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John 8:13-29

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LIGHT CONFRONTING DARKNESS

When my wife was pregnant with our first child, I had the impression that the baby was a boy. I didn't have any preference for a boy or girl; I just knew it was going to be a boy. On delivery day, I was surprised. My daughter Sara was born and I realized I had been wrong all along. When the light revealed the truth, I realized that even though I thought I knew, I didn't know anything. I had been in the dark even though I had a fifty-fifty chance of being right.

We think we know God or know about him, but when the light comes, we realize that we had it all wrong. This is what happens in John 8 when the "Light of the world" reveals the darkness of the world. In our last study we looked at Jesus' statement in 8:12:

"I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."

We talked extensively about the significance of this statement and its connections to the Feast of Tabernacles, to the Old Testament, the new heavens and earth, and the world of creation. In the remaining verses of chapter 8 the "Light of the world" challenges and confronts the darkness of the world, specifically the darkness of well-intentioned religious people, the kind who would make great neighbors. Thousands of pilgrims from all over Israel have gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, the greatest and the most popular of the Jewish feasts. As the Pharisees question Jesus' authority, Jesus reveals the nature of their darkness.

So the Pharisees said to Him "You are testifying about Yourself; Your testimony is not true." Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone. But even if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone in it, but I and the Father who sent Me. Even in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true. I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me." So they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also." These words He spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come. (John 8:13-20 NASB)

The idea that God creates and brings light is rooted not only in creation but also in Israel's history. Israel was designed to be a light to the nations. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah is described by the same metaphor. When Jesus says he is the "Light of the

world," he is making a messianic claim. That is what the Pharisees took his statement to mean, so they ask him for evidence, for witnesses to back up his claim.

The discussion centers on what constitutes a valid witness. All law, not just the law of Moses, requires some supporting witness. That's common sense. If everyone spoke only the truth, no second witness would be needed. But such is not always the case. People tend to give testimony that is not completely accurate or true. When we respond to the witness of only one person, we often end up acting wrongly because we do not have all the facts.

The discussion is also related to what occurred earlier, when Jesus said: "If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true" (5:31). The Pharisees misunderstood this statement. Jesus was not saying that if he testified about himself, without supporting witnesses, that he was a liar. He was saying that if he spoke outside of what he saw the Father doing, and testified on his own, then his witness could not be true. Here he makes it clear that his testimony is true, because he knows his origin and his destination, which is a very important theme in John (3:11-13; 7:27-28, 34-35; 9:29-30; 13:1, 36-47; 14:4; 16:5, 28; 19:9).

Even though his witness is true, Jesus offers the Pharisees a second witness, which is that of the Father. The Father gave testimony to the Son primarily through the signs and miracles which Jesus performed. Every one of these signs was deeply meaningful to the Jewish mind-set. Nicodemus spoke for many when he said in chapter 3, "no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (3:2). The Father also was a supporting witness, because Jesus was fulfilling the predictions and promises of the OT. Therefore, Jesus claims he has two witnesses, himself and his Father, and thus fulfills the Law of Moses. Notice how Jesus refers to the law as "your" law. This was not to distance himself from the law of Moses, but to claim that he was the new locus of revelation from the Father, and the fulfillment of the law.

The Jews are seeking to bring a charge against Jesus so they can arrest him. Notice that Jesus is not being passive; actually he is the aggressor. It is not Jesus who is on trial, but the Pharisees. The Light has come into the world. The world is in darkness and rebellion against God, whether it is paganism or religiosity. In either case, darkness implies the absence of the life of God, eternal life. The Light of the world confronts and exposes this darkness.

As Jesus does this we learn several things about the nature of darkness. Let me mention a couple of things at this point.

1. People in darkness don't know God even if they think they do

This is the nature of darkness. We can't see reality; we can't see obstacles that lie in our path. In a dark room we bump into

things. On a dark trail we trip over things. We can't get the key into the front door if the porch light is off. The nature of light is that it reveals truth. We turn on the lights in our homes when it gets dark. When we walk the dog at night, we take a flashlight. Everything becomes clear with light. However, at times we think we can get along just fine in the dark. This was the problem with the Jews in their relationship with God. They did not have clarity concerning where they stood in this relationship.

Jesus says that he knows where he comes from and where he is going, but his opponents do not know. Later, when Jesus is asked, "Where is Your Father?" he answers, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also" (8:19). Notice the repeated use of the word "know." The Jews took great pride in "knowing" God. They were supposed to be the light of the world. But the truth is, they had forgotten God. If they knew God they would have recognized Jesus. They would have looked at Jesus and seen the Father. God was in their midst but they didn't know him. They did not know God, they did not know Jesus, and by extension they did not know themselves or the fact that they were in darkness.

Many people think they know God. They make bold and confident statements about God or about spiritual things, as if they were an authority. They say that if you are true to your own feelings, that is all God wants. They say that God helps those who help themselves. They say that people who go to church are bound for heaven. People who live in darkness make up things they want to believe about God. They create a god of their own choosing. They think they know, but they are in the dark and ignorant of the truth. I grew up believing in and praying to God. I went to church every week, sang hymns and knelt before the Eucharist, and yet I was completely in the dark about Jesus and my need for him. It is amazing how much the darkness clouds our vision of reality, of God's truth and who he really is.

But the darkness is not just out there in the world. The church is full of well-meaning, well-mannered, well-educated people who think they know God, yet they live in darkness. The darkness is deep within all of us. We think we know, but we do not know. The Light shines and exposes the truth of our lives, but we reject it and live in darkness. It is easy to shine the spotlight on others but not ourselves. It is easy to regard the Light as a privilege for ourselves, just like the Jews did, rather than a calling to be a light to the nations. We would rather live a well-ordered, secure, comfortable life than love sinners and people who are lost in the darkness.

2. People in darkness judge Jesus solely by human criteria

In chapter 7, Jesus told his opponents that they judged by appearances. Here he tells them that they judge according to the flesh. The darkness judges by the criteria of fallen mankind in a fallen world, outside the control of the Spirit. This is how they look at God, at others and themselves.

Jesus does not judge according to the flesh. He judges no one, not even the woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus came to save, not to judge. Yet he will judge by the fact that he is the Light that shines in the darkness and reveals it. And even if he judges,

his judgment is true because he is united with the Father. He is not alone; the Father is with him.

The Pharisees looked at Jesus from a human viewpoint. He had no wealth, no standing and no political power. They saw him as a troublemaker upsetting their well-ordered, secure world. They actually expected Jesus to produce his Father as a witness.

The world in its darkness looks at Jesus in the same way. He had no power. He never led a victorious military campaign. He was not the CEO of a top company. He did not promise an easy life. He asked people to give up everything to follow him. From a human perspective, it doesn't make sense to believe in Jesus.

The world wants evidence to support the claims of Jesus. But they want earthly evidence. They want hard, scientific data that God exists and that Jesus is who he claims to be before they believe. While there is much you can say scientifically and historically, I doubt whether you can fully satisfy someone's mind from a human perspective. We will not be able to prove Jesus is true beyond a shadow of a doubt. We will not be able to satisfy the world's skepticism.

The world looks for a loophole to justify their unbelief. Like the Jews, they do not want to look at all the evidence. They want to find one thing that they are unsatisfied with so they can reject Jesus and live the way they want to. Someone will ask, "What about all the people who have never heard of Jesus? How can Jesus be the only way? How can I believe in God when the church seems so unkind and unloving? What will happen to people of other religious faiths?" If the answers to these questions do not meet their human criteria, they reject Jesus.

Jesus is the true light that shines in the darkness. The darkness cannot validate the light. The world cannot apply the tests to which it is accustomed. The only testimony that can prove the light is the shining of the light. We must either accept this testimony or reject it. We must either come to the light or turn away into darkness. This is what faces each and every one of us.

Back in the days when I worked as an engineer, I was in the field late one evening. Around midnight, I returned to the motel with three co-workers with whom I had become good friends. As we sat around chatting, the conversation turned to God. My friends had long known that I was a Christian. I had had conversations with them previously, but that night they unloaded with all their questions and we battled until the early hours of the morning. A few days later, one of them told me that I had won the debate. I realized it didn't matter whether I could answer their questions. In the end, what mattered was whether they would respond to the light they had seen or choose to live in darkness.

Continuing the dialogue, this time with the Jews in contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus expands on the themes mentioned in the last section.

Then He said again to them, "I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come." So the Jews were saying, "Surely He will not kill Himself, will He, since He says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come?'" (8:21-22)

Up to this point, Jesus had escaped the clutches of the Jewish leadership on several occasions. As verse 20 reminds us, his hour had not yet come. However, he knows he is not long for this world, that he was being rejected and he was going away soon. He also knows that his opponents would soon lift him up on a cross, as we will see.

The Jews will look for him, they will keep looking for the Messiah but they will not find him. Jesus tells them they will die in their sin. The word “sin” is singular and points to the sin of unbelief. Because the Jews do not believe, they will not be able to go where Jesus goes.

The Jews ask whether he is going to commit suicide. They believed that people who committed suicide went to the deepest part of hell. Their sarcastic response implies that they certainly would not follow Jesus there. Ironically, Jesus will not commit suicide, but he will give up his life voluntarily and hand himself over to be killed.

And He was saying to them, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” (8:23-24)

Jesus says there are two worlds, one above and one below. He then reiterates to the Jews that they will die in their “sins.” Here the plural is used to refer to the actions that stem from the one sin of unbelief. The only possible way of escape is to believe in the one from above, the one who is not of this world, to believe that he is “I am.”

This little phrase “I am,” (*ego eimi*) is very important in John. It will be used again in verses 28 and 58 of this chapter. Jesus is identifying himself with name that God gave Moses in Exodus 3:14:

Then Moses said to God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM (*ego eimi*) WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exod 3:13-14)

But perhaps more pointed are the instances of “I am” in Isaiah:

**“Who has performed and accomplished it,
Calling forth the generations from the beginning?
‘I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last. I am He (*ego eimi*).” (Isa 41:4)**

**“You are My witnesses,” declares the LORD,
“And My servant whom I have chosen,
So that you may know and believe Me
And understand that I am He (*ego eimi*).
Before Me there was no God formed,
And there will be none after Me.” (Isa 43:10)**

**“Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called;
I am He (*ego eimi*), I am the first, I am also the last.” (Isa 48:12)**

For one to apply this title to himself was blasphemous and an invitation to face the wrath of God (Isa 47:8; Zeph 2:15). Jesus’ claim is tantamount to a claim of deity, since only God can say

this. Jesus is claiming that he is God, but also that he is distinct from God because he is sent from him.

What else do we learn about the nature of darkness?

3. People in darkness do not know the reality and result of sin

Jesus knows where he comes from and where he is going. The Jews did not know where they were going. They could not go with Jesus because they were going to die in their sin unless they believed in him, the One who is “I am.” The amazing thing is that Jesus said this to religious people who went to church and read their Bibles.

Jesus is now expanding on the theme of not knowing God. People in darkness not only do not know God, they don’t know themselves. They don’t see the reality of sin and what it is doing to their lives. They don’t see that they are dead in their trespasses and sins. People live as if they were really living, as if they were immortal, as if there were no consequences to their actions. They act as if all their good deeds and clean living will save them, that they are in control of their destiny. But the truth is, there is no cure for sin apart from Jesus. If you don’t want to come to Jesus to get to heaven, then come to him because you don’t want to live forever in darkness.

Once as a 22 year-old college student in Nebraska, I visited my brother in Iowa, where I had lived during my elementary school years. Like many singles in their early twenties, I began thinking about the girls I had known in sixth and seventh grades. I imagined that perhaps one of them was waiting for me to call. One of the girls I was thinking about attended my brother’s church. When I asked him about her, he said that something very dark and demonic had happened to her. Obviously, I didn’t call her. I had been reading the Bible and thinking about giving my life to Jesus. Upon returning home, I called my Christian friend and asked him about what I had heard. Was all this dark and evil stuff real? I asked. He told me it was and I had better make a decision so that I would not fall under the control of darkness. I asked him to come right over, and that was the night I accepted Christ.

4. People who live in darkness live in a world completely separate from God

Here Jesus is expanding on the theme of judging according to the flesh. The reason the Pharisees judge by human criteria is because they are from below, from the world, the realm of fallen humanity. The world below is characterized by darkness. Jesus is from above. He comes from another realm of being. The world above is characterized by light. The Jews cannot understand Jesus or his teaching because they come from two different kingdoms. Jesus is saying that the world and the place where he comes from are two distinct places. One is earthly, the other heavenly.

On the first day of creation, God separated the light from the darkness. After the fall of man, the same kind of separation took place. There is a world below and a world above, dark and light. These two realms have no point of intersection, other than the Word that became flesh.

People who live in darkness are completely unaware of this separation. Their thoughts, actions and beliefs are from the world below. The way they live, the way they view work and marriage,

the way they pursue their selfish interests are based on human criteria. They live on the basis of human power and wisdom, seeking their own glory. They are incapable of comprehending that which is from above. So it should not surprise us if they do not understand spiritual things; that they cannot grasp truth and life and light when they live completely separate from these things. We should feel great compassion for people in such darkness.

But again, there is application for us, too. If we do not live in the light and walk in the light, then our thoughts and ways of viewing life will be controlled by the world below. We too will operate our lives based on human criteria. Our actions will find their source not in the light but in the darkness. Even though we know the truth about Jesus, our marriages, our homes and our churches will reflect what is around us, not what is above us.

So they were saying to Him, "Who are You?" Jesus said to them, "What have I been saying to you from the beginning? I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world." They did not realize that He had been speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him." (8:25-29)

The Jews ask, "Who are you?" Jesus answers that he is who he said he was from the beginning, the beginning of the world and the beginning of his ministry. What Jesus has been telling them all along has been consistent. He is not reluctant to speak. He has been sent from the Father. He speaks from the Father, but since they do not believe, his words judge them.

The Jews do not understand because they are in darkness, living in the world below. When will they understand? Jesus says they will "know" when the Son of Man is "lifted up." Here he is referring to his imminent death and departure.

Is there hope for anyone to get out of darkness and the world below? How can one live in the world above, the kingdom of light? How can one come to know God and Jesus? How can we be born from above? And how can we continue to live a life of faith in the light? The answer Jesus gives is to look at the cross, the place where God's self-emptying love was revealed. Then we can know. The cross is the place of transformation, the place where the truth of Jesus is revealed. The cross is the doorway going from darkness to light. If we try to know God apart from the cross, we will remain in darkness and die in sin.

This is an obvious, gospel-saving truth for the unbeliever. But it is a crisis and a dilemma for us as well. The reason is that even as believers, we still try to explain God and how we live, using the wisdom, the understanding and the experience of the world. It is easy to lose the center and wander into the darkness. This is why Paul says that he will preach Christ crucified, he will know no man according to the flesh, not even Jesus, and that his only boast will be in the cross. Even as believers we must continue to humble ourselves in the presence of the one lifted up on the cross. We have to accept. We have to believe.

One of the ways we do this is by coming to the Lord's Table. There we fix our gaze on the cross and humbly receive what God in Christ has done for us. We do nothing; he has done everything. As Jesus said, we eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of him. This is more than a mental exercise or a ritual to refresh our memories. The life that Jesus gave continues to live in us. As we come, we participate together in what he continues to do. He is present in a very real way in the meal. We also "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Son of Man was lifted up to save us from our sins. Salvation is accomplished in his death, and only in his death. We can add nothing to it. All we can do is receive. Salvation is rooted and grounded in Christ and only in Christ. Jesus is not merely a great teacher, a great example or a great hero. He is Light and Life.

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