

## "Lights In the World"

One thing that is a big part of all the Christmas symbolism and celebration is light. In Scripture, God often uses that image of light! It is an image I want to keep burning brightly in my own heart for the coming year. I was drawn to this image several weeks ago when I was reading Scripture and came to **Philippians 2:15**, which says we Christians are to *shine like lights in the world*. I remembered from previous study that some scholars believe this to be the central image that captures the joyful theme of the whole book of Philippians. All through the book of Philippians, in four chapters, over fifteen times, the words *be glad, rejoice, or joy* appear. Now, the image that captures all that joy in Christ is that of light. It is a great message for us as we enter a new year. The world needs to see Christians shine more brightly. It is appealing personally because it's hard to imagine someone shining like a light and not being a pretty strong and healthy human being. What I love about Paul's letter to the Philippians is that it is realistic about life, and yet it shows us it is possible to actually live a life filled with the light of Christ in the real world. **Philippians 2:15**, says the world is a *crooked and depraved* place. That's realism. But he still says, ***In this world, with all its very real problems, Christ can enable us to shine like lights in the darkness.***

*How do we do that? Well, the first thing we can say is that...*

### **I. TO SHINE LIKE LIGHT IN THIS WORLD, SHINING LIKE LIGHT HAS TO BECOME IMPORTANT TO YOU.**

In **Philippians 2:14-15**, the crowning image of shining as lights in the world is clearly important to God.

#### **A. God wants us to take to heart the powerful imagery of light as a symbol of goodness and of God.**

*There are hundreds of verses in the Bible that use this imagery in beautiful ways. Consider seven – seven aspects of this...*

**1. Light is what God first speaks into existence in the creation story. Genesis 1:3** God's first words in the Bible are, *“Let there be light.”*

**2. Light is a picture of God and his nature in all of Scripture.** **1 John 1:5** says, *this is the message we have heard from Christ and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him, there is no darkness.*

**3. Light in the darkness was how the prophets pictured the promise of a Savior.** In **Isaiah 9:2**, Isaiah prophesied that in the coming of the Savior, *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.* The gospels quote that at the birth of Jesus.

**4. Light for the darkness was the imagery Jesus repeatedly used to describe himself!** In **John 12:46**, he said, *I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.* He used the imagery of light repeatedly.

**5. Light was the image Jesus choose to describe his followers in his most famous sermon.** In the Sermon on the Mount, **Matthew 5:14**, he said his followers are to be the light of the world.

**6. Light is what is given to us and what we become when we receive Jesus and his saving grace.** **2 Corinthians 4:6.** *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.* The creation story pictures the new creation that takes place personally when you come to faith in Jesus.

**7. Light is what we are to embody and express in this world as we live as Christians.** **Ephesians 5:8** *for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.*

*Now, in all of this, the purpose of God is not just that you understand and take to heart the beautiful imagery of light.*

### **B. God calls us to actually *shine* as lights in the world!**

That's the point of many verses and especially **Philippians 2:14-15**, *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.*

**1. God has always wanted his people to shine in this world.** One of the great scandals of biblical history is that God's people have so dramatically failed to do this.

The key words Paul uses here remind us and warn about that. *Blameless, innocent, and without blemish*, and also *grumbling* all come from stories found in other places in the Bible. Paul is tying together all these stories relating the lessons to our lives. In Genesis, God chose Abraham. God said he would bless the world through Abraham and his descendants. God said, walk before me and be *blameless*. Later God used Moses to lead the descendants of Abraham from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. They were supposed to be a set-apart people full of faith shining like lights in this world, but when they experienced hardships, they grumbled. In the book of **Deuteronomy, chapter 32**, these grumbling people became a people who were *blemished, crooked, and twisted*. So Paul is making a connection to the larger story of the Bible. He's saying the calling of God to be light in this world is the same for us, and the temptations that undermine that calling are the same also. You have the resources in Christ to do better. Trust him and shine like lights in this world.

**2. This is a mission and purpose that can shape all of life.** There are few things more powerful than a sense of purpose. If your purpose is to become a doctor or a teacher or an engineer, you have to plan for that and do the things that make it possible. If you are an athlete or an artist, and there is something you want to accomplish, you pursue that purpose, and it requires choices and sacrifices. It eliminates some options and prioritizes certain actions. In the same way, if you make it your purpose to be the light and to shine like light in this world, it will affect your entire life. It will have an impact on the way you handle hardship. It will shift your priorities. It will impact the way in which you engage politics and the way you interact with people. This is more important than any other resolution you might make this year. Make this your purpose, your 2021 resolution, to shine like light in this world.

*If the apostle only said we are to shine like light in the world, perhaps this would simply be a very heart-warming Scripture to encourage us, but when you look at the whole passage, there is a serious and challenging part of this that can not be minimized because it says.*

## **II. TO SHINE LIKE LIGHT IN THIS WORLD WE HAVE TO STOP GRUMBLING AND DISPUTING.**

That's **verses 14-15**, *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.*

Now, in light of other Scriptures, we know...

**A. This does not mean that you are supposed to just bury your emotions under a tight lid of pretense.**

*The Scriptures actually teach us that...*

**1. It is important to honestly pour out your heart to God in prayer.** In **Psalm 142**: David says, "With my voice I cry out to the Lord; with my voice I plead for mercy to the Lord. 2 I pour out my **complaint** before him; I tell my trouble before him." God wants you to pour out your heart to Him. He welcomes honesty and is close to the broken-hearted.

**2. It is often important to share your struggles with people.**

**Galatians 6:2** says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." It's one thing to open up to an appropriate confidant who will guide you toward godliness and to say, "I'm really struggling with this issue, and I don't want to carry this all alone" - but it's another thing to walk around negative, critical, and bitter, stewing in it inwardly and spreading it all with grumbling. That, God says, needs to stop.

*So we can share and pray with honesty and sincerity, but...*

**B. We have to learn how to live, from the heart, without unhealthy grumbling and ungodly disputing.**

**1. "Grumbling" is a failure of faith and love.** When we grumble, good things are taken for granted but what we perceive to be wrong gets all the attention. *Grumbling* shows up in unbalanced criticism, impatience towards what you don't fully understand, unrealistic expectations so that nothing measures up, an unwillingness to accept difficulties gracefully and to follow others as they lead us or to bear with those we are called to lead.

One interesting thing about this passage in Philippians, is that God links this big idea of bringing light to the darkness to something we might be tempted to think of as insignificant; grumbling. Maybe we think grumbling is not such a big deal. After all, there is a whole army of bigger problems in the world and bigger sins in my life. Well, we might be tempted to think that way, but then we come up against the fact that here is this old warrior, the apostle Paul, who had been on the front lines of the most important spiritual battles of his day. He is filled with the Spirit of God, and he is writing inspired Scripture from his prison cell in Rome. He does not waste words or miss the point, and he says that this issue of grumbling is not a small issue but a big issue. When we are grumbling, we aren't shining. So he says it needs to stop.

**2. “Disputing” is a failure to obey God.** This is a word used in the Bible, not only for arguing with other people but for inward arguing in your mind with God. It seems that when there is grumbling, there is usually inward disputing with God as well. The reason we grumble and dispute is that we are sinful and proud. We look at life and God and say, "God! What are you doing?" You could say God has one crucial question for us. God asks you, in effect: "Which of us is God?" And then God has a follow-up question: "Will you trust me?" As Jesus and all of Scripture teaches us, there is one true and living God, so you are sort of stuck with him – which of course, is not a bad thing because he is wonderful. But because he is God and you are not, is it not your way right away but God's way all the time. You are not as smart as you might imagine. You are not as good as you might think you are. You are not as loving, knowledgeable, good, or wise as God. You can trust God or trust yourself. Everything else is details, but to shine in this world, you have to so trust God that stop grumbling and disputing.

I love that Paul says in resisting grumbling, we are holding fast to the word of life. God's word gives life! A doctor doesn't forbid a patient from eating something *because* it tastes good. A doctor forbids you from eating something *even though* it tastes good, It is undermining your life and health. That's the way it is with God's Word. Sometimes grumbling and complaining feels good, and it brings the momentary relief of sympathy and even validation from well-meaning friends, but that is a deceptive substitute for the healing power of going deeper with God finding your life in him, and choosing to fulfill your purpose to shine as light in this world holding fast the word of life.

*To shine like light in this world has to be our purpose as we live in this world. To shine as lights in this world, we have to stop grumbling. There is a third thing without which we cannot do anything.*

### **III. TO SHINE AS LIGHTS IN THIS WORLD CHRIST HAS TO BE THE CENTER OF YOUR LIFE.**

This is the primary revelation of Philippians. In each of the four chapters, we are pointed to Christ in slightly different ways. Consider reading Philippians this week. That's a great way to prepare for a New Year. As you do, consider that for each chapter, there is a key truth.

*The first chapter teaches you to,*

#### **A. Make Christ the Purpose of your life.**

The key verse is **Philippians 1:21**. *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* That is a life-shaping purpose. In the same chapter, Paul writes about prison and loss of freedom. He goes on in the chapter to talk about people kicking him when he was down. In **verse 18**, Paul says: *But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...* To shine like that, we have to say with Paul, *“to live is Christ and to die is gain.”*

*That's the first chapter. The second chapter tells you to,*

**B. Make Christ Himself the Inspiration for your life.**

The key verses are **Philippians 2:4-5**, which say, *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,<sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.* He talks about the humility and the sacrifice of Christ and how after he died for our sins, God raised him up as Lord of all. He says Jesus is your inspiration. Christ is more than an example. He is our Savior. But as our Savior, he inspires us with his example. Follow him.

*Your purpose is Jesus, chapter 1, but now your inspiration is Jesus, that is chapter 2. Then the third chapter says*

**C. Make your salvation in Christ the Treasure of your life.**

The verse is **Philippians 3:8-9**, *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.* If you go back and read **Philippians 3**, you will see a list of things we might think will make us righteous and give us status and significance and satisfaction or even salvation. He says you know what all that amounts to when it comes to real righteousness and joy? Our translation says, *rubbish* but the Greek word is stronger.

When you give up your foolish claims to be righteous in yourself and trust in Christ, **verses, 8 and 9** say you are *found in Christ*. In Christ you have a righteousness that comes from God not by your works but by faith. The greatest of all treasures is not a reward you earn at the end of a good life but a gift you receive the moment you trust in Christ.

Our sins are paid for by his death on the cross, his righteousness is given to us as a gift of grace when we place our faith in Jesus. If you haven't recognized that your attempts at righteousness, your goodness and good works, are rubbish, and in that recognition turned to Christ to place your faith in him as your Savior, don't let another year, another hour go by, without responding to God's grace and receiving Christ. Trust in him. Tell him you are trusting in him.

If you receive the righteousness of Christ by faith, you can know you are loved, accepted and forgiven by the only one whose opinion finally counts. You don't have to struggle for status, significance or salvation. You are free to live as a child of God, to rest and rejoice in his grace.

*Make your salvation in Christ the treasure of your life and shine like light in this world. That's the third chapter. The fourth chapter says,*

**D. Make the presence of Christ the Strength of your life.**

**Philippians 4:13** says, *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.* Do you find your strength in Christ? Think of your life as a lamp. We want to see our lives lit up with strength and joy. So we try to plug our lamp in to people or possessions, or plans of our own, and every time we get an inadequate current, or worse, a painful shock. Some people carry around dozens of "extension cords" and try to plug them into the Lord as well as all the people and things as they can. But God says only one place we can find lasting life and power: that is in Christ. I have found that when something is troubling me *if* instead of continuing to grumble about it, I can catch myself, it can become an opportunity to go deeper with God. It isn't easy, but it is better. Whenever you find yourself grumbling and disputing, stop and look at whether you have allowed yourself to not just get a little discouraged but to actually get plugged into the wrong source of power altogether. If that's what's happened, you need to un-plug from whatever you have been plugged into (the Bible calls that repentance), and then you have to plug your heart back into the Word of Life (the Bible calls that faith).

## **CONCLUSION**

To shine like light in this world – that actually shining like light has to be your purpose. You have to fight grumbling and center your life in Christ.

**Amen**

## **Prayer of Response**

Dear Lord, as we enter this new year, we thank you that Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. We affirm our faith in Jesus as our only Lord and Savior. We confess our dependence on your Holy Spirit, who indwells and empowers us. We trust in you as our Fatherly and ask that we might glorify you in all we do. Forgive the grumbling and disputing that dims the light of your presence in our lives. Enable us by your Holy Spirit to shine brightly in a crooked and twisted generation. May your son, our Savior, be our life and strength. We pray in his holy name, Amen.