

## A Season of Light

I think the first verse to O Little Town of Bethlehem contains some of the most beautiful lines in any Christmas Carol.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting Light  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight*

I can see that little town, lying quietly at night, unaware of the massive thing that is happening in her midst. The streets are dark, the stars are silent. But that darkness is about to be pierced by the birth of Jesus Christ, the Everlasting Light.

Christmas is the season when we celebrate the Everlasting Light coming into our dark world. The gospel of John captures the magnitude of this event in his opening words:

*1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not anything 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.*

John doesn't mention Joseph or Mary or a stable, but he's talking about Jesus entering the human race as a man. John begins his narrative by echoing the opening words of Genesis 1— *in the beginning God created the heavens and earth* – to let us know that Jesus was with God in the beginning (before time began) and was God and to draw the comparison of God's creation with God's new creation through Jesus Christ. Jesus is God come to earth as a man to make us new creations in Christ.

John continues to echo the creation account, where after God created the heavens and earth, everything was darkness. So God spoke His first recorded words in the Bible: "*Let there be light*" and there was light. John writes, *in him (in Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (vs. 4-5)*

The earth was dark until God created this amazing natural phenomenon called light, and in the same way sin had darkened the world with spiritual and moral darkness and so God sent His Son as the Everlasting Light to shine in the darkness.

It's interesting to me that John says that in Jesus was *life* and that life was the light of men. It would seem to make sense to say that in the opposite order: in him was *light* and that light was the life of man. It would make more sense because in the natural order light is essential for life but life isn't essential for light. Light can exist without life, but life cannot exist without light. Without the sun, there would be no life on this planet. We completely depend on the sun for life to exist, and not just its warmth. We need its light. Through photosynthesis plants convert light energy into chemical energy to fuel their activities. A byproduct of photosynthesis is oxygen, which life on earth needs to exist. Animals and people depend on plants to provide food and oxygen. Light produces life, life doesn't produce light.

But the light Jesus shines is different than natural light. The sun radiates light, and that light sustains life. But Jesus the Son radiates life; darkness-overcoming, death-reversing, abundant, eternal life, and that life produces light in our darkened souls. In Jesus the lights go on! Light that illuminates for us who God is, who we are, and what life is all about. As C.S. Lewis put it:

*I believe in Christ like I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.*

Sin darkened and deceived us so we spent our lives chasing after meaningless things, giving our lives to dead ends. The song says the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in order to enter our darkness, live our struggle, and eventually take our place on the cross. Jesus came to meet us right where we live, at the intersection of hope street and fear street, and to shine light in a dark place.

Human beings can only see a small percentage of the full light spectrum? In that band we see well, but there are light waves that are invisible to us. There are animals and insects that can see ultraviolet rays that we can't see. The bee is guided to their supply of nectar by brilliant UV markings in flowers that we cannot see because our eyes can't detect UV light spectrum. And there are creatures that can see infrared waves, creatures like the mosquito, that through infrared can "see" the warm spots on an intended victim that indicate where the highest blood supply is.

In the same way, because of sin's shadow over our hearts, we aren't able to see the light of God's goodness and glory. We are blind to His glory – not because it doesn't exist but because our natural eyes and hearts are unable to detect it... until God supernaturally enables us to see it.

*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Cor. 4:6*

Christmas is the season of God's light coming to earth, to shine not only in the world, but in the dark streets of our hearts. Let's consider two rays of that light and then close by looking at a by-product of that light in our lives:

*1. Jesus shines the light of God's love*

There is a kind of light that shines but doesn't warm. The stars in the night sky never shine brighter than they do on a bitter cold night, but they don't offer any warmth as they shine. They may be bright but they are also cold and distant.

There was a popular song years ago sung by Bette Midler that said God is watching us from a distance. The premise is that this world looks good from a distance. Up close we may be at war, but from a distance we look like friends. Up close we see anger and hatred and violence but from a distance we look like we're at peace and harmony and all is well. God is watching us from that distant place where all looks good and right.

The Christmas message is the opposite: God wasn't content to watch us from a distance. Jesus drew close – as close as God could possibly get - by becoming a man and entering the human race. Jesus came to shine the warmth of God's love in a cold world. God could have shined down on us from a safe distance the way a star shines light on us from far away, but it would have been a cold and impersonal light. God shone the Everlasting Light of His everlasting love on us in the Person of Jesus.

In the gospels we see Jesus radiating the warm light of God's love everywhere we look. We see it in how he touched and healed the leper. Lepers weren't to be touched – God's law warned not to touch the leper lest you also be made unclean with their disease. It makes medical sense, but think of how the leper was starved from human touch. When a person contracted leprosy, they weren't even able to give their children or their spouses a goodbye hug. Their lives were condemned to never feel the warmth of human touch again. Jesus could've healed those lepers with just a word, but he didn't come to shine on

them from a distance, he came to shine the everlasting light of God's love on them, and so he intentionally touched them. That touch didn't make him unclean, it made them clean. They were healed. And at the same time they felt the touch of God's love.

The greatest demonstration of God's love is seen on that dark hill called Calvary. There Jesus stood in our place condemned, taking our sin, our uncleanness upon himself. Why did Jesus do it? Why did God do it? Love.

*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Rom. 5:8*

That's why Jesus came. He came to heal us of our sin, our uncleanness, but he came to do it by touching us, loving us, accepting us, and changing us from up close, not from a distance. Christmas is Jesus shining the warm light of God's love.

## 2. *Jesus shines the light of Truth*

Truth is a precious thing – never underestimate the value of truth. Proverbs 23:23 gives good advice when it says, *buy the truth and sell it not*. The smallest truth is worth more than the greatest lie. One of the shadows sin has cast over this earth is the shadow of deception. Satan is a liar.

John goes on to say of Jesus in verse 14, *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14*

Jesus would later say of himself, *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me*. Now that is a staggering statement. He's saying no one gets to God, no one enters heaven, no one escapes hell and lives eternally except through him. It is not a good statement, not a kind or helpful or even sane statement to make...unless it is true. If I were to say to you that I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life and no one gets to God except through me, you ought to stone me. At the very least you should run for your lives. Because it would be a colossally dark and evil lie.

I happened to read a little bit this week about a man who lived in the early part of the last century, who in his early thirties began to claim that he was God. He called himself Father Divine. His following grew quite large over time. As I looked at pictures of this diminutive man, eating a meal or hanging out with people, I felt this horrible sadness that a man who was just an ordinary man would lie about who he was just to gain a following and fame and fortune. How tragic when people give themselves to a lie.

Jesus came to shine the light of Truth. He is the Truth – truth radiated from him like life radiated from him. There was no untruth in him, not the slightest lie, not the slightest deception. So we can trust what Jesus says.

John goes on to say that people hated the light Jesus shined, because they loved darkness because their deeds were evil. Sin loves the cover of darkness and deception. Jesus shines truth on us, truth that reveals our flaws, our sins, our imperfections. And we don't like that. But when God says "let there be light" in our souls, we find we are drawn to the light. We may not enjoy being exposed, but we know we need it. Like plants bend towards sunlight, our souls bend towards Jesus' light.

And when God says "let there be light" within our souls, He doesn't mean for us to hide or hoard that light.

## 3. *Jesus wants us to shine his light in a dark world*

<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Matt. 5:14-16

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. Eph. 5:8*

How do we do that? How do we shine Jesus' light in this world? Light of love, light of truth, light of Jesus (not our own light)? By living a life that witnesses to the light of Christ. Witnesses to the truth of Christ. Witnesses to the love of Christ.

A story I've shared before always touches my heart and illustrates well how we can be that light. A man named Wayne Jacobsen is at an airport terminal waiting for his flight and trying to read as he waits. As the terminal fills up he starts to get annoyed at the noisy crowd. This is what he writes:

*Why can't they be quieter? I asked myself...the commotion continued to grow until I found it impossible to concentrate. I looked up in contempt as I prepared to move my things to a quieter gate, and a little girl, no older than five, caught my eye. She gazed longingly out the window and then looked up briefly at her mom and smiled as their eyes met.*

*A burst of laughter pulled my eyes to a young Japanese family and behind them a young man stood quietly with a single rose in hand. I found myself captured in the human dramas unfolding around me...*

*Soon people began to come through the jetway. The little girl being held by her mother above the crowd suddenly screamed, "Daddy!" as a man in military uniform came through the door. As her mom put her down, she barged through the crowd and into his arms. The mother joined them in an embrace, nearly crushing the little girl between them. Tears pooled in my eyes.*

*The Japanese family began to shout greetings in their native language as an elderly couple emerged from the jetway. I wondered if they were the parents of recent immigrants, finally able to see their children's new homeland. Their joy, expressed in tears, deeply hit me, and I tucked my head lest anyone see mine.*

*I looked at the young man with the rose. He stared intently up the jetway, and with each passenger emerging his face grew more concerned. When the trickle of people finally stopped, his tension was visible. Had she missed her flight? "Oh no, let her be there." I muttered half in prayer. Seconds later she walked out and his face lit up. He ran to her, and [they] embraced.*

*...In just a few moments, my contempt for the annoying crowd had been transformed into deep affection. [How did it happen?] I had ceased to view the crowd as a faceless mass of humanity and instead saw them as individuals with unfolding stories. That is how Jesus loved...*

Jesus didn't shine from 6 billion light years away. He came to our airport terminal and saw our story. He entered our story. He came to where we live at the intersection of Hope Street and Fear Street and he shined God's love upon us. And he calls us to also see people not as faceless masses but as individuals with unfolding stories, and to meet them on the corner of Hope and Fear. And shine Christ's love and truth for them, praying that the God who said "let there be light" will turn the light on in their souls as well.

Let's join our hearts and pray together.

**I want to invite you to join us Christmas Eve at 6:30 for a one hour candlelight service reflecting on the birth of our Savior. Merry Christmas!!**