temple, an old, devout Jewish man named Simeon took Jesus into his arms and said,

*"...my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a **light** for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32).*

"Light" is what Israel was destined for, and "light" is what Jesus brings. Actually, according to John 1, Jesus **is** the light.

Secondly, notice that the intentionality of the light. It is going somewhere, and it has a purpose: "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." The word "enlighten" means to shine upon, and here it means spiritual illumination. It might sound like John is saying

that everyone is spiritually illuminated or that everyone is saved. But if you read verses 6-8, you will see that John is establishing the uniqueness of Jesus over John the Baptist. Therefore, John is saying that Jesus is the **true** light, the light that has the power to illuminate everyone. The focus is on the substance and power of the light. In other words, everyone who believes comes through Jesus.

The final phrase really captures the essence of this verse. John says that this true light, this spiritually illuminating light was “coming into the world.” There is clearly a directional intention here. There is a world of darkness, a world of hopelessness. There is a world that is in trouble because of the darkness of sin. And the glorious message that John announces and the message that the birth of Jesus announces is that God has come to rescue his people. Like God’s deliverance from Egypt, now God is rescuing them from the slavery of their sin. Remember what the angel told Joseph? “You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

The mission of God and the image of “light” are meant to convey the spiritual reality that God comes to rescue people. Just ponder that with me for a moment. He rescued you. He pursued you. God found you. We try to capture the words of this by singing, and Charles Wesley tried his best to capture the stunning beauty of God’s rescue when he wrote *And Can it Be*. Here’s the second chorus:

*He left His Father’s throne above
So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race:
’Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!
’Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!*

God comes to our rescue!

2. We’ve rebelled against our creator (vv 10-11)

God’s rescue of us is incredible in and of itself. But that is not the full picture. God did not just rescue people who needed help. He rescued people who had rebelled against him. The miracle here is not just that God found you, but that when he found, you he loved you. And the reason this is so amazing is because of the rebellion of mankind against their Creator.

There are two elements and ironies connected with the rebellion:

1. We are sinfully indifferent to what should be obvious
2. We dangerously reject the One who made us

Verse ten identifies the specific of our sinful indifference. It shows us the spiritual tragedy of passive rebellion. John tells us three things:

- **“He was in the world”** – John is talking about the obvious presence God in creation of the world. Romans 1:20 tells us that creation shows us that God exists.
- **“the world was made through him”** – Creation not only reveals him; it belongs to him. And if that is true, then everything is accountable to him. Again, Romans 1:20 tells us that everyone is without excuse in their moral and spiritual denial of God or his rule.
- **“the world did not know him”** – The indifference is not accidental ignorance. It is a willful, intentional refusal to deal with the obvious fact that you are created and there is more accountability.

The picture here is a dark world that intentionally denies and suppresses the truth about who we are and who God is. Passive indifference to your Creator is dangerous and dumb. The true light is coming to a world that is dark with careless living and arrogant indifference.

The second element of our rebellion is tragically ironic. And it is almost as if John raises the emotion, deepens the contrast, and magnifies the tragedy. Look at what he says in verse 11:

- **“he came to his own”** – If you have an ESV Bible, you will note a footnote. It is fairly important. My edition says, “Greek *to his own things; that is to his own domain or to his own people.*” It means that he came to what belonged to him. Leon Morris captures the outrageous tragedy of this moment:

When the Word came to this world, he did not come as an alien. He came home. Moreover, he came to Israel. Had he come to some other nation, it would have been bad enough, but Israel was peculiarly God's own people. The Word did not go where he could not have expected to be known. He came home, where people ought to have known him.¹

He came to what belonged to him!

- **“and his own people did not receive him”** – There is no word for people in the text. It is implied. The meaning here is so painfully clear. He came to his own things, his own people, his own realm, his own kingdom. And this is not just a kingdom in which he happens to be the ruler – like an heir to a throne. No. Jesus is the Creator-king, and his people did not receive him. The word “receive” is used for taking a person into intimate fellowship (as Joseph did with Mary in Mat 1:20,24, and what Jesus does with believers in John 14:3). In light of who he is and who they are, he should have been enthusiastically and passionately received.

But instead he was rejected. And this rejection of the Son of God was a dangerous act of rebellion. God sends his Son to the very world that he created, and his own creatures reject him and kill him.

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 96.

This is dangerous. As Peter said in his sermon at Pentecost: “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

Sin at any level is rebellion against the creator of the universe. The rejection of Jesus began at his crucifixion but it continues even today when people refuse to acknowledge God’s rule, our sin, and our need of a savior. The rebellion continues when people chose in brazen or subtle ways to worship the creature more than the Creator.

The light shines into a dark and needy world, and it was rejected.

3. God rescues rebels through regeneration (vv 12-13)

All of this sets up what comes next, and it is so glorious! We see the miracle of the new birth or regeneration set in contrast to the darkness of a sin-infected world. The message of this text is that in the midst of the darkness of the world and the human heart, God recreates his people. He makes them new. They are born again!

Keep in mind that this passage is primarily about who? It is about Jesus. It is about his incarnation, why it is important, and what it accomplishes. So the focal point in this text is God. And while it talks about our role, don’t lose the main focus. God rescues rebels through regeneration.

Having set up the contrast with religious indifference and willful unbelief, John now talks about the incredible mercy that is given by God through the Light of the World. He starts with what people do.

Verse twelve says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” So there are people who do welcome Jesus into intimate fellowship and who do acknowledge who he is. There are some people who do open their heart to him.

John clarifies what he means by this by saying, “who believed in his name.” This phrase means that they believe that Jesus is truly the Son of God. They believe that he really is the Messiah and that he really can save people from their sins. They believe what Jesus says about himself and about them. And in their believing, they put their faith and trust in him. They believe the gospel – the good news that Jesus died for sinners. To believe in his name means that one has come to agree with the Bible about sin, judgment, and the atonement through Jesus. To believe in his name mean that you no longer believe in your name and in your ability to self-atone – to do things that would merit God’s mercy.

Next, notice the unbelievable thing that John says next. Savor the beauty of what is said here: “he gave the right to become children of God.” Remember who these children actually are. They are not just orphans; they are traitors. They are not made citizens; they are made children of God. Wow!

So God not only gives his Son, and Jesus not only gives his life. The right for sinful, rebellious people to be called children of God is given by God as a gift. "Give, give, give" is the theme of God's redemptive activity.

What's more, the gift that is given is incredible! They are not just granted clemency or freedom or immunity; they are given the rights of full-blooded children. They become part of God's family. They become the gracious recipients of all the privileges, honor, safety, and provision. They become the children of God.

Now this is unbelievable in itself, but John isn't done. The rebellion was unthinkable, God's intervention was undeserved, and the gift of grace was unmerited – but there's more. All of this happens by the power of God. God, God, God – it is all about him, through him, and by him. We would never have been rescued on our own. We could never do enough to deserve this kind of love. And we are powerless to change any of it.

The essence of the good news is that you cannot do it. You need someone else's help. You need the righteousness of Jesus. You need a new life, and you cannot create it on your own. Listen to what John says:

13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13).

John does look back at the conversion of these people – the ones who believed in Jesus – and he answers the question: how did that happen? And, of course, the answer is: "God did it!" But to make that point very, very clearly, he also says what didn't make it happen. In three different ways he says that being born again was not done in your power.

In fact, that is why he uses the word "born." This is why Jesus says the same thing to Nicodemus in John 3:

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).

What is Jesus saying here? He is saying that true conversion is a total transformation, and it is completely dependent on God. It is an absolute miracle! And it is a great mystery! Jesus uses the analogy of birth to describe what takes place. You are really alive. You are moving. You are active. But you didn't create your birth. You participate, but you didn't initiate it. It is a miracle.

To make this point clear, John says three things that do not create the new birth:

- “blood” – National identity, family heritage, and your upbringing do not create the new birth.
- “will of the flesh” – Your own desire, your own will, and your own decision will not create the new birth.
- “the will of man” – The decision of another person for you will not create the new birth.

Now don't you hear me for a minute saying that you don't need to choose Christ. And don't you hear me say that you don't need to believe. John just told us about belief one verse earlier. So I am calling you to believe in Jesus. Choose today to believe in him!

But the glory and the beauty of the new birth is that when you believe, you know that if it were up to you, you'd never believe. The miracle of the new birth is that you know that unless God rescued you, came after you, and recreated you, you'd be totally lost without any hope.

Again, Charles Wesley and the hymn *And Can it Be* helps us see this:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

The light of the world is the quickening ray that wakes us up, floods the dungeon with light, and sets us free!

Do You See?

This is what we celebrate during the season of Advent. We marvel at the beauty of Light of the World, Jesus, who invades our fallen and dark condition in order that we might be set free from sin. We consider the arrival of this child named Jesus who saves people from their sin.

What's more, we consider what our lives would be like without him. We think about how desperately we needed rescuing. We remember what kind of rebels we were. And we marvel at the miracle of the new birth – that God made us new creatures. If you know this and live in this truth, then it should transform everything in life, beginning with what you feel in this moment.

Again, as Charles Wesley wrote in *And Can it Be*:

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,*

*And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

You are free! No condemnation! No shame! So live like it!

However, there are some of you who are not new today. And you know it. The reality is that you are living for yourself – you do things that you know are wrong, and you know that you are not a child of God. You are filled with guilt, fear, and judgment. You are afraid. Frankly, you should be.

I wonder if today might be the day that you finally see what the Bible, Jesus, the cross and your sin are all about. I wonder if today you sense that this message is somehow for you. I wonder if today you “see it.” You see yourself, your sin, and Jesus. And you are ready – today – to receive Jesus Christ.

Receiving Jesus simply means that you put your faith and your trust in his death and in his life as a sufficient payment for you. It means that you believe in him. It means that you receive him; you welcome him into your heart, into your life.

It means – listen to me! – it means that you give up! It means that you know that you are a spiritual rebel who needs to be rescued by regeneration. You need God to make you new!

“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12)

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