

“The Light Shines in the Darkness”
by Pastor Jason Van Bommel
John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. – John 1:1-5, ESV

Shining Light in Growing Darkness – Advent, then Christmas

We’re in the time of year of increasing darkness. The sun sets earlier and earlier each day. When we left Daylight Saving Time, it became even more dramatic. If you feel bad and don’t like this darkening time of year, people on the island of Svalbard off the coast of Norway are in the midst of their polar night, and they won’t see the sun again at all until March.

Still, it is interesting that Advent comes each year during this time of increasing darkness – at least, in the Northern Hemisphere. People in Australia are dreaming of a White Christmas in the middle of their summer. Then, Christmas itself comes just as we turn the corner from increasing darkness to increasing light.

Like many Christians, I used to think that the church set December 25th as Christmas Day to replace the Roman Pagan festival of Saturnalia or perhaps the other Roman pagan feast of the sun god Sol. But I learned something new this year that has challenged my thinking on that topic. A statue of the early church leader Hippolytus dating from around the year 222 is one of the oldest pieces of Christian art in the world. And around the base of the statue is the calendar used by the early church at that time. It places the date of Jesus’ conception at April 2, 2 B.C., which would put His birth pretty close to December 25th, nine months later. In fact, one copy of one of Hippolytus’ writings places the birth of Jesus on December 25th. This is interesting for a couple of reasons:

1. Saturnalia was never celebrated on December 25th, so Christmas can’t be the church’s substitute for Saturnalia.
2. The feast of Sol was not implemented in Rome until sometime after 274 A.D., at least 50 years after the Hippolytus statue.

Early church fathers, dating back to at least Clement of Alexandria in 195 A.D. thought that Jesus must have been conceived in the womb of Mary at Passover, which would place His birth sometime in late December or early January. So, it’s very possible that the Feast of Sol might have been started by Pagans in Rome to counteract Christian celebrations of the birth of the Son of God, Jesus.

Anyway, that's just a little bit of interesting historical trivia. What's not trivial is that Jesus' coming into the world did change the trajectory of human history in the world. After centuries of spreading and increasing darkness, the Light of the World came into the world, penetrating the darkness with the Light of Heaven. Our Advent and Christmas series this year will draw from the Gospel of John exploring what the coming of the light into the darkness means for our world and our lives.

I. Who is the Light? The Word in the Beginning . . .

The first thing the Gospel of John tells us about Jesus is that He is the Word of God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

By opening his Gospel with the words "In the beginning," John is intentionally calling our attention back to the opening of Scripture in Genesis 1. He wants us to re-consider Genesis 1 through new eyes, seeing Christ as the Word of God:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

- Genesis 1:1-5, ESV

God's Word is powerful and effective. It always accomplishes the purpose for which God sends it. It is how God acts in His creation – how He creates and how He redeems, how He guides and how He sustains. Think about what the Bible says about the Word of God:

- *"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." – Hebrews 4:12, ESV*
- *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." – Isaiah 40:8, ESV*
- *"Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him." – Proverbs 30:5, ESV*
- *"man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." – Deuteronomy 8:3, ESV*

- *“For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.” – Psalm 33:4, ESV*
- *“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.” – Psalm 33:6, ESV*
- *“I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.” – Psalm 138:2, ESV*
- *“Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.” – Psalm 119:89, ESV*

God’s Word is eternal, unchanging, powerful, unfailing, trustworthy, and exalted. It is God’s very character and nature expressed outward. Jesus as God the Son is God’s very Word and Wisdom personified. He is the Wisdom of God and the Word of God. He was in the beginning with God, and He is true God – very God of very God, begotten not made, as we confessed earlier.

According to the 2022 Ligonier State of Theology survey, 73% of evangelicals surveyed Strongly Agreed with the statement: *“Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.”* This is an interesting and disturbing survey result, especially since 96% of the evangelicals surveyed strongly agreed that: *“There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”*

Maybe people were just confused when they were asked, but these two statements are completely incompatible. All Christians should know that John 1 is talking about Jesus, that the Word is Jesus, and so *“In the beginning was Jesus, and Jesus was with God, and Jesus was God. Jesus was in the beginning with God.”* This is completely contradictory to the statement *“Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.”*

Now, I understand that a lot of Christians don’t like to think about the Trinity, because we can’t fully understand the Trinity, and thinking too hard about the Triune Nature of God can make our heads hurt, and on some level, I get that – but also, God is Triune, and 96% of evangelical Christians agree with the classic statement of the Trinity, but if that’s true, how can they then say that Jesus is a created being? If they had in mind the human nature of Jesus, being conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, well, that’s not the first act of creation.

No, I rather think we’re plagued by sloppy and lazy thinking about Jesus, and that’s really tragic, because He’s the Lord and our only salvation, and we ought to save our best and clearest thinking for Him. He is worthy of our best language and our best thoughts, and that’s what John is giving us here. Jesus is the eternal word of God, the eternal wisdom of God, One who has always been with God and who, in fact, is God, from before the beginning.

John Calvin in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* expresses the distinction between the members of the Triune God in this way –

It would unbecoming to say nothing of a distinction which we observe that the Scriptures have pointed out. This distinction is, that to the Father is attributed the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit. Moreover, though the eternity of the Father is also the eternity of the Son and Spirit, since God never could be without his own wisdom and energy; and though in eternity there can be no room for first or last, still the distinction of order is not unmeaning or superfluous, the Father being considered first, next the Son from him, and then the Spirit from both. For the mind of every man naturally inclines to consider, first, God, secondly, the wisdom emerging from him, and, lastly, the energy by which he executes the purposes of his counsel.

This is why John uses the word *Logos* here to refer to God the Son – “*wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action*” is a good way to understand the Greek word *Logos* and its significance.

II. What does the Light do? Creation, Life, Light

And by calling our attention back to Genesis 1, John wants us to remember what the Word of God did in Creation – what effect it had – how it was that all things were made through Him:

³*All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.* ⁴*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.* – John 1:3-4, ESV

When God creates the world through His Word, when His Word comes into the Creation, what happens? Well, before God speaks in Genesis 1, we’re told that the world was formless and void; it was chaotic and empty. The Word first brings light and then order and then life.

The very first thing the Word brings is light – “Let there be light.” Light penetrates and illuminates the darkness, and everything else flows from there. We know that light and life are inseparably linked. Light gives life to all things in the world, and then, in the deepest oceans where the light does not penetrate, it is life that brings light through bioluminescence.

When the Bible speaks of light, it is speaking of the outshining, the outworking of the character of God. Hebrews 1:3 tells us, “*He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God*” But what does the light of God bring and produce? Specifically, the Bible tells us in Ephesians 5:9 “*the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.*” All true goodness, righteousness, and truth flow from the light of God, from the very character of God as it shines from Him into His creation.

The Word of God in Genesis 1 also brings all order and distinction and then all life into God’s creation – teeming life in all its variety. Nothing in God’s creation has the power of life in itself; all life draws its life from elsewhere. Plants get their life from the air and the light of the sun. Animal life all depends on

plant life or other animal life for food. We need air to breathe and water for hydration. Without air, water, and food, we cease to live.

Only God has the power of life in and of Himself, needing nothing from anyone. Jesus as the Word who is God does not need anything or anyone to give Him life. Rather, by His life and light, He gives life and light to everyone in the world. Where does everyone get any of the truth, goodness, or righteousness they may experience? It flows from the very Light of God in Jesus Christ. Where do we get all get our life? All life is given and sustained by Jesus.

We have nothing that God has not given us, and God gives us all things through His Son, the Word, the Light, and the Life of all people and all creation. We should just stand in awe and gratitude and worship Him deeply.

III. What is this Darkness?

Then, verse 5 tells us –

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

What is this darkness into which the light shines? Well, in Genesis 1, the darkness is the chaos and emptiness of creation without the Word of God. So, too, our world and our hearts and lives are dark, chaotic, and empty without the Word of God speaking into them and the light of God shining into them.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says:

“even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 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.” – 2 Cor 4:3-6, ESV

Darkness is fundamentally the absence of light, and so spiritual darkness is the absence of God’s truth, goodness, and righteousness. We are blind in the dark, and in the darkness of our ignorance and unbelief, we cannot see the light of the Gospel of glory of Christ. Satan loves this because it keeps us under his control and away from the only One who can free us from his web of lies.

Thanks to God’s common grace, His general goodness to all of His creation, we are not left completely in utter darkness with no light at all. But, on our own, apart from the intervening grace of God in salvation, we are trapped in darkness and blindness and the death-trap of our own sinful rebellion

against God. Many times, unbelievers can be decent, moral, friendly people, by God's common grace. However, unless we know Jesus, we remain blind, ignorant to the light of God, and stuck in the darkness of condemnation, chaos, and spiritual emptiness.

It is the Word of God alone which changes this reality. Just as the Word spoke creation into existence, shining light into the darkness, so also the Word of God brings the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ into our hearts.

IV. What happens when Light and Darkness meet?

The last thing we see in these opening verses of John is what happens when the Light and the Darkness meet:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Think back again to the beginning of creation in Genesis 1: What happened when God said, "Let there be light."? Did an eternal cosmic struggle between light and darkness begin, one that will never be fully and finally resolved? No. Did the darkness push back the light and reclaim its rightful place? No.

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light, and God saw that the light was good. No drama. No struggle. No conflict. The powerful Word of God and the penetrating Light of God were instantly in the world and seen as good.

God then made a separation between the light and the dark, but it was His sovereign power that gave darkness a limited and temporary home called "night." At the end of all things in this present age, Revelation 22:4-5 tells us how things will be forever:

They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. – Rev. 22:4-5, ESV

As it is in God's creation, so it is in our hearts and lives. When God speaks and sends His light, the night is driven back, and the darkness loses. God's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Some translations will say "The darkness does not comprehend it." The Greek word carries both senses, to overcome and to comprehend. We have a word in English that also carries those two meanings – master. To master something can be to fully comprehend or understand something, such as mastering French or Algebra or the material for your history test. But to master also means to control, to dominate, to overcome.

The darkness can never master God's light. This means that those in darkness cannot comprehend God and His ways, but it also means that Satan and the forces of darkness cannot overcome and subdue God and His truth, goodness, and righteousness.

This is good news, and it is essential to the Gospel. If God has shone the light of His Word into your heart and mind, the darkness has already lost the war. It may resist or be allowed to hang on for a limited time, but your future perfection in the light of God is already secure. And Philippians 1:6 tells us that He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it until the Day of Christ Jesus. So, rejoice! The Light of the World has come into the darkness, and the darkness has not, cannot, and will not ever comprehend or overcome it.

But, has the light of God's Word shone in your heart? Have you heard the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd? Have you received the grace of God given in Jesus Christ? If you haven't, call upon Him today. Ask Him to shine His light into your heart and save you forever!