

The Freedom of Following the Light

I enjoy watching videos of people who have gone legally blind, but through new medical breakthroughs, their sight is being restored. You watch some of these people see their own children's faces for the first time; in some cases, they see their own faces for the first time. They see colour, and shapes and objects, and most of them are just overcome with emotion.

Having no sight or very little sight is difficult. All sorts of things that are easy to the sighted become real challenges, from eating, to opening doors, to navigating. Not only difficult, but discouraging. You have to put in so much more effort to get along in life, and often enough, even when you do so, some things still don't work for you, some things you still can't fully experience. Not only difficult and discouraging, but downright dangerous. Without sight, obstacles, steps, sharp objects, heated objects, uneven ground all become dangerous.

It's difficult, discouraging and dangerous to have little or no physical sight. But it is equally, if not more difficult, discouraging and dangerous to have little to no spiritual sight. By spiritual sight, I mean your mind and heart's ability to understand the world, to navigate life's obstacles, to see the problems, the dangers, the priorities as they really are. When you can't see what life is really about, life has some hard and sharp edges that are pretty painful to bump into and to trip over.

Many people have spiritual macular degeneration, inner, moral retinitis pigmentosa, ultimate heart retinal detachment.

But it doesn't have to be that way. There is a way to see reality as it really is, to get at the truth of things. You can have 20/20 spiritual vision. We find that answer in John 8.

John 7 and 8 is Jesus in the middle of enemy territory, being hounded and harassed by people who want to put Him to death. In the midst of all this, Jesus boldly and courageously keeps teaching who He is, what He offers to people, why He has come. It's difficult to keep your cool when people shout in your face, insult you, slander you, and try to discredit you. But light is never extinguished by darkness, and Jesus just keeps telling the truth.

The truth that Jesus tells in this passage is that He Himself is the light we need to understand God, ourselves and the world around us. We either follow Him out of darkness, or we remain in it. We either choose the freedom of clear sight, or the bondage of blindness.

I. The Call of the Light

¹²Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

I am the One who brings light into the world. Someone who follows me, who becomes my disciple, will not spend his life living in darkness, but has the light that I bring which imparts life and illuminates life.

This is the second of seven times that Jesus says "I am" in the book of John. I am the light of the world. Jesus was probably using something very prominent and visible as He spoke. This was the Feast of Tabernacles, and one of the ceremonies they had introduced by this time was to light four massive menorahs, four candelabras, place them in the Temple complex, in an area known as the Court of the Women. This wonderful display of beautiful light must have been compelling and drawn people to see it at night. Even today we are drawn to light displays. At Christmas time,

people enjoy seeing lights decorating houses, or in large arranged displays.

To them then, and to us now, light in the darkness is beautiful. It's beautiful because it brings visibility, and clarity. If visibility and clarity is what you want, then light is really an image for truth. The truth is what really is; it is reality as it is. And if you want truth, then you want what is honesty, righteousness, fairness, equity, justice, goodness.

In the Bible, light is a way of speaking about both truth and goodness. Light shows you the way, light helps you stick to the straight and narrow path, light reveals.

So if that's what light is, what would Jesus mean by darkness? Darkness, like blindness, obscures, hides, conceals. That means darkness has to do with lies, deception, falsity, not reality. And if you prefer that falsity, then you prefer deeds that go with it: cheating, betraying, stealing, lying, exploiting, harming, using. So when the Bible speaks of darkness, it means both lies and sin. Darkness obscures reality, enabling you to leave the path and do wickedness in the dark.

By saying "I am the light of the world", what is Jesus implying about the world? The world lies in darkness. The world of mankind lives in a blindness to reality. That blindness comes from a few sources. First, when we sinned in Adam, we walked away from the light, broke fellowship with God and plunged our own consciences into darkness, a self-imposed ignorance, foolishness and blindness. Second, Paul tells us that the god of this age has "blinded the ...minds [of those]who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them." (2 Corinthians 4:4). Third, there is even a judicial, or judgement blindness that God gives to those who keep rejecting Him "*He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with their eyes, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.*" (John 12:40)

That's a lot of blindness. Human culture is drenched in this thick black fog of chosen and inflicted blindness. You cannot expect man, on his own, to turn his art, and his science, and his technology, and his politics, and his economics, and his social structures, and his psychology towards reality, because he is really stumbling about, feeling his way through a reality he can't see and doesn't want to see.

Man is a highly intelligent creature; but fallen man is a stupidly foolish creature. We have high intellectual capacities, but morally we are stubborn, proud and self-destructive. Blind men feeling our way barefoot through an exploded glass factory, refusing to believe it is an exploded glass factory, cutting ourselves to pieces but stubbornly persisting.

Jesus sets Himself up as a lighthouse in this pitch dark. To those who do not want to continually slam into the walls of reality, to those who do not want to perpetually be falling down the stairs of reality, to those who do not want the bruises, broken bones and lacerations of trying to live life in the darkness without our Creator, Jesus makes a clarion call. I am the light of the world. I am the Truth. I am the Explanation of Reality. I am the the Father's Logos, His Word, come to Me to see and understand.

If life seems confusing, mysterious, unfair, puzzling, incomprehensible, perhaps you are still feeling your way on your own in the darkness. Perhaps you are trying to just figure it out without communication from the Creator, without the design instructions from the Designer.

Jesus' call is not simply to know about Him, to passively agree with some of His teaching. His call is to follow Him. Follow means you change loyalties from yourself to Him. We men don't like to admit that we are lost; we prefer to say we are taking another route. But eventually, if we are lost

enough, we have to admit we need directions. To follow Him is to accept directions from someone else, to agree you are lost in life.

Now all of this raises the question. Why should we trust Jesus? And so we have the enemies of Jesus to thank for interrogating Jesus from every angle, so we could decide for ourselves if Jesus is trustworthy. Most made-up legends have their heroes unchallenged and facing no criticism. The Bible records the non-stop hostility of Jesus' critics to His claim to be the light of the world.

So for the next 17 verses, we have the credentials of Jesus examined.

II. The Credentials of the Light

¹³ The Pharisees therefore said to Him, "You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true." ¹⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one.

The first criticism is this: you are touting yourself, blowing your own horn. It is not valid to be the reference for yourself. That's just proud, narcissistic behaviour.

Jesus responds first by saying, I am speaking of myself, but that's because I'm not from here. I come from somewhere else.

If you met someone who said, "The way you all are doing things is self-destructive and dangerous." we might respond by saying, "Who made you the authority?" If he said, "Well, I'm not from here. I come from a place where everything works, and is safe. I'm not trying to bolster myself; I'm just telling you that where I am from, it is not like this."

Jesus is saying something like that. I come from Heaven. I came from there, and am returning there. I don't have some selfish agenda. I'm not selfishly judging others for some personal agenda. I've come from a land of light to try to help you who live in the land of darkness.

Now you decide if when you read the words and wisdom of Jesus, if they sound like they come from this world, or from another. You decide if the message Jesus brought was just another version of our own systems, or whether He comes to us as an ambassador of Heaven.

W. S. Peake pointed out "We have no other teacher who so completely eliminated the trivial, the temporal, the false from his system, no one who selected just the eternal and the universal, and combined them in a teaching where all these great truths found their congenial home.

¹⁶ And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I *am* with the Father who sent Me. ¹⁷ It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. ¹⁸ I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me." ¹⁹ Then they said to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also."

The second way Jesus responds is by saying, I am not really testifying of myself alone, because every time I open my mouth, the Father is also testifying to me. If you were one of my disciples, you'd know my Father, and know that My Father speaks every time I speak. You'd know that I am not just one, but actually two.

Again, we must decide, does Jesus seem to be a lonely cult leader on his own mission? Or does He

seem like a Beloved Son, absolutely secure that He is one with the Father?

But now Jesus turns the tables on His critics.

²⁰ These words Jesus spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one laid hands on Him, for His hour had not yet come. ²¹ Then Jesus said to them again, "I am going away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin. Where I go you cannot come." ²² So the Jews said, "Will He kill Himself, because He says, 'Where I go you cannot come'?" ²³ And He said to them, "You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins."

Jesus says, time is running out. Soon my diplomatic mission to this world ends. Even if you look for Me, you won't find Me because you cannot come where I come from – at least not as you are now. They think Jesus means He will kill Himself. But what He means is that they are not in the Father's family. They are not believers. They are from beneath, from this world, and as He will say later, from their father, the devil. If they do not become His disciples, when they die, they will not go where He is going, they will die in their sins.

What must they believe? Look at verse 24. If you do not believe that I am. Notice the word "He" is in italics. That means it has been supplied by English translators for clarity, but it is not in the original Greek. What Jesus said was, if you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins. He is going to say it again in verse 28, and then most clearly in verse 58. Jesus is saying, you must believe that I Am.

Now who in the Bible claimed that His name was I Am?

¹³ Then Moses said to God, "Indeed, *when* I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What *is* His name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:13–14)

Jesus is saying, you must believe that I am Yehovah, I am one with the Father, I am the Son. If you reject that, you will live in darkness, and one day, finish out your life in the same state, with no hope of Heaven.

But his critics don't get it.

²⁵ Then they said to Him, "Who are You?" And Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning. ²⁶ I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him." ²⁷ They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father. ²⁸ Then Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and *that* I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. ²⁹ And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him." (John 8:13–29)

Jesus says I AM. They say, You are who? Jesus says, I am who I have been telling you I am from the beginning of My ministry. I am the Sent One from the Father. I do what the Father tells me to do. I speak what the Father teaches Me. He is always with Me. I only do what pleases the Father. Jesus says, you will know that I AM when you lift up the Son of Man – which refers to His death on the cross and subsequent resurrection.

To summarise it, I and the Father are one. You are accusing me of being a lone ranger, self-serving deceiver. But I am not here for Myself. I come from the Father. I'll be returning to the Father. His

words, His works, His will, are worked out through Me. That's because I AM.

Now there are the credentials of Jesus given again. Now some remain in rejection. But there are others, who at least mentally, and superficially, seem to agree with Jesus.

³⁰ As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.

So what must we do with this truth that Jesus is the I AM?

III. The Conditions and Comforts of the Light

³¹ Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³² And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." ³³ They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How *can* You say, 'You will be made free?'" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵ And a slave does not abide in the house forever, *but* a son abides forever. ³⁶ Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:31–36)

Jesus now explains the conditions for being His disciples and walking in the light. If you abide in my Word, then you are truly my disciples, and as disciples you will live in the freedom of truth. You will live in the light, and be free.

It is not enough to simply agree that Jesus is from the Father. A disciple of Jesus receives Christ and receives Christ's words, and then lives in them. You take Christ in, and you stay, you remain, you endure, because His life is now your life, and His words are now becoming your will. A disciple follows, and keeps following.

Jesus says, if you are truly my disciples, you will live in the truth of My words, and that life of truth will set you free.

His listeners seem to be a bit offended by this. As Israelites, they are not a slave nation, so how will being the disciple of Jesus set them free? But Jesus explains freedom does not come from ethnicity. It comes from who or what you are following, or living for. Whatever you practice begins to dominate you. Jesus answers, sin is like a master. If you give yourself to sin, a life of walking in darkness, then you are really in bondage. You might think you're free, but you are chained to your selfishness, living only for yourself.

Paul tells us exactly why this happens. ¹⁶ Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness? (Romans 6:16)

Isn't it strange how people who are chained by addictions will tell you how free they are, how they can stop at any time! Or people who follow the crowd in an exhausting cycle of partying and pleasing man and abusing their bodies and feeling disgusted with themselves will tell you how free they are, how much liberty and personal freedom they have? But in their quiet moments, they feel they are trapped. They know they are stuck.

Jesus gives a mini-parable to explain. These listeners think they are freeborn sons of God, because they are ethnically Jewish. But Jesus says as long as they are living a life of sin, they are slaves. Slaves don't have permanent place in the household. They can be bought or sold, and they have no choice in the matter. A son has a permanent place in the household. Jesus is the Son, having a

permanent place in the household of God. As a true family member, he can set slaves free, and make them truly part of the household.

But if you come under the authority, the dominance of Jesus Christ, your slavery to Him is true freedom. He sets you free to live a life without regret, without crashing into things in the dark, but a life of light, and life, and love.

This is one of life's great paradoxes. If you hand yourself in at the justice of God, willing to be incarcerated, instead, God will set you free. If you accept the handcuffs of being a Christian, you will suddenly find they become the best fitting gloves ever to handle anything.

But if you run from the justice of God, you will find you are in chains everywhere you go. The chain of guilt. The chain of man-pleasing. The chain of regret. The chain of hopelessness. The chain of emptiness. If you refuse the handcuffs of Christ, you will find you are padlocked to a ball and chain of self and selfishness.

In fact, the image Jesus once used was the kind of forced labour you would get from an animal. You put a wooden device on an ox's neck called a yoke, and it would pull your plow for you in the field. In the Bible, we often read the words the yoke of slavery. Jesus picks up this language and says this

²⁸ Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)

The human race is sick. We run from light and freedom towards darkness and bondage, because we think it will be better for us there. We are like wild animals fighting the veterinarian trying to help us. But even this morning, the Great Physician is again reaching out a hand to help. He says, “Your life is difficult, discouraging and dangerous because you cannot see what really is. I can help you to see, and free you if trust Me and come to me. Will you listen to the call of the Light of the world, and believe His credentials, and accept His condition? If you do, you will be like those people in the videos who see for the first time. Life opens up. The world makes sense. Purpose. Design. Law. Truth. Goodness. Beauty.

We sang it this morning:
I heard the voice of Jesus say,
“I am this dark world’s Light;
look unto Me, thy morn shall rise,
and all thy day be bright.”
I looked to Jesus, and I found
in Him my Star, my Sun;
and in that Light of life I’ll walk,
till trav’ling days are done.