



## FEAR OF THE LIGHT

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 8:12-30

18th Message

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Are you afraid of the dark? When I was a boy, my older brother tried to convince me that everything is the same in the dark as it is in the light. But I didn't believe him because I couldn't trust him. Part of my nightly routine these days is to calm my three-year-old son Timothy's fears of the dark. His greatest fear is that the Count of "Sesame Street" is going to count him. The absence of physical light in a room can do strange things to a child's mind.

In the same way, the absence of spiritual light in a life can do strange things to one's mind. Many of us have had our lives and minds affected by darkness. In fact, we have been in the dark so long that our eyes have become accustomed to the absence of light, with the result that we think darkness is normal. An amazing result of this phenomenon is that instead of being afraid of the dark, we become instead afraid of the light.

That is the situation that the religious leaders of Israel found themselves in in their interaction with Jesus during the Feast of Tabernacles, recorded in the gospel of John. They had lived in the dark so long that when the Light finally appeared, they rejected it. Last week, in our studies in this gospel, we looked at a failed plan by the rulers of the nation to trap Jesus and arrest him. The leaders' cynical unhallowing of a woman they probably had set up to commit adultery is a greater revelation of the dark nature of sin than anything else recorded in the gospel. But, in Jesus' piercing response to the Jews, we saw his compassion, purity and brightness shine through in a new and wonderful way.

Chapters 8-9 of the gospel continue to describe the Jews' growing antagonism toward Jesus during this most joy-filled feast in the Jewish calendar. As we have already seen, the Feast of Tabernacles was designed to remind the Israelites, who lived all week long in booths made from tree branches, of the time their forefathers spent living in tents in the wilderness. In fact, in chapters 6, 7 and 8, there is a striking succession of three great wilderness images. In chapter 6, Jesus identified himself as the new manna sent down from heaven, the true food of which the manna in the wilderness was only a symbol. In chapter 7, he portrayed himself as the water that miraculously flowed from the rock when Moses struck it with his staff. Jesus is the true drink, the One who can satisfy the deep thirsts in our hearts. And here in chapter 8, he is the cloud, the pillar of fire. Those who followed it moved toward the Promised Land; those who didn't perished in the wilderness. In this story, therefore, Jesus reveals that he is the true Light of the world.

Another great ceremony during the Feast of Tabernacles was the illumination of the temple, which took place in the treasury at the beginning of the feast. In the center of the treasury stood four great candelabras, possibly as tall as the walls of the temple itself, each of which was topped by a great bowl that held about 65 liters of oil. Ladders extended

up to each bowl, and when evening came, young priests carried oil to fill the containers. When they lit the protruded wicks, the flames illumined the whole temple and the light could be seen throughout the city. It was to remind the people of the great pillar of cloud and fire that accompanied the Israelites through their wanderings in the desert. The Mishna tells us that each evening during the feast, the people danced before the candelabras, with burning torches in their hands, singing songs and praises; the Levitical orchestras cut loose and the people sometimes danced all night.

Here, before these immense torches, Jesus raised his voice above the crowd, and proclaimed these astonishing words, recorded in verse 12 of chapter 8:

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

What an astounding claim: "the light of the world"! In these words, Jesus claims to be the reality behind the symbol of the cloud.

According to Exodus, the cloud appeared on the day the people left Egypt. It hovered between the Israelites and the pursuing armies of Egyptians on the night before Israel crossed the Red Sea, providing protection from attack. It spread out over them to give them shade by day and warmth by night. And it provided direction for them. There were few landmarks in the desert. How were they going to find their way and avoid wandering into hostile territory or going around in circles? The cloud was God's answer. When the cloud moved, they were to move; when it remained in one place, they were to remain there.

What then is Jesus proclaiming here in the words, "I am the light of the world"? It is that he himself is the very presence of God in our midst. John wrote in the first chapter of this book, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt (lit. "pitched his tent") among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus is our protector. He is the One who provides direction. This is why the promise that he makes is so powerful: "he who follows Me [an appropriate thing to do with light, if it is the glorious pillar of cloud setting out the way in the wilderness] shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life." These are not the promises of a politician, like those we are hearing in the current Presidential campaign — pledges that will quickly be forgotten after the election. Jesus means to fulfill these words.

It is he who enables us to see things as they really are. He is the One who brought light into that first creation when darkness covered the surface of the deep. God spoke and said, "Let there be light." It is Jesus who brings light into the moral darkness of our world. He shows us who we are, and where we are. It is he who brings light into the moral decay, confusion and fear we see on every side today. C.S.

Lewis once remarked that we believe the sun has risen, not because we see it, but because by it we see everything else. It is Jesus who opens the eyes of our hearts and brings life into focus so that we can see clearly, without distortion. He helps us to see life as it really is. It is a gradual process, and I can bear personal testimony to its truth. I have found that if I want to understand this crazy mixed-up world, where a thousand explanations are being hurled at me all the time by the media, I need to listen to the words of the Lord Jesus. He is the One who knows life, who understands it, explains it, and corrects it. He can help us distinguish between what is true and what is false.

When I entered college, I was a fearful, insecure young man. Although I displayed an outward appearance of confidence, and seemed to have the ability to handle things, inside I had a deep sense of uncertainty and apprehension. I felt as if I was trying to play a game without knowing the rules. I was trying to guess them as I went along. I was baffled by the great questions of life: Why am I here? What is life all about? What is really worthwhile and how can you tell? What happens after death? I began dating a Christian girl who gave me a New Testament, and in the process of reading through that book, I came to know Jesus Christ and began to understand the message of his life. Little by little, things became clearer. I found answers to many of the issues that had been troubling me. It was in this light that I was able to recognize my own true condition: I was desperately sick with sin and in need of a Savior. In January of 1970, I began my journey of following that Light. And as I have sought to follow him since that time I have found these words in John 8:12 to be wonderfully true.

One fact, which holds the key to many other things, has become increasingly obvious over the years. The most intractable problems in my life are not due to the circumstances around me; they are there because of what is going on within me. I am the problem. "We have met the enemy and he is us," said Pogo. The solutions to the problems, therefore, are not to be found by changing others or by changing my circumstances. I am beginning to understand myself as the light of the word of the only One who knows what is in man, shines upon me.

Perhaps you feel that the darkness of your life overpowers the light. You have made choices that have resulted in deep scars, and you have lost hope that things can ever be made right. Hearing that Jesus can turn your dark past into light may seem unbelievable to you, but it is true. Light and darkness are opposites, but they are not opposites of equal power. Light is more powerful than darkness. Darkness disappears when light enters. My prayer this morning is that we will lose our fear of the light. Jesus said that he did not come to condemn, but to save. His light not only reveals; it saves, too. And his light not only gives us life, we ourselves become part of that light. He makes us light, and that light makes us a source of life to others. What a promise!

But not all who heard Christ's claim during the Feast of Tabernacles to be the light of life were pleased. Earlier, John wrote, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil." The Pharisees revealed their hard hearts. And their hard-heartedness revealed another truth -- that when Jesus is loved and trusted, his light is revealed; but when he is rejected, darkness descends. The wilderness cloud produced the same effect. Exodus 14:19-20 says: "The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and

stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long."

The verses that follow here in John's gospel reveal something of the darkness of the men to whom Jesus was speaking. And it was that darkness that was preventing them from coming to the light. Here we can see why it is that every person in the world needs Jesus Christ -- everyone -- and what it is that holds men and women back from the light and makes them spend their entire lives in darkness. Two things, ignorance and pride, keep people from opening their hearts to Jesus: Ignorance of the facts, and pride that refuses to submit to those facts and adjust to them.

Ignorance is holding many in darkness right now. They have come to believe a distorted, unreal picture of Jesus, one that makes him a caricature of what he really is, and not at all how the Scripture portrays him. It is critical that we see the true Jesus, however. That is the task of the church: that we might share his story in its simplicity and beauty in such a way that others might actually see who he is; then he will draw them to himself.

But here is something that is truly amazing. These people who are listening to Jesus are ignorant of the facts about him although he is standing right in front of them. Verse 13:

**The Pharisees therefore said to Him, "You are bearing witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true." Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness 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 people 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 He who sent Me. Even in your law it has been written, that the testimony of two men is true. I am He who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me." And 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.**

Jesus tells them, "I know where I came from and where I am going . . . but you do not know." And he goes on to tell them, in verse 19, "You don't know me or my Father." That is ignorance! These men rejected Jesus on the basis of a very narrow slice of evidence. Like many people today, they never looked at all the facts.

Jesus tells them that they rejected his claims because they looked only at appearances -- they judged "according to the flesh." He is telling them, in effect, "You regard me as nothing more than a troublesome rabble-rouser who makes claims he has no right to. You evaluate me on the basis the world uses to pass judgment and determine value. You reject me because I have no political influence, no wealth, no standing." Jesus was the last person in the world the Pharisees expected to fit the profile of the Messiah. He was a very unimpressive-looking Messiah. "You even think I came from Nazareth, in Galilee," says Jesus, "and for that reason I can't be the Messiah. But you never investigated and found that I was born in Bethlehem, according to the word of the prophet." As is true of many people today, the Pharisees were saying no to Jesus because of insufficient ev-

idence.

Next, Jesus warns them about the consequence of their attitude of willful ignorance. Verse 22:

He said therefore again to them, "I go away, and you shall seek Me, and shall die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come." Therefore the Jews were saying, "Surely He will not kill Himself, will He, since He says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come?'" 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. I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am [He], you shall die in your sins." And 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. Jesus therefore 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." As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.

These words remind me of Jesus' first conversation with Nicodemus. The Pharisees, religious men who prided themselves on their understanding of the scriptures, are completely blinded to the spiritual realities of life. They regard themselves as good and righteous people whom God would not shut out of heaven. But Jesus tells them that they don't understand anything beyond the limited, narrow range of facts which they could see with their eyes and hear with their ears. He tells them, "Because of your limited outlook, you are in bondage to the god of this world. You are living in slavery that will end finally in death and hell. I am the only way out."

Notice how earnestly he pleads with them in their blindness. These are not words of anger, bitter rejection, accusation or condemnation. Jesus is pleading earnestly with them. "You are going to die -- everybody is -- and you will die in sin unless you lay hold of the provision God has made for sin." But their pride made them blind their eyes and reject his word because they thought they were good enough already.

A great many impressions of Christ are popular today, but most of them are far removed from the biblical picture of Jesus. Here, however, is a wonderful picture of Christ, by author Dorothy Sayers:

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore -- on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe... He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as "that fox"; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a "gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other peo-

ple's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth and social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humor that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb. He was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had "a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly," and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness. (*Creed or Chaos*)

Ignorance clouded the minds of the Pharisees and pride blinded their eyes. It sounds hopeless, doesn't it? But, John adds,

"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." As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.

What is the salve to open blinded eyes? What is the key to unlocking the prison of slavery? It is the cross. When you see Jesus on the cross, when he is lifted up, then you will begin to understand the facts about life. That is what our Lord is saying. When he was lifted up on the cross, he gave himself for the sins of the world. When today we see that by the eyes of faith, then we will begin to see Jesus for who he is: the Lord of Glory, the Liberator of man, the Redeemer from our sins, the Cleanser of our shame, the One who can forgive us. And you will see the power of his word. You will see the sinless beauty of the Son of God who is the delight of the Father's heart. All of this becomes visible when you contemplate and gaze upon the cross of Jesus.

As we remember the cross, we are able to deal with the awful reality of human depravity, the terrible evil that lurks within every human heart. That is why we need not fear the light. For there on the cross we see the love of God spelled out for us, by a God who freely gave his only Son. The apostle Paul wrote that this God, "who spared not his only Son, will he not freely give us all things?" That is why the cross is so critically important. The hymn writer prayed, "Jesus, keep me near the cross . . ." It is there we begin to see life the way it really is, and to see darkness for what it really is. It is there, at the cross, that we lose our fear of the light. As John would later in his letter: "When we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin."

God's promise is that we need not be afraid of the light. As we step out of the darkness and confess our sin, we will experience the wonderful joy of fellowship and the sweet relief of his cleansing grace.

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