

# The Light of the World

It was early days. Jesus had only just called some of those who would spend the next three years in close contact with him, but already his fame had spread out from Galilee, north into Syria and right down south to Jerusalem, even further afield. It is mostly those who are conscious of their own needs who come to him. He starts to describe the 'kingdom of heaven', saying who belongs in it and who doesn't, showing how the values of the world around just don't fit with this totally new way of life.

*"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under the peck-measure, but on a lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house."* (**Matthew 5:14-15**)

This is what it will be like for those who follow him and respond to his teaching, coming under the rule of the Father and being transformed by the life of the Holy Spirit within - they will be **very** visible, even from a distance, and nothing they do can be hidden away - very important, then, that the light shines out the right message: "Our heavenly Father is at work amongst us; give him the glory!"

He has more to say about light in **Matthew 6:22-23**. Instead of a lamp in a house, he uses the picture of the eye as a lamp to the body. To appreciate light and all that it reveals, we only have our eyes. If they do not work properly, our whole bodies miss out on the benefits of light. **Luke 11:33-36** combines parts of both these passages in Matthew.

Many people know Jesus's claim to be the light of the world in **John 8:12**. In **John 9:5**, he is already looking towards the time when he will no longer be in the world, and indicates that his rôle as the light will change. Later on, in **John 12:35-36**, Jesus is approaching the last few days before his death and makes it clear

to the crowd that it is possible for them to become 'sons of light' by believing in him.

Paul picks up this theme in several places, including ***Ephesians 5:8-14***, ***Colossians 1:12*** and ***1 Thessalonians 5:5***. In ***Ephesians 5*** he shows one of the most important functions of light, and of believers as 'children of light': to make things visible. This is not a particularly comfortable rôle to play in the world! He calls on the church in Ephesus to show up the darkness around them by living open lives which are honestly good and upright. He does **not** say, "you ought to be children of light", but you **are** children of light. For too long, the Christian church has given itself the reputation of being a bunch of hypocrites, with false righteousness and double standards. In the words of politicians, "saying one thing and doing another". Needless to say, the effect on the rest of the world is negative, actually promoting darkness rather than light.

When the Lord Jesus is praying for the disciples in ***John 17:6***, he describes the process which has gone on as he has revealed the Father to them. He has 'manifested' the Father's Name to them, made it known, made his nature and character visible to them.

This is the same word which Paul uses in ***Ephesians 5***, and John uses it again in his first letter. In ***1 John 1:2***, he tells it from his own viewpoint - "the life of the living Word of God was made visible to us."

In ***1 John 2:28*** and ***3:2***, John looks forward to the return of the Lord Jesus and makes a simple but profound statement:- "... we shall be like him, because we shall see him just as he is." This is a process which will certainly happen when Jesus returns but is also happening now, as Paul describes in ***2 Corinthians 3:18***.

It is good to become and to live as 'children of light' but our Father has greater things in mind - ongoing transformation! We need to go on being transformed, and this will **not** happen by looking at ourselves, even by reminding ourselves of 'who we are in Christ'!

It is much better to know that the Father has joined us to the Lord Jesus Christ, placed us in him and achieved in him all that we need 'for life and godliness' (see **2 Peter 1:3**), and then turn our attention to him, not to ourselves. It might seem like playing with words but it is the difference between trying to do it ourselves and entering in to what our Father has already done for us in Jesus!

If we do **not** know that we are in Christ, and it is our Father who has placed us there, we can try all sorts of psychological tricks to convince ourselves and give ourselves a 'positive self-image'. Some of them may seem to work for a while but in the end the truth, the reality, will become obvious and the house of cards will collapse.

Paul was not having any of that! In **2 Corinthians 4:2**, in the context of declaring the light of the good news of Jesus, he uses this same word 'manifestation' - making visible the truth, the reality, which is there in his life as he stands in the sight of God. He is not afraid to let what is there in his life become seen by all around.

Paul makes no claim to be perfect but knows that the work of God in his life is real and knows that this reality will show, even in his weakness - perhaps especially in his weakness! He knows that his old life is dead and gone and that the resurrection life of Jesus can be seen ('manifested') in him as he lives in that reality. Read the whole chapter, **2 Corinthians 4**!

This is no psychological self-hypnosis or auto-suggestion. He knows that the light of the gospel has shone into his own life, *"to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."* He knows that it is God who has done it and that his truth will shine out even from his shattered life!

There is not much point in trying to live up to Jesus's statement that we are the light of the world unless we have begun to learn this lesson. In reality, **we** are never going to be the light of the world. It is always Jesus who will be the light of the world, shining through us to the extent that we are transparent. Are we prepared to start learning the same lessons as Paul?

All this process needs to be going on between us and the Lord on an individual basis, but Jesus's statement is clearly addressed to the group of disciples, to the church, not expecting individuals to be 'the light of the world' on their own. The original Greek is clear: "You (plural) are the light (singular) of the world." What does he mean?

As we look into the great prayer of the Lord Jesus in **John 17**, he shows us how the company of believers will be effective in communicating to the world. Twice, in **verses 21** and **23**, he makes it clear that the oneness of his believers will make it clear to the rest of the world that the Father sent Jesus and loves the world. Very simple and straightforward.

It is obvious that a lack of oneness among Christians will severely cloud that message, perhaps even totally obscure it. There may be many aspects of Christian disunity that we can do nothing about, but one thing we can do is to live 'in the light' with each other, a vital part of our living as 'children of light'.

Once again, the apostle John puts his finger on it, in **1 John 1:5-10**. Light is concerned with truth and openness, a preparedness to be made visible before our brothers and sisters in the same reality as we stand before God, to confess to what is true about ourselves, even if it is unpleasant, and to receive the forgiveness which has already been won for us through the blood of Jesus.

In Christ. Dead to the old life and being made alive daily by the resurrection life of Jesus as a reality in our lives, constantly being changed by the Holy Spirit's work. Keeping short accounts with our Father and our brothers and sisters, dealing with known sin immediately and relying on the blood of Jesus for our forgiveness.

Transparency for the true light of the world to shine through.

*"If the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"*

Dave Taylor March 1999

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