

A Light Has Dawned

JEREMY TREAT

*The people walking
in darkness have seen
a great light; on those
living in the land of
deep darkness a light
has dawned.*

ISAIAH 9:2

Growing up in a small town in Alaska, I was well acquainted with darkness. In the depths of the winter, a mere few hours of sunlight each day would quickly give way to the long, unforgiving nights. And the effects of the darkness went beyond the inconvenience of shoveling the driveway under artificial light. The lack of light brought about a lack of hope. The long winters of Alaska produce isolation, depression, and sometimes despair. In the darkness, there is no vision, no direction, and no purpose.

Isaiah 8 tells of a time when Israel was well acquainted with darkness. Under the threat of invasion by an international superpower (Assyria), God's people were in a place of fear and dread. Rather than turning to God as their hope, they doubled down on their fear by embracing conspiracies and consulting with occultic mediums (vv. 12, 19), which led them only deeper into utter darkness.



And yet, amid this distress, the prophet Isaiah proclaims that “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” Despite their own attempts to claw their way out of the darkness, a light has dawned upon them. What is this light? Who could bring hope amid utter darkness? Isaiah declares, “For to us a child is born.”

While a child is certainly no match for the Assyrian military, *this* child is different. This son will grow up to be a king who will rule with righteousness and justice. Though he will reign from David’s throne, his kingdom will extend to the ends of the earth and will be established for all of eternity. Through this anointed child, not only will the light shine amid the darkness, but the light will *overcome* it.

The promise given by Isaiah was ultimately fulfilled hundreds of years later when a child, a son, was born under the threat of another international superpower. Jesus is the Light of the World. And while our world still

remains in utter gloom, the light of the gospel shines bright amid the darkness. For this king reigns with grace and rules with love. Of his kingdom, there will be no end.

The winters in Alaska were harsh. But I have not told you about the summers. At the height of summer in Alaska, there is daylight 24 hours a day. *No darkness. All light. So much joy.* When Christ returns, he will make all things new. And the Book of Revelation tells us that in the new creation, there will be no need for the sun (22:5), for the glory of God will shine brighter than a thousand suns! We will walk in the light and experience the pure joy of Christ’s kingdom forevermore.

Consider Isaiah 8:21–9:7.

How does the historical context of this great promise impact your understanding? How does it speak into our context today?

Salvation and Love

BETH STOVELL



*I, the Lord, have
called you in
righteousness;
I will take hold of
your hand. I will
keep you and will
make you to be a
covenant for the
people and a light
for the Gentiles.*

ISAIAH 42:6

We have all experienced what it is like to wake up in darkness—that moment when we are grasping for the light so that we can see the world around us clearly. Perhaps like me, you never fully grew out of that fear of the dark. Darkness is a universal fear because it can create spaces of danger, whereas light guides us toward safety. Especially before the invention of electric lights, darkness meant that a person was more likely to experience an attack by enemies or dangerous animals.

It should not surprise us, then, that light is a powerful metaphor for safety and salvation in Isaiah as he describes God's servant fulfilling this role. We

see this idea in the New Testament as Jesus is described as the “light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5), echoing the descriptions of God’s servant as the light of salvation for the whole world in Isaiah 42, 49, and 60.

Isaiah places two ideas next to one another as he pictures God’s servant: God’s global salvation and God’s deep intimacy. On the one hand, the servant will bring salvation on a global scale. Like the light of the sun that reaches across the earth from end to end, God’s servant will bring salvation to all people, every tribe, every nation (42:6; 49:6; 60:3). This salvation is multiethnic, multicultural, and available for all.

On the other hand, when Isaiah depicts this salvation—the servant’s global light—he also anchors this vast vision in God’s deep intimacy. This God formed the servant within his mother’s womb (49:5), labors like a woman giving birth for his people’s salvation (42:14), and remembers his people like a nursing mother who remembers her baby at her breast (49:15).

We likewise see this combination of global salvation and personal intimacy in Jesus. Jesus is the one who brings a kind of light that honors the covenant God made with his people (42:6). This light gives freedom to those experiencing captivity (42:7)

and draws nations and kings out of their darkness to Jesus’ light (60:2–3).

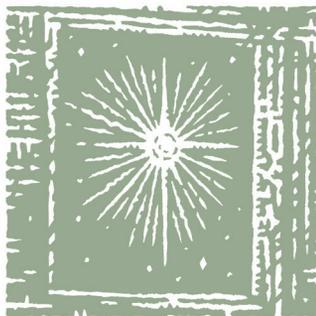
Jesus’ light also provides personal and specific hope to those who have been sitting in dark dungeons awaiting their release and to those experiencing blindness (42:7). This light both shines across vast expanses around the world and peeks into the smallest crannies of our individual homes. This is the Jesus we await during Advent: the gleaming light illuminating and encouraging those all around the globe, and the candle glowing in each of our lives, reminding us of God’s nearness.

Ponder Isaiah 42:1–14;
49:1–15; and 60:1–3.

How do you see the global nature of God’s light in these passages? Where do you see its intimacy? How do you see both in Jesus?

The Light Leading Us Home

JAY Y. KIM



*I am the light
of the world.
Whoever follows
me will never
walk in darkness,
but will have the
light of life.*

JOHN 8:12

The 19th-century English painter J. M. W. Turner was renowned for his stunning use of light. Stare long enough at pieces like *Snow Storm*, *Frosty Morning*, and—my personal favorite—*Fishermen at Sea*, and one gets the sense that Turner was painting with fire as much as oil and watercolors. Pastor and artist Michael Milton notes, “In Turner there is not merely light, but light leading the viewer in search of meaning.” In the artwork of this master, light is not the end—it is an invitation toward hope, beauty, and meaning itself.

Walking around our neighborhood on cold evenings during the

Advent season, we are dazzled by arrays of Christmas lights. In recent years, seeing them through the eyes of my two young children has awakened something in me I'd lost to the subtle and insidious cynicism that often sets in with age: longing. Light is a wonderment because of its promise that there's something brilliant veiled behind the darkness, waiting to be found, pulsing with life, on the brink of unfolding before us.

In John 8:12, "when Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" The words alone are poetic enough, but this wasn't just a catchy metaphor. In announcing himself to be the Light of the World, in this particular place and at this particular time, Jesus was making a bold and beautiful declaration about what's veiled behind the darkness—and more importantly, about his own ability and willingness to get us there.

Jesus spoke these words during the Feast of Tabernacles, a weeklong Jewish festival centered on celebrating the Exodus, when God led his people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom in the Promised Land. During their long journey through the wilderness, Yahweh had revealed himself to the people as a pillar of cloud

by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21–22; 40:38). To remember this act of divine guidance during the Feast of Tabernacles, in the temple courts flames were lit atop two 75-foot-tall pillars to symbolize the pillar of light in Exodus. It is in this very setting that Jesus stands in the temple courts—likely in the light of these pillars—and declares, "I am the light of the world."

Jesus is the light guiding us through the wilderness of our despair, our pain, our loss. He is the light undoing the darkness of our fear, our anxiety, our uncertainty. He is the great Light of the World, leading us home.

Reflect on John 8:12.

Optional: Also read John 9:5 and 12:46.

What do you imagine Jesus' first hearers thought or wondered when Jesus said this? How does the context of the Feast of Tabernacles enrich your understanding of his claim?

A Frightening and Freeing Light

JAY Y. KIM

Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

JOHN 3:21

For God so loved the world that he . . .”

Chances are, you can finish the line without a second thought. John 3:16 is arguably the most famous verse in the Bible—but it doesn’t stand alone. Though the rest of the passage in this third chapter of John’s gospel receives far less fanfare, it offers us a sobering and hopeful truth:

Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. . . . But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (vv. 19, 21)

Human experience is the paradoxical commingling of the love of darkness and the need for light. And this reality isn’t just true *out there*, among



the sinful masses. This is true *right here*—in my heart, mind, and soul, and in yours. The apostle Paul aptly describes this pervasive and universal tension: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15). We’ve all been there. We still are.

Light can both expose and illuminate, making it simultaneously frightening and freeing. American physicist Richard Feynman said, “The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool.” If he was right—and I believe he was—then this frightening and freeing light is *exactly* what we need. This light exposes our pride and illuminates our shame, which have both stricken us since the very beginning of the human story.

In the Genesis creation narrative, God created a good world and

placed Adam and Eve at its center, as his image-bearers, called to bring the earth’s good potential to bear. But when the first humans sinned against God, it was because they came to believe the lie that they could be “like God” (Gen. 3:5). This is pride. And where does pride inevitably lead? Straight toward shame. “I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid,” the man said (3:10).

Jesus, the Light, has come to free us from the darkness of pride and shame. The light has come to tell us the truth—that we are forgiven, accepted, loved. The light has come to undo the catastrophe of the Fall and to enact God’s good new world, where we can all belong.

Meditate on John 3:16–21.

How is God’s light frightening? How is it freeing? In what ways does the broader context of verse 16 deepen your understanding of Jesus’ identity and purpose?

Delivered from Darkness

KRISTIE ANYABWILE

*You are a chosen
people . . . that you
may declare the
praises of him who
called you out of
darkness into his
wonderful light.*

1 PETER 2:9

It's a natural instinct to fear the dark. We know that bad things happen under cover of darkness. The same is true of spiritual darkness. Scripture tells us that the domain of darkness is where fruitless deeds reside and where ungodliness and evil dwell (Eph. 5:8–12). If we're under the control of darkness, we have no fellowship with God (1 John 1:5–7).

But Jesus came to deliver those blinded by darkness—to deliver us! Now, as people who dwell in the light of Christ, we strive to walk in a manner suitable for those who follow Jesus. We walk worshipfully, giving thanks for the great inheritance we have as coheirs with Christ.

In the beginning, God declared, “Let there be light,” bringing day into existence (Gen. 1:3). God also declares, “Let there be light” in our own lives, referring not to the cosmos but to the



light of the gospel in our hearts that enables us to see the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). The Light of the World himself stepped down into the darkness of this world, into the darkness of our hearts, and opened our eyes so that we could declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light. In that light, there is righteousness, peace, and joy.

As citizens of Christ's kingdom of light, we have redemption, forgiveness, and fellowship with God. He made us—who once relished the darkness—his treasured possession.

God chose a people who would be his very own and reflect his holy character. He chose a people who would both embrace and transcend ethnic distinctions, declaring his praises within the beautiful diversity of his family. He chose a people to whom he would give the full privileges and

blessings of the priesthood of believers—that is, direct access to God's very presence. The veil that once prohibited us from drawing near to God was torn so that “a new and living way” would open to us through Christ (Heb. 10:20). He chose a people whom he would welcome in his presence at all times—a people who would declare his praises as we offer individual and corporate spiritual sacrifices to God.

This Advent season, we celebrate the Promised One who delivered us from darkness, who called us into his wonderful light so that we might bask in the Son and declare his praises.

Contemplate Colossians
1:9–14 and 1 Peter 2:9.

What does it mean for you to live as part of the kingdom of light? How has Jesus, the Light, brought you understanding and purpose?

Christ in Ten Thousand Places

MARLENA GRAVES



*For God, who said,
“Let light shine out
of darkness,” made
his light shine in
our hearts to give
us the light of the
knowledge of God’s
glory displayed in
the face of Christ.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:6

In Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave, people live imprisoned in chains, staring ahead at a wall with a fire casting light from behind them. Unbeknownst to them, puppets and moving objects behind them are creating the shadows they see on the wall. They believe the shadows are reality. They have no idea that there is a bright sunlit world outside. Even when others tell them about the real world, they still don’t want to leave their cave.

The allegory reminds me of Paul’s words: “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). In contrast, when we are born anew in Christ, we

become children of the light—children of the sunlit world (Eph. 5:8). God illuminates our hearts and minds through the gospel so we can see Christ in his glory. As we fix our eyes on Jesus and remain in him, God progressively puts everything in its proper perspective. The result is that the church collectively and people individually are better able to discern good from evil. We grow to see and discern the details of beauty, goodness, and truth—to see the world and people aright. No doubt, we need each other to remain in the light to experience God’s shalom—to see and to love.

Ephesians 5:9 reveals something breathtakingly beautiful about the fruit born of light. The fruit is “all goodness, righteousness and truth.” Gazing at the face of Christ, we start to see him more and more in our lives and in our world. We see Jesus showing up in thousands of ways and in all sorts of places—sometimes quite unexpectedly. We’re enabled to find the goodness, righteousness, and truth present even in difficult or painful circumstances. Similarly, others see these virtues manifested in our own lives and give thanks to God.

The knowledge revealed to us through God enlightening our hearts fills us with overflowing joy and enduring hope (Eph. 1:18). It is hope for the present because of the “incomparably

great power” we have through the Spirit to do God’s will in the world (v. 19). This hope is further buttressed by the knowledge that God is ever for us. And we also have hope for the future because we catch glimpses of our glorious inheritance.

Indeed, as we remain in Christ and connected to one another, we know at a deep level that evil is the counterfeit, the shadow world. As Gerard Manley Hopkins described in his poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” we grow to see Christ playing “in ten thousand places” and the glory of God shining everywhere. This is Advent light.

Consider 2 Corinthians 4:4-6
and Ephesians 1:15-23; 5:8-11.

How do these passages describe what spiritual illumination looks like? How has faith in Jesus—the Light—enlightened your own life?

He Shines in the Darkness

CAROLYN ARENDS

The apostle John contextualizes his account of the words and deeds of his good friend Jesus with an opening prologue that crackles with energy and wonder. Jesus, John wants to tell us, is the very Word of God. He was with God at the creation of the world. He *is* God. He is life itself, and that life is the light of the world.

Then comes verse 5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” At least that’s what it says in my 2011 edition of the NIV. But here’s a striking thing: My older edition of the NIV (the 1984 translation) reads differently. It says, “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

The Greek word alternatively rendered “overcome” and “understood” is *katalambanó*—which means to “take hold of” or “grasp.” We need more than one English word to try to hint at the full gist of what John is saying here.

John has seen the Light of the World with his own eyes. He’s gone fishing with him. He’s eaten with him. He’s prayed with him. And he’s watched him endure the most horrific death imaginable and then *come back to life*. So John knows that there is no darkness in the universe that can permanently grasp and defeat this light. The darkness cannot *overcome* it.

But John also knows that our human minds, left to their own



*The Word became
flesh and made his
dwelling among us.*

JOHN 1:14

devices, cannot begin to grasp the love on offer in the astonishing fact of the Incarnation. The darkness cannot *understand* it.

John's prologue culminates with a breathtaking meditation on the lengths to which God has gone to reach us with his illuminating love. "The Word became flesh," he writes, "and made his dwelling among us." Or, as *The Message* paraphrase renders it, the flesh-and-blood Word "moved into the neighborhood."

The Mighty God came in the staggeringly vulnerable form of a human baby. The Prince of Peace allowed himself to be birthed into a world of sin and chaos—God made huggable, woundable, kissable, killable.

Only the Light of the World can give us the power to begin to understand what God has offered us in the birth of Jesus. So, this Advent, let us pray the prayer the apostle Paul offered the Ephesians (3:18): that we, "being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."

Ponder John 1:1-18.

What does this passage emphasize about the about the Word? About Jesus as the Light of the World? About the Incarnation? What questions, thoughts, or feelings does it stir up in you? Express your response to God in prayer.