

# THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

SERIES: I AM: GETTING TO KNOW JESUS



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John 8:12, 9:5  
Second Message  
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*John 8:12, 9:5*

One of the biggest steps of faith I've taken was the decision to leave journalism for theological training.

I left what I knew—what I had gone to college for, what I had done for eleven years—for what I did not know. I did not know where this would take me. However, I had a sense that I needed to take this step into the darkness.

On the one hand, I don't think I can take much credit for the decision, because the Lord made it all but unavoidable, not least by making me miserable in my job as a newspaper editor. On the other hand, my mother and father, who were not believers, were not thrilled with the decision, which made the darkness a little darker.

We come, in our study of the "I am" statements of Jesus, to John 8 and 9. In those chapters, Jesus identifies himself as "the light of the world." In John 8, Jesus tells the Pharisees, and perhaps others, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). In John 9, Jesus tells his disciples, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5).

If Jesus is the light of the world, we can step forward into the darkness. Is there some sort of step you may need to take?

## Israel is the light

Who is the light of the world? Clearly, based on Jesus' words, Jesus is the light of the world, yes. But go back to the prophet Isaiah, who before Jesus came into the world said the servant of the Lord is "a light for the nations" (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). But who is the servant of the Lord? Isaiah tells us: the servant of the Lord is Israel, God's people (Isaiah 41:8, 43:10).

What did it mean for Israel to be the light of the world? It's as if the whole world can't see the truth that the God of Israel is the Creator God who redeems what he has created. Thus, so to speak, the nations are blind;

thus, they dwell in a dungeon of darkness, imprisoned by sin, locked away from the saving love of God.

There was hope for the nations, though, and that hope was Israel. The Lord made a covenant, or partnership, with Israel to bring his love to the world. As the light of the world, Israel was to "open the eyes that are blind" and "bring out from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:7). Another way of putting it is that the Lord made Israel, as the light of the world, for the purpose of bringing his "salvation . . . to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

## The blind servant

What happened? Isaiah could see what had happened—and what was happening. The Lord, speaking of Israel through Isaiah, said, "Who is blind but my servant . . . ?" (Isaiah 42:19). Israel, commissioned to open blind eyes, had itself become blind.

The apostle Paul accused hypocritical Jews who deemed themselves "a guide to the blind" and a "light to those who are in darkness" of forsaking both the Lord and their vocation. Likewise, Jesus accused the Pharisees of being "blind guides" (Matthew 15:14).

Therefore, God's name, instead of being exalted because of the Jews, was "blasphemed among the Gentiles" because of them (Romans 2:17-24). The light became part of the darkness. The solution to the problem became part of the problem.

Proud of their possession of God's law, proud of their status as God's people, the Israelites turned inward. Think of Israel as a lighthouse, with mirrors positioned to flood the world with light. Instead, Israel repositioned the mirrors, so to speak, turning them inward, keeping the light to themselves.

## Jesus is the light

Now Jesus comes along and claims to be the light of the world. What Israel was supposed to be, Jesus is. Jesus, all by himself, is the new Israel. He takes onto himself

the vocation of Israel to be the light of the world. Isaiah, realizing Israel's failure, could anticipate the day when "the people who walked in darkness" would see "a great light," and Matthew, with the advent of Jesus, could say that that day had arrived (Isaiah 9:2, Matthew 4:16).

What, then, does Jesus do as the light of the world? What does light do? Light is revelatory. Light, quite simply, enables you to see. That's what Jesus does: he enables you to see.

Because of his light, you can see reality: the reality of God as he really is, the reality of the world as it really is. Jesus, as John has already noted, "gives light to everyone" in that he enables everyone who is exposed to his light to see—if they want to see, that is (John 1:9).

Jesus is the light of the world by virtue of what he says, speaking the truth, and by virtue what he does, for if you say one thing and do another, you cast doubt on the words you speak. Paul said that Israelites' hypocrisy invalidated their claim to be "a guide to the blind" and a "light to those who are in darkness."

What does Jesus do? Supremely, he goes to the cross, showing us the reality of the world as it really is (desperately needy) and the reality of God as he really is (desperately loving). On the cross, Jesus "emptied himself": he "poured out his soul to death" (Philippians 2:7, Isaiah 53:12). Jesus pours himself out for us until the last drop of blood.

Jesus is the light of the world: he speaks the truth and embodies the truth. What is the truth? The truth is that we are desperately needy: we need God's Son to be crucified. The truth is that God is desperately loving: God's Son is crucified.

### **Can you see?**

Many of us don't like being told we're needy, for to be needy is to be dependent on someone to meet that need. We don't like being dependent; we prize being independent. For if you acknowledge that you are dependent on someone to meet your need, you're granting that person some say in what you do with your life. Billy Joel depicts our resistance to granting others such access in his song "My Life":

I don't need you to worry for me cause I'm all right  
I don't want you to tell me it's time to come home  
I don't care what you say anymore; this is my life  
Go ahead with your own life; leave me alone.<sup>1</sup>

Our preference for independence is understandable. After all, not everyone can be trusted. Is there anyone who can be trusted all the time in every circumstance to know the truth, speak the truth, and act with the best of intentions? Well, yes, there is. His name is Jesus, and he is the light of the world.

The truth is that we *are* needy. At the very least, even the most independent among us can't keep ourselves from dying. You can be that captain of your soul and you can do it your way, but death will not tremble to take you. After you die, then what? Then for sure you will need Jesus. Jesus tells us the truth, even if it hurts us, and in case we question his motives, he goes to the cross, even if it hurts him.

Can you see? Can you see that you're desperately needy? Can you see that God is desperately loving? Can you see that Jesus loves you enough to tell you of your need, that he loves you enough to meet your need?

### **What we need when we need it**

We walk—we live—in a dark world. You don't know what's ahead. We do not see how things will turn out. That doesn't prevent many of us from hoping that we can guarantee a positive outcome if we just think and plan enough. Forethought, though, rarely mitigates against the possibility of disaster, not least because we have no way of planning for all the variables. This we know instinctively, and therefore many of us are anxious much of the time.

No matter what we do, we can't dispel the darkness off in the distance. Yet Jesus says if we follow him, we will "not walk in darkness." How can that be? If he is the light, and if we who follow him "have the light," then the light will be with us wherever we go in this dark world. We can't see ahead, but we have the light with us as we move ahead. If we have the light with us as we walk, we see what we need to see (not more than we need to see) when we need to see it (not before we need to see it).

Therefore, instead of trusting in a specific outcome, we have to—we get to!—trust in Jesus. Who knows what we'll see next? Who knows where we'll end up? Thrilling? Absolutely. Frightening? Perhaps. In any event, we get to trust Jesus each step of the way, which means we get to be with Jesus each step of the way. We "have the light" with us. If we have Jesus, we have what we need. We have who we need.

The answer to Billy Joel's "My Life" is Louisa M.R. Stead's "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus":

'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,  
Just to take him at his word;  
Just to rest upon his promise,  
And to know, "Thus saith the Lord!"

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him!  
How I've proved him o'er and o'er;  
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!  
Oh, for grace to trust Him more!

## Take a step

If you have Jesus, you'll have the light you need for the next step. He may not tell you what that next step is, but you'll have light enough to take it. You may not know what to do, but you may know you need to do something.

Is there a step you need to take into the darkness, trusting that Jesus will give you the light you need? Is there something to be done that frightens you but also thrills you? You don't know what will happen if you take this step. The outcome is not guaranteed.

Is it relational, having to do with moving toward someone or some group? Is it vocational, having to do with work or school? Is it missional, having to do with sharing the love of Jesus in word or deed?

Don't concern yourself with the next ten steps; that won't get you anywhere. There's almost always a step to take. We walk with Jesus, and walking requires steps: one step at a time. What is that step for you?

For some, the next step is believing that Jesus is the light of the world; it's the first step in a walk with him. Is that the step you need to take?

Yes, it's dark out there, but Jesus is the light of the world. Step into the darkness, trusting Jesus will show you what you need to see when you need to see it.

## Posthumous letter

After I made the decision to leave journalism, but before I left, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. During that last week of her life, the Lord led me to shepherd her and the rest my family during her final days.

The night before she died, the Lord led me to ask her a series of questions about Jesus, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life, and though she could not speak anymore, she answered each question with a nod of affirmation.

After she died, my father handed me a letter that my mother had intended to give me questioning my decision to leave journalism. I read it, crumpled it up, threw it away, and said, "She wouldn't feel that way today."

## Light of life

If you follow Jesus, you will not only have the light; you will also have "the light of life"—that is, the light that produces life. As the light, Jesus leads us into life: into everything that the Father has for us. We don't know the future. It's unpredictable. But if Jesus leads us into life, that means the future will be great. For those who follow Jesus and therefore have the light of life, the future is unpredictably great.

That doesn't mean it won't be hard. That doesn't mean you won't suffer. That doesn't mean that someone you love won't suffer. That doesn't mean that your most cherished hopes won't go up in flames. That doesn't mean you won't work hard on, and be very excited about, a sermon for Easter Sunday and not be able to preach it because you test positive for COVID on Good Friday (as in my case!).

It does mean that wherever your path takes you, you will experience "life"; and remember how Jesus defines life in the gospel of John: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). You'll experience something of Jesus, something of the Father.

Step into the darkness with Jesus for a closer relationship with God.

## Blind man sees

John reports that Jesus "saw" a blind man (John 9:1). Seeing a man who could not see, Jesus sees the deeper purposes of God. From Jesus' perspective, the display of the works of God trumps whatever difficulties the man has endured from years of blindness. Jesus, as the light of the world, healed the blind man.

After being healed by Jesus, the formerly blind man identified him as "the man called Jesus." Then, he called Jesus a prophet. Later, Jesus asked the formerly blind man, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The Son of

Man, in Daniel 7, is a figure who sums up the people of God, ascends to God, and reigns over the world forever (Daniel 7:13-14).

The man has already determined that Jesus is a prophet who speaks for God, so he is eager to believe in the Son of Man, whoever he is. When Jesus answers, “You have seen him,” it can’t be lost on the man that until recently he hasn’t been able to see anything and that he is speaking with the one who has enabled him to see.

Who is the Son of Man? Why, he is Jesus himself, “he who is speaking to you.” The man not only believes in Jesus; he also worships him. Whether or not the man worshiped Jesus as God at this point, John has clearly identified Jesus as God incarnate, who is worthy of worship (John 1:1).

The man blind born blind has come a long way in a short time, first identifying the one who he healed him as “the man called Jesus,” second hailing him as a prophet, third discerning that he is “from God,” fourth believing that he is the Son of Man, and finally worshipping him.

Jesus is the light of the world. The man born blind sees the light. Jesus has opened his eyes in more ways than one.

## Too dazzling

Jesus, as the light of the world, gives us a better vision of himself, not simply that we might know more truth or know more about him but also that we might embrace the truth of who he is and be transformed by him. As Jesus says in Mark 4:25, “For to the one who has, more will be given.”

No one gets all of Jesus in one shot. Emily Dickinson wrote, “The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind.” Jesus is too dazzling for us to grasp all of who he is.

We learn of Jesus incrementally, in glimpses of glory, until the day when we’re ready to see him as he is, when he returns to consummate the kingdom of God as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in dazzling splendor. For a preview, look at Jesus in Revelation 1:9-18, where John was given a glimpse of glory and fell at the feet of Jesus like a dead man.

## Each step of the way

My father, who at first was not thrilled with my decision to leave journalism, came around. I was talking with him about my job at PBC over dinner one night and said, “Dad, I’d do this for free.” He was amazed—and delighted.

Every time I preached on Easter, he came to see me, and though he expressed appreciation for my sermons, and though I tried to share Jesus with him on occasion, he never expressed what I would call saving faith. Nevertheless, we enjoyed a beautiful relationship up until his death a year ago.

I didn’t get to preach this year on Easter Sunday. I trust that God didn’t want me to preach. I don’t need to know why he didn’t want me to preach. It was enough for me, in this case, simply to trust his heart.

But as I was thinking about my father, I wondered if the Lord was telling me something like this: “You know your father would have been here to see you preach on Easter. Well, he’s not here this year, so it’s fitting that you’re not here either. Take this year off—and trust your father to me.”

As I look back on my decision to leave journalism and step into the darkness some thirty-two years ago, I can say that Jesus has been with me each step of the way and that I have a closer walk with him.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

## Endnotes

1. Billy Joel, “My Life,” track 3 on *52nd Street*, Columbia Records, 1978.