

# HOW BRIGHT THE LIGHT?

By

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“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shined” (Isaiah 9:1). According to Matthew, this prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus began to preach (Matt.4:16-17).

The darkness was that of pagan tradition mixed with religious zeal, the blackness of evil desires and the shadows of greed and lust. It was the darkness of the cruel tyranny of state power and the blindness of a populace that was controlled by bloody sports, free bread and national pride. When the people looked to their religious leaders they saw the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the corrupted teachings of the rabbis.

When they looked to civil officials they saw men corrupted by personal ambition. They were at the lowest depths of despair. The darkness of evil was everywhere, as Job had said of his contemporaries, “They met with darkness in the daytime” (Job 5:14). Morale was at its lowest ebb and all spiritual light was gone. Into this mix of religious confusion, pagan tradition and patriotic devotion to nationalism and power, Jesus appeared as the light of the world.

However, the light did not burst upon the scene with dazzling brightness that drew everyone’s attention. The prophet had described Jesus as “a root out of dry ground: he has no form nor comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa.53:2). A Roman centurion would enter a community with shouts, the clatter of horses and the flash of steel helmets, swords and chariots. But of the light-giver it was predicted, “a bruised reed he shall not break” (Isa.42:2-3). Nor was the light focused on the high and the mighty, the palace or the people of fame.

The light was not that which was perceived by the eye, but that which penetrated the mind. The light was in the message Jesus brought, the truth that he revealed. As the sun lights up the physical universe, the son of God lights up the spiritual life of humanity, so that Jesus could say, “I am the light of the world: he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12, 9:5). The purpose of the light was to enlighten, to give man a knowledge of God, of His purpose, and how man might fulfill that purpose.

The message revealed by the light was revolutionary to the extreme, the very opposite of what the philosophers and religious teachers had held for generations:

“Happy are the poor in spirit...Happy are they that mourn...Happy are the meek...Happy are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness...Happy are the merciful...Happy are the pure in heart!” Who ever heard of such wild statements, so contrary to normal experience? “Happy are they which are persecuted...!”

Foolish ravings of a fanatic? So it may seem to a world that is blinded by its own idols. But Jesus was revealing the purpose of God, which is to have man in His own image.

The true aim is righteousness, not power, wealth, pleasure, nor the world's esteem. It is no wonder, then, that this light was unwelcome to the world. Jesus said, "Men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil" (John3:19). Men make a deliberate choice, but because of the corruption of the heart, the natural choice is darkness and a resistance to the light.

Truth is that which is real. The light reveals reality about God and His purpose, about man and his destiny. The darkness is the opposite of reality, including religious ideas invented by men, beliefs upon which they stake their lives, although none of them are true. Still the press, the arts, the schools, all choose the darkness – theories of evolution, religious traditions with pagan origin, ambition for worldly glory, goals of wealth and pleasure, gain at the expense of another's loss, and the approval of things God forbids under the label of "tolerance." Therefore, truth is unwelcome to evil. "Everyone that does evil hates the light, and comes not to the light, lest his works should be reproved" (John3:20). Consider how governments use every means possible to keep the populace from knowing all the facts of official activities.

Jesus revealed that "a man's life consists not in the abundance of things that he possesses" (Luke 12:15). He said that life is more than things and that to lose life for His sake is to gain it, that when one makes God's kingdom and righteousness his first priority, all the essential things will be provided. He revealed that our real wealth is that which cannot be taken away from us against our will, such as faith, hope, and love. He taught that death is like sleep, and that those who place their lives and trust in him will one day be resurrected from death to live in joy forever. He also warned that those who reject God's purpose will be put to death forever.

When one comes to this realization, a light comes on in his mind that changes him forever, and makes it possible for him to be at peace in the midst of the world's turmoil.

So Jesus said of all who would be his followers, "You are the light of the world...even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14, 16). He was telling us, "You are to live by the truth I have given and make this truth known to others. You are to act before them as I have demonstrated in my life. They will not glorify you for what you do, but will learn to glorify God our Father."

Paul wrote that we are to be obedient, so that in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation we might be "seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life" (Phil.2:12-15). We live in just such a generation today, but it fails to see the clear and shining light of Christ's example reflected in Christians. In the very season that is designated as a celebration of the Light, the followers of Jesus toss his teachings aside to join the trends of the "perverse generation.

What the light (the teaching of Jesus) reveals is that in these days there is not a lot of difference between the lives of Christians and the non-Christians. It reveals our sins, our greed, our covetousness, our grasping for the security of the temporal world. It reveals

our failure to humble ourselves, our failure to fully trust God rather than rely upon our own ingenuity and power.

The Y2K computer problem has prompted many leaders to encourage Christians to arm themselves and be prepared to kill anyone who would try to steal their beans and rice. It is impossible to reconcile this position with the advice of Jesus, that if someone takes away your coat, let him have your cloak also. To first century Christians it was written, “You took joyfully the spoiling of your possessions, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb.10:34).

Jesus taught us to have no fear of man, but to trust God our Father. Neither he nor the apostles made preparation nor provision to protect themselves, but considered it a privilege to suffer for the sake of the truth. Many today are more concerned with protecting themselves than they are with being lights to give others the opportunity to see the difference between the children of light and the children of darkness.

When will the statement of Paul again be true, that Christians \*may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life?” (Phil. 2:15-16).

To be a Christian is to be a follower of Christ, to walk in the light, that is, in the commandments he gave, and thus be a light to the world. It means to proclaim the gospel, live godly, practice mercy and charity, not lead a rebellion to fight the government or seek power to “impact society” through politics, and force compliance by legislation. Jesus lived in perfect obedience to his Father in a depraved society and under a hostile government. His enemies did not just ignore the light, they sought to put it out. Paul wrote, “For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph.6:12; And what are we to do? “Wherefore take up the whole armor of God...” (v.13): This armor is made up of truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer.

So, how eager are we to come to the light and examine our works and our lives by the teaching and example of Jesus? “He that does the truth comes to the light, that his works may be made manifest, that they have been wrought in God” (John 3:21). How willing are we to let the light of a holy and sanctified life be seen in us at the work place, and by our associates and relatives? When will people be able to see a marked difference between the children of light and the ordinary citizen?

How bright is the light?

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