



## The Word: The Life & the Light

### The Incarnate Word Series #2

John 1:4-13

David Sunday

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Emmanuel, God within us dwelling, make us what You would have us be. Shine into our hearts through the light of Your Word. By the illuminating power of the Spirit, help us see, savor and be transformed into the likeness of Your Son, Jesus. It is in His name that we pray. Amen.

Let's turn in our Bibles and continue in worship as we read from John 1. Matthew takes us to wise men and a foolish king in his Gospel. Luke shows us shepherds and let's us hear the song of Angels. But John peels back the curtain and allows us to see the glory of Christ before there was time. He takes us all the way back into eternity, when nothing existed but God Himself. John says to us, "Come, behold the wondrous mystery!"

The purpose of Advent is to captivate our hearts and minds' imaginations, so that we will worship this great God. Both staggering realities that are at the center of the Christian faith stand here in the prologue to John's Gospel. In verse one, we see "...*the Word was God.*" In verse 14, "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*" Jesus is fully God and fully man. These are the two hinges upon which the door of Christianity opens to glorious realities. Everything we believe revolves around this truth of Christ being fully God and fully man.

So come and behold the wondrous mystery as we read John 1:1-14 together:

*<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. <sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*

*<sup>9</sup>The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

Thanks be to God for His living Word!

John is at once simple and sublime. His message is simple enough for a child to comprehend. Most of us aren't children, so we probably need an explanation of this message. However, it is very clear and simple. Jesus is the life Who brings light to all people, but humanity is blind to the light because we are spiritually dead. Everyone who receives Jesus can be born again to a new life as a child of God. That is the message that we are going to look at in John 1:4-13.

If you have been in church for any amount of time, you have heard these truths. It is very possible to think, "I know all that." But John understood that not only is this a simple and clear message, it is also profound and sublime. John took these themes from the prologue and developed them throughout his Gospel. He goes round and round, almost in a circular fashion, coming back again and again to these same truths. Each time, he leads us deeper and deeper into them.

Some cities are built on a grid with many square blocks, and it is easy to find your way around. The city I grew up in, Kenosha, was a lot like that. There were a whole lot of square blocks, and it was easy to find an address. All you needed was the first two numbers of the address along with the street number, and you could put it together in the grid and find your way anywhere in the city. Chicago is a lot like that as well, built on square blocks.

Other cities are more circular. When Kate and I went to Paris, we went on one street that seemed to wind around in a grand circle. All of the main attractions, such as the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower, were on this street, and we ended up where we began. John's Gospel is a lot like that. Some people struggle a bit with John. If you are used to reading Paul, his books are more structured and propositional. John seems more circular.

Back where we were growing up, Renault, the French auto manufacturer, moved into Kenosha and took over the American Motors plant there. Kate's French teacher in high school said that many of the executives who moved from France to Wisconsin preferred to live in Racine. They didn't want to live in Kenosha because the streets were more circular in Racine and they appreciated that approach.

John is circular like that in his Gospel. So we are going to go in a circle and end up right where John begins. When we get there, we will get a sense of the deep meaning of what John is saying.

### **In Him Was Life**

Let's start at the beginning of verse four with this truth: "*In him was life...*" Now, we need to ask, In whom was life? The answer is the One Who in the beginning was the Word (verse one),

Who was with God and Who was God. In this eternal Word was life. In the beginning, before anything was made, when nothing but God existed, there was life. God is life. God is alive. Life resides in God and in the eternal Christ. We are not a product of a big bang of inanimate material. We are the creation of a personal God Who has life in Himself. Strictly speaking, it is not even right to say God created life. It is better to say that He is life. In Him is life and all that exists—everything material and immaterial. All living things find their life in Him.

The implication is that we have no life apart from Christ. We have no physical life. In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). John's greater concern is that there is no spiritual life apart from Christ.

If you look at John 20:31, you will see that the whole purpose of John's Gospel was that we might believe in Christ to receive this life. John 20:31 says, "... [B]ut these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John said, "This is why I am writing my Gospel: so that by believing in Christ you may have life in His name."

This was the passion of John's life. Toward the end of his life, the old man and apostle wrote these words in 1 John 5:11-12: "*And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*" It doesn't get any clearer than that. If you have Christ, you have life; if you do not have Christ, you do not have life.

Jesus understood this Himself. He came into the world that we might have this life. In John 5:39-40, Jesus said to religious people, "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*"

Jesus grieved over this. The reason He came is clear in John 10:10: "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*" For all who believe in Him, He said, "*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. And no one will snatch them out of my hand*" (John 10:28). In Him was life. We start there.

### **The Life Was the Light of Men**

Now, let's continue on our journey to the next point. Here we see a great light shining in chapter one. Beginning in the second part of verse four, we read these words: "*And the life was the light of men.*" I said that over and over again in my mind. Meditate on that truth: And the life was the light of men.

We have to think about that. We sing about this truth: "Light and life to all He brings." The life was the light. There is another song we sing where we meditate on this truth. It was

written by Ambrose of Milan back in the third or fourth century. The early church fathers loved to think of things like this. It says:

O splendor of God's glory bright,  
O Thou that bringest light from light;  
O Light of light, light's living spring,  
O day, all days illumining.

The life, Christ, was the light of men. What happens, then, if we don't have the life of Christ? If that life is the light of men, what happens when we don't have that life? We are in the dark. We cannot see.

If you talk about light to scientists, they think about energy. If you talk about light to philosophers, they think about wisdom. If you talk about light to religious worshipers, they may think of purity and perfection. Energy, wisdom, purity and perfection—Christ is all of these things.

- When John talks about Jesus being the light, He is the energy of God. We read in verses two and three that all things were made through Him and, without Him, there was not anything made that was made. Apart from Christ, I cannot produce anything that is pleasing to God.
- Christ is the wisdom of God. He is the One Who is the Word, Who was with God, and Who was God, communicating the reality and essence of Who God is from all eternity. Christ is the wisdom of God and, apart from Him, I walk in utter foolishness and am lost.
- Christ is the purity and perfection of God. Apart from Him, I cannot have holiness. His life is the light of men. Apart from Him, I am lost.

What John said in verse 4b is that there is a type of seeing, or knowledge, that can only be made possible through the life that is in Christ entering you. Apart from His life in you, there are things you will be utterly blind to and you will walk in darkness. We read John 8:12 earlier, where Jesus said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."*

### **The Light Shines in the Darkness**

Let's continue on our journey to the third stopping point. There is good news in verse five. It says, *"The light shines in the darkness...."* In other words, it did not just shine in Bethlehem, as we sing in the hymn, "Yet, in Thy dark street shineth an everlasting light." An everlasting light is still shining today. It is shining in the darkness. That says something about God's nature. He is a God Who shines. He is a God Who communicates life and light. He is not a black hole absorbing matter and energy, sucking glory from all that exists. He is a life-giving,

light-giving, and “shining out” kind of God, according to Peter Meade. That is the kind of God we have.

The light shines in the darkness. The very Son of heaven’s love, in lasting radiance from above, still shines today. This world is a place of darkness, a place of death. Thanks be to God that we celebrate at Christmas that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light! Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shone (Isaiah 9:20; Matthew 4:16).

### **The Darkness Has Not Overcome the Light**

Verse five: *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not...”* Depending on what Scripture translation you have, you are going to see a variety of words there that are trying to translate a Greek word that could have different meanings. If you have the ESV or the New Living Translation, it has the idea of the darkness being unable to overcome, extinguish or put out the light. If you have the old NIV, the New King James Version or a number of other versions, the idea here is that the darkness did not comprehend or understand the light. Which one is it?

Let’s take our English word “grasp” for a minute. What does it mean to grasp something? It could mean: “I can’t wait to get my hands on you because I want to hurt you!” To grasp something could mean to seize it with hostile intent so as to destroy it. Or, to grasp something could mean to understand it. “I grasp that idea, that concept. I get it! I see.” So what does it mean when John says the darkness has not grasped the light? That is basically what the Greek word means: to grasp something.

John was smart. I think he understood that the Greek word could go either way. Both of them are true. Praise God! The darkness cannot distinguish the light of Christ going out in all the world. Doesn’t history prove that truth? The darkness cannot put out the light. However, the other definition is equally true. The darkness cannot comprehend, or understand, the light. As we progress in our journey to verses 10-11, I think the context will support this idea that John is referring to in verse five and we’ll see both of these meanings are true.

### **Witnesses to the Light**

So light is shining, but darkness is not comprehending. It is not understanding that light. We are going to think about why that is, but thanks be to God there are witnesses to the light in the world today! Look at verses six through nine. *“There was a man sent from God...”* Just pause there for a minute. God could have sent angels to witness to the light of Jesus, and He did when Jesus was born. God could have written messages in the sky with clouds and smoke. God

could have given a voice to the wind, so that, as the wind blows in the morning, you hear, “Christ died for your sins. Repent and believe the gospel.” You are hearing truth from God in the wind.

But that’s not how God chose to convey the truth about the light. What did He do? He sent a man named John; or a woman named Reba; or some other living witness to the truth. Think about who it was that first bore witness to you that Jesus Christ is life and light. Who was it that first told you the good news of the gospel? This was a person who was sent from God to bear witness about the light, not about himself or herself.

That was John the Baptist’s purpose. He came to bear witness about the light. He was not the light, but he came to bear witness about Jesus “*that all might believe through him*” (verse seven). He wanted everyone to believe this gospel message. So what did he do? He told people about Christ. In verse 23, he said, “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.*” In other words, “I’m here to tell you to clear out whatever obstacles in your life could keep you from receiving the Lord Jesus Christ because He is coming.”

In verse 27, John talked about Jesus, saying, “... [*E*]ven he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” He is preeminent. John humbled himself in order to make much of Christ.

I love the way he testified to Christ in verse 29: “*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’*” That’s what we get to do in the world today. In this dark world, we get to bear witness to One Who is the life; Who gives light; Who became the Lamb of God; Who died to take away the sin of the world; and Who rose forevermore and now lives to give eternal life to all who believe in Him. It is a wonderful privilege to be His witness and messenger, and God has been very generous in giving witness to the light in the world.

### **The True Light Was Coming into the World, but the World Did Not Know Him**

Let’s move on to the fifth stopping point. We are coming around the circle, and John will bring us right back to where he began. Look at verse nine. It says, “*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*” There is a sense in which the coming of Jesus into the world sheds light on all of humanity. The word there for “enlighten” is the word *photizo*, which means “to shed light on so as to bring out the true quality of.” When the light of Christ shines upon a life, it shows what is really in that person.

Look at John 3, and let’s read verses 19-21 to see how this light-shedding ministry of Jesus Christ exposes what’s really in a human being. John 3:19-21 says:

*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. [He doesn't want the light shining on the true nature of his work and character.] 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.*

The life is the light, and coming to the light shows that it is God's work in you that makes you the person you are. Humanity is divided into those who hate the light and those who receive it. It shines upon every person, whether you receive it or not. It shows what is in you.

J.C. Ryle, a pastor and author from the late 1800s, said:

Christ is to the souls of men what the sun is to the world. He is the center and source of all spiritual light, warmth, life, health, growth, beauty and fertility. Like the sun, He shines for the common benefit of all mankind—for high and for low, for rich and for poor, for Jew and for Greek. Like the sun, He is free to all. All may look at Him and drink health out of His light. If millions of mankind were mad enough to dwell in caves underground, or to bandage their eyes, their darkness would be their own fault and not the fault of the sun. So, likewise, if millions of men and women love spiritual “darkness rather than light,” the blame must be laid on their blind hearts and not on Christ. “Their foolish hearts are darkened.”

That's the sad reality to which verses 10 and 11 point us. We are coming almost full circle now, and we see that this life that is the light of men is largely rejected by humanity. It is rejected by religious people and irreligious people alike. Look at verse 10: “*He was in the world, and the world was made through him...*” It's His world! He created it. We are the inhabitants of a world that He created. He came into this world—this world that He made—“*yet the world did not know him.*” It did not recognize Him or esteem Him as precious. It did not love Him and obey Him. The world of darkness did not know its own maker when He came.

Verse 11 begins, “*He came to his own...*” Technically, everyone is His own, but this is specifically talking about the Jewish people Whom He had brought out of slavery in Egypt and caused to be redeemed. He had guided them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. He came to them, but they did not receive Him. This is the tragic evidence of the darkness that is in humanity.

Sometimes, we religious people talk about “sinners” as if they are “the world out there.” These verses make it clear that we all have the same basic problem, whether we are religious or non-religious. Whether we know the truth about God or don't know the truth about God, the

fundamental sin behind all our sins is that we reject the light. We do not know Him. We do not esteem Him. We do not receive Him.

This is the fundamental problem of humanity. When Jesus shines, human beings cannot understand or grasp Him. His life is like light, and we do not see, savor, and treasure that light. What does that reveal about our condition? If you go into a morgue and prepare a sumptuous meal, whoever is lying in the coffin will not say, "That smells so good! I am getting hungry." If you go into a morgue and take a hammer to pound the knee of the body that lies there, the body is not going to move. If you shine light into his eyes, there will not be any response. A dead body does not respond to external stimuli.

John is telling us that the life that existed from all eternity, through which the world and all its beauty and majesty was created, shone into the world and still shines today. Humanity says, "I'm not interested. I don't recognize that. I don't esteem that. I don't want that. I have no desire for that." What does that tell you about humanity? We are dead in our sins. We are spiritually dead and unresponsive to the life and light that shines in the world. That is the truth of humanity apart from Christ.

A spiritually dead person does not feel dead. If you went to work tomorrow and said, "Do you know what my pastor said about you? He said you are dead." They would think, "What kind of crazy, goofy, fanatical church do you go to?" Religious people don't want to believe this either. We want to believe that humanity needs some help and a little self-improvement, but we do not want to believe we are spiritually dead. That is not flattering to humanity.

We can be excited about all kinds of things: football, music, art, love and beauty. Physical things can excite us; even money can excite us. But what about the Bible? What about the glorious gospel of our blessed God? If you find yourself yawning all the time, saying, "I just don't understand what is so exciting about that or why religious people get into this stuff so much," there could be a number of explanations for your indifference to spiritual light and life. It could be that the one who is proclaiming it to you is having a bad day. Or it could be that those who tell you about religious things don't have the life in themselves. That is possible. Or it could be that you are so depressed for a season that these glorious truths are not permeating due to your overwhelming sorrow. That is also possible. However, when you find that your response to the truths of the gospel is consistently indifferent, apathetic and disinterested, I am 99.9% certain it is because you are still spiritually dead. You are dead in your sins. One of the great, universal marks of dead people is that they don't know they are dead. They do not recognize it.

Tim Keller says, "The best way to know you are alive is to know that you were once dead, and the way to know you are dead is that you don't know you are dead." Everyone who is alive in

Christ knows, "I once was dead. There was a time when I had no savor of spiritual realities. I had no desire for gospel truths, no sense of the beauty, loveliness and life-transforming power of Christ in me. I couldn't see. And then one day light started shining into my mind and heart, and I said things like, 'Why didn't I ever see that before?' The answer is because I was dead! But He made me alive in Him, and now I see. I once was blind, but now I see."

### **To All Who Receive Him**

That is what brings us back to the beginning. The last point brings us full circle. In Him was life, and He still has the life to give to those who are spiritually dead. In verse 12, John said, "*But to all who did receive him...*" To all who said, "Jesus, You are a Savior. I am a sinner; I need You. You are a Leader. I am lost; I want to follow You. You are wisdom from on high. I am foolish; I need You to teach me. You are a King. I am a rebel; I lay down my weapons and submit to You." That is what it means to receive Him and take Him as He is.

*"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name..."* They didn't just say, "Yes, okay, I believe You are God." They treasured Him and found their soul satisfaction in Him alone. "*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born [they were dead, but now they are born], not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man [not by any human effort], but of God.*"

My friend, I offer you this good news this Christmas season. In the name of Jesus Christ, I offer you new life. He didn't come to make you an ethical person; He came to make you alive. He didn't come to help you turn over a new leaf; He came to give you a new life. He didn't come just to give you life; He came to make you an adopted child of God the Father. You can go straight into God's presence and know that He receives you as His child. All that belongs to Him in glory is yours by inheritance. That's why Jesus came. He came and in Him was life. He came to bring light and life to all. He was "born to raise the sons of earth..." He was "born to give them second birth." He is here today to do that for everyone who receives and believe in Him.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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