

The Life of God and the Light of the World

John 1:1-18

About a year ago, I went with two brothers from our church to a meeting with two Jehovah's Witnesses, a husband and wife. We had a good and informative conversation about the differences between our two faiths. One of the key differences between us and Jehovah's Witnesses is that they do not believe that Jesus is fully God. They will call him "a god," and even "mighty god," but they say he is not "Almighty God," a title that belongs to Jehovah alone (Jehovah is the name they apply to God). According to them, Jehovah created Jesus originally as Michael the archangel.

Something came into sharp focus for me during that conversation when the husband used this illustration: "I can't imagine Jehovah coming down into this world. If you are the owner of a store, and you have a mess that needs to be cleaned up, you don't clean it up yourself. You send your janitor to do it." When I heard that, I realized that the key difference between us and Jehovah's Witnesses is not merely our understanding of who Jesus is. It is about who God is. In their understanding, it is a task far beneath God to come down to us, to be with us and become one of us. So he sends us his emissary instead.

And if we hold to that view of God, we are left with the conclusion that the love of God does not reach all the way to us. But the wonder of Christmas is that God did not send a third party to save us. In the incarnation, God has not held back. He has given us himself. Divine love crosses the boundary between Heaven and Earth. The older I get, the more convinced I am that there is no heart issue that we face—no inner turmoil, no pattern of sin, no battle with anxiety, no emotional darkness or depression, no relational difficulty with others—that is not directly addressed by our inner grasp of the love of God for us. That is why Paul prayed for Gentile believers in Ephesians 3:17-19 that they would have supernatural power from the Holy Spirit to be able to comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, and in comprehending that, to be filled unto all the fullness of God. So my goal in this message today is to declare to you once again the wonder and depths of God's love for us, as revealed by the incarnation, in hopes that the Spirit will apply it to you personally in the face of your own trials, temptations, sins, and distresses.

As we explore the wonders of the incarnation, I want to draw out three major truths that come from this passage. These three truths follow a movement from who Jesus Christ is in himself from eternity, to his revelation to us in history, to its effects in us. I think the two ideas of "life" and "light" from verse 4 capture this movement well, so I have organized some thoughts around those ideas.

We see, first,

I. As the eternal Word, Jesus Christ has divine life in himself.

Here we contemplate the truth that Jesus Christ is fully God, not a third party between God and man. John makes that point very clear in this passage. Words are central to human personality and relationship. Language, whether spoken, written, or sign language, is the vehicle by which we connect to other people. I believe it was Mark Dever who once said that you may think you have a good relationship with your dog, but imagine walking home one day, and your dog suddenly said to you, "So, how was your day?" I think we can all agree that would take your

relationship to the next level. John refers to Jesus in this passage as “the Word,” or the perfect self-expression of God, standing forth as a distinct Person.

Verses 1-2 read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” We can note three truths about the Word from these two verses. One: the Word is eternal. There was no time when he came into being, but he transcends time. We see this in the first statement: “In the beginning was the Word.” These words echo Genesis 1:1, telling us that when God created the world, the Word was already there. Two: the Word was always with God. In the beginning, outside of time and creation, the Word was there with God. Or, as verse 18 declares, “No one has ever seen God; the only God [or ‘only-begotten God’], *who is at the Father’s side...*” This image speaks of loving intimacy between the Father and the Word or Son from eternity. Third: the Word was not only with God, but was and is himself God. John says so directly: “And the Word was God.”

How can it be possible that the Word could be both with God and God himself from eternity? In the early centuries of the church, theologians, drawing from the teaching of Scripture, argued for a concept that makes sense of these two statements, which led to our understanding of God as Trinity. That concept is known as eternal generation, which is the claim that the Word (or Son) has been begotten of the Father from all eternity. There was never a time when the Son came into being, but rather his very nature as Son is one who receives his being from the Father. C.S. Lewis used the illustration of two books stacked on top of each other. If you imagine that, you can see that the position of the book on top is determined by the book on the bottom. Now imagine that those two books have been like that from all eternity; there was never a time when somebody placed the top book on the bottom one. They simply always have been positioned that way relative to each other. That is an analogy for eternal generation. The Son has his being from the Father, but the nature of the Father is not something that can be divided into distinct parts, so it’s not like the Son is simply “part” of the Father broken off and distinguished from him. No, the Son is everything the Father is exactly, except for the fact that he is Son and not Father. When we say the Nicene Creed together, as we did a couple of weeks ago, we confess this truth by confessing belief in “Jesus Christ the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” By arguing that the Son is “begotten” and not “made,” theologians of the early church argued that his divinity is the same divinity as that of the Father. And these were the categories that gave rise to our doctrine of the Trinity, which is at the heart of the Christian faith. John 1:1-2 plays a major role in our understanding of that doctrine.

So the Word is eternal, with God, and God himself. As such, he is also the Creator of all things. The book of Genesis pictures God speaking all things into existence, and John tells us in verse 3 that God’s powerful, world-creating Speech is actually Jesus Christ himself: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Verse 4 then begins, “In him was life.” The word “life” is a word that often refers to salvation in John’s Gospel, especially in the phrase “eternal life.” However, I don’t think John is speaking of salvation yet at this point. When he speaks of the “life” that was in the Word from eternity, I think he is speaking of the divine life that Jesus possesses in himself, the life that is the source of all life in creation. John Piper has pointed out with reference to this verse that mainstream scientists today say that matter came first, and then over time, matter somehow produced life. By

contrast, the biblical teaching is that Life was present first—the very life of God—and that Life is what produced all the matter that exists. From eternity, the Word has possessed the life of God in himself, for he is himself fully God.

Sometimes in my Bible classes one exercise I like to do is to draw a vertical line on a board and write on one side “God” and on the other side “everything else.” And then I ask the students to tell me about each category that makes them different. I often expect that some will say that God is spiritual and everything else is physical, but that’s not true. Angels are not God, and yet they are spiritual beings. So the distinction has to be something else. The answer I guide them to is this: God alone is uncreated, and everything else is created. And between the two there is an infinite divide. God is not just a bigger version of us. He is a different kind of being altogether. So here’s a question for you: on which side of the board does Jesus belong? On the “uncreated” side or on the “created” side? Of course, he is fully God, so he goes on the “uncreated” side. But think about what the implications would be if we put him on the other side, as many false teachers throughout history have done. What if Jesus were a created being? Then he would be more like us than like God. He would belong to our side of the board. How in the world could he ever reveal God to us? If our Savior is a created being and not fully God, then we don’t really know God at all. God remains hidden in mystery, shut up within himself, and forever cut off from us. And if that is so, the love of God for us is greatly diminished by the fact that he forever holds us at a distance. But thanks be to God! Our Savior is none other than God himself, the one who truly can bridge the divide between God and man.

John’s prologue moves from eternity to time, and that brings us to a second truth in this passage:

II. As the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ is the true light of the world.

Jehovah’s Witnesses deny that Jesus is fully God. But did you also know they have trouble with the other side of the incarnation as well, namely, the humanity of Jesus? According to their view, Michael the archangel became a man, Jesus of Nazareth, and he was crucified for our salvation. On the third day he rose from the dead, but not physically. His resurrection was a spiritual one, in which he re-assumed his former status as an archangel. And that means he became a man for a limited amount of time, and then at his death and resurrection he stopped being a man. By contrast, Scripture speaks of the absolute necessity of Jesus’ humanity lasting forever once he assumed it in the incarnation. Hebrews 7 speaks of his high priestly intercession for us, on which our salvation depends, and it reads in verses 23-25: “The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” What this means is that if Jesus Christ does not remain a living man forever, he is not qualified to be the high priest whose intercession keeps us under God’s blessing forever. And so we confess not only is he fully God, but he is also fully man.

The movement in John’s prologue is from the life that Jesus has in himself as God to the light of revelation that he shines forth to us in the world. But the revelation that comes to us through Christ is actually two different kinds of revelation in this passage. One kind of revelation is what we call “general revelation,” that is, revelation of God’s truth to all people at all times and places that comes through created nature itself. The other kind is what we call “special revelation,”

which is given at specific times and places in history and is far more clear in revealing God to us. Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God, shines forth to us in both ways.

Where do we see that in this passage? I think we see general revelation in verse 4: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” I don’t think John is talking about the incarnation yet here. The verse is still in the context of speaking about creation, not salvation, and so “the light of men” seems to refer to what older generations called “the light of nature in man,” that is, the knowledge of God that is naturally implanted in us as human beings made in God’s image. In Romans 1:21, Paul says of pagan Gentiles, “For although *they knew God*, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” Even pagans know God on some level. The knowledge of God is simply inescapable, because the light of the eternal Word is the light of the knowledge of God in every person. So, what is the result of general revelation? The rest of verse 4 says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” John is the master of double meanings, and the verb translated “overcome” could be translated two different ways, and it seems John intended us to see both. On the one hand, it could mean, “The darkness did not comprehend it.” The light of nature shines into every heart, but in our sinful rebellion we suppress the truth about God, so we simply don’t comprehend the light that is within us. On the other hand, John also seems to mean that our suppression of that truth does not overcome God’s purpose to make himself known, because God has not extinguished his truth in response to our rebellion; instead, he has given us even greater light through special revelation.

How did God do this? He made himself known to a particular nation, Israel, in the Old Testament era. God spoke through a succession of prophets who came to Israel throughout the centuries. The last of those prophets was John the Baptist, whose testimony is referred to in verses 6-8. But John was not the light itself; he came as a witness to the true light. And that brings us to the climactic moment of God’s special revelation in history, which we find in verse 9: “The true light, which gives light to everyone, *was coming into the world.*” The eternal Word, who is himself the light of men, does not merely shine his light into our hearts from Heaven. He has actually entered the world to make God known to us.

Verse 9 speaks of the coming of the true light into the world, but verse 14 tells us how that happened: “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.” This is the summary of John’s version of the Christmas story. The word became “flesh.” He who was eternally with God, who was and is God himself, who created and sustains all things, entered into this world in frail humanity. He did not, therefore, cease to be God. He added to his divine nature a human nature, joining God and man together in order to bring man to God. When John says the Word “dwelt” among us, the Greek verb suggests the image of pitching a tent. The background of this idea is the tabernacle, which was a tent that Israel carried around through the desert, a tent that represented the presence of God with them. It was at this tent that the glory of the Lord appeared in visible form as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But the glory John and the early Christians beheld was a glory that far surpassed the glory of the tabernacle. This was the glory of the very Son of God made flesh, flesh that could be broken for our salvation.

One of the key differences between general revelation and special revelation is that through general revelation we understand something of God’s law. We all have an instinctive knowledge

of right and wrong, and we are all conscious of the fact that we have violated that law. But general revelation tells us nothing about the gospel of God's grace. Through special revelation, God has revealed his grace, but he has done so in stages, as verses 16-17 declare: "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." It is as if John is saying, "Yes, there was grace in the law covenant that God made with Israel. But we only really understand the magnitude of God's grace when we see it in Jesus Christ and in the new covenant that he brings." Contemplate the difference: in the old covenant, God's glory presence dwelled in the holy place, the tabernacle, in the middle of the camp of Israel. Yes, that was a gracious act. Israel did not deserve it. And yet, God held them at a distance. Only the priests could enter the tabernacle, and yet God's space, the Holy of Holies, was reserved for him alone. The dwelling place of God was not with man. Now contrast that picture with the reality of the new covenant: God's Spirit dwells within us. The veil of the temple was ripped in two, and *we* have become the holy temple of God! The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The incarnation in summary form is declared to us in verse 18: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." The incarnation is the fullest revelation of God available to us. In chapter 14:8-9, Philip says to Jesus, "Show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus' response is this: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." If you want to know the character of God, look to Jesus Christ. He who was with God and was God from eternity, has shone the light of God's glory into the world by becoming a man for our salvation.

So when you put all of this together, you come to this conclusion about the Person of Jesus Christ: he is not half God and half man. Nor did he change from God to man, ceasing to be God so that he could become something else. Nor is he a mixture of divinity and humanity, which would result in something else that is neither God nor man. No, he is fully God and fully man, one Person, with two complete, unmixed, yet undivided natures. Only one who is God and man can reconcile man to God. And this is who our Jesus is.

And so he who has life in himself from eternity has shone as light into the world, first through the light of nature, but then, in order to save us from the darkness of sin, through the light of the incarnation. So that brings us to a third major truth in this passage:

III. As the light of the world, Jesus Christ draws God's children from the darkness.

John 3:16 may be the most well-known verse in the Bible. It begins, "For God so loved the world." When we hear the word "world," we tend to think in terms of "the whole wide world." But throughout his Gospel, when John uses the word "world," he typically means humanity in rebellion against God. So the wonder of God's love for the world is owing to the fact that the world hates God and seeks to dethrone him. Yet he is undeterred in his love for us, and that is why he gave his only-begotten Son.

So let's look back at verse 9: "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world." The Word incarnate entered a creation that stood against him in rebellion. But what does John mean when he says the true light "gives light to everyone"? There are a few possible meanings, but I am most persuaded that what John is referring to here is not the inner light of spiritual understanding ("illumination" of our minds), but rather the outer light of God's

objective revelation. In other words, you might translate it like this: “The true light, which shines upon everyone [to expose him as one who either loves darkness or loves the truth], was coming into the world.” I am persuaded that this is what it means because the thought seems very similar to John 3:19-21: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

John’s point is that the coming of Jesus has brought every heart under the light of truth and has created a distinction between those who love the light and those who don’t. And we would expect that the masses who suppress the truth of God’s light through general revelation would see clearly his grace revealed in his Son and turn to him in faith. But in fact, and quite surprisingly, that is not how this story goes. Even the shining light of the incarnation does not meet with widespread faith in men. Verses 10-11 read, “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” Not only did the world not recognize its Creator, the people of Israel did not receive their Messiah. When the light came into the world, the masses were exposed as those who love the darkness.

So does that mean Jesus failed in his mission? Not at all. There is a prominent theme in John’s Gospel that the crowds misunderstand Jesus and ultimately reject him, but there are some who are drawn out of the unbelieving world by the Father and are given to the Son, and the Son’s mission is to keep them in the faith until the last day. The world may not see the light of God’s truth revealed in the incarnation, but all those given to the Son by Father will see. So notice verse 12: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” The many reject him, but the few who receive him by believing in his name are adopted into the family of God as his children. They are granted the privilege of sharing in his sonship. Faith, which is receiving and resting upon Christ, makes all the difference. What that means for you, if you are a believer in Christ, is that the love of the Father for the Son, the greatest love imaginable, is now directed toward you because you are in Christ. His destiny is also your destiny.

But John switches from the idea of adoption in verse 12 to the idea of a supernatural birth that makes us God’s children in verse 13. If verse 12 focuses on our faith, verse 13 gets behind our faith to show us the work of God that makes our faith possible. It speaks of believers as those “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” We cannot be born naturally into God’s family. John is so emphatic on that point that he makes it in three different ways. When he writes “not of blood,” John has in mind bloodlines of Jewish descent. Being a descendant of Abraham does not make you automatically a child of God. In speaking of “the will of the flesh,” John speaks of human decision. And in speaking of “the will of man,” he likely has in mind the will of a husband in initiating the act that impregnates his wife. The point in all three expressions is that being born into God’s family is a supernatural work. We call this “regeneration,” the act by which God makes us into new creatures, giving us new hearts, opening our eyes to see his glory in the face of Christ. The distinction between those who are God’s children and those who are not ultimately depends on God’s will. If you are a

believer in Jesus Christ today, it is not because you are smarter, or more clear-headed, or in any other way better than those who are unbelievers. It is because God in his grace has opened your eyes to the truth. You did not—and could not—have done that for yourself.

And so the light shines in the darkness, and while the majority of the human race has remained in darkness, the darkness has never overcome the light. John's Gospel teaches us to think of ourselves as a minority in this sin-darkened world. The whole shape of his Gospel makes that point, and it is illustrated beautifully in the story of Jesus' first miracle in chapter 2. When Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana, have you ever noticed the contrast between the large group of people who have no idea where the wine came from, and the relatively small group of people who do know (Jesus' mother and disciples)? John concludes that story in 2:11 by saying, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And *his disciples* [not the crowds!] believed in him."

Our minority status as disciples of Jesus is becoming more and more evident each day in an increasingly godless society. The price of following Jesus will likely rise in the coming years as Christians will increasingly be viewed as bigots, menaces, and blights on our society. We could look at our minority status from two different perspectives. On the one hand, we could lament our misfortune, wallow in self-pity, and crave the world's approval. Or we could see our minority status as an indication of the extraordinary grace we have received. We have been called out of the darkness of this unbelieving world to the light of life! We, who are by comparison few, have been given the right to be called children of God! When you suffer for following Christ, look at those who are persecuting you, and recognize that, if it were not for God's extraordinary grace to you, *you* would be doing the persecuting. And that would be far worse than receiving it.

Do you struggle to grasp God's love for you? Of course you do. We all do. Paul said it is a love that surpasses knowledge (Eph 3:19), which indicates it is not within our natural capacity to take in. John has shown us here that in his love for us, God has not held back. He did not send a third party to clean up our mess. No, he has given us himself. Love has come all the way down from Heaven to earth. And so may the Holy Spirit give us eyes to behold in the manger of Bethlehem, sitting under the shadow of the cross of Golgotha, the fullness of God's love displayed, the brightest blaze of his light in a sin-darkened world. Amen.