

## **“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”**

John 8:12-30

Key Verse: 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.’”**

From the beginning of his gospel, John declared that Jesus is God. Then he explained in various ways what that means. He includes Jesus’ seven “I am” declarations. Just as each sign reveals a different aspect of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, so each “I am” reveals his divine beauty from another angle. Today’s passage contains Jesus’ second “I am” declaration: “I am the light of the world.” Jesus says the words “I am” ten times in this passage (12,14[2],16,18,21,23[2],24,28). Jesus tells us who he is. C.S. Lewis, in “Mere Christianity,” said, “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.” Who do you believe Jesus is? A madman, a liar, or the Son of God? How you answer will determine your attitude toward Jesus and bring consequences for your entire life and beyond, into eternity.

The centerpiece of this passage is Jesus’ declaration: “I am the light of the world.” This declaration is followed by a challenge from the Pharisees and Jesus’ answers to them. In essence, this is a dialogue between Jesus and his opponents. This reveals Jesus’ incarnational humility. Jesus has great power as the Creator God. He could have burned up his opponents with lightning from heaven. Instead, he humbly conversed with them to help them understand who he was. Out of his great shepherd’s heart for them, Jesus gave them promises and clear warnings. He urges them to accept him as the Messiah. His promise and warning apply not only to the Pharisees, but to everyone, including all of us. That is why we have to listen carefully to his declaration. Let’s consider what this declaration and promise means to each of us. Jesus’ declaration and promise in verse 12 is supported in verses 13-30 by some very powerful testimony and accompanied by serious warnings.

First, Jesus' declaration and promise (12). Verse 12 begins, "When Jesus spoke again to the people," marking a continuation from chapter 7. Jesus was at the temple courts at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem (7:28; 8:20). He had declared himself to be the Messiah and invited thirsty people to come to him for living water (7:37-38). People were divided because of Jesus' claim. A central event at the Feast of Tabernacles was the lighting of giant lamps in the temple courts. The light reminded the Jewish people of how God was with them in a cloud that looked like fire (Num. 9:15-23). When the large lamps were burning, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (12).

Let's consider what Jesus meant. Jesus' first words "I am" have a deep meaning, rooted in God's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 3. God called Moses at a burning bush to deliver the Israelites. Then Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" In his deep heart, Moses wanted to know who God is. But it was hard for him to ask this directly. So he asked on behalf of his people. Then God graciously revealed himself by saying, "I AM WHO I AM...I AM has sent me to you" (Ex 3:13-14). "I AM" means that God exists, and he always exists, without depending on anyone. He is the First Cause of all creation. He is the source of life. He never diminishes or gets old; he is always the same. His existence is self-evident. Though God's revelation of himself was very profound, he did not identify with a definite object, saying, "I am 'this,'" or "I am 'that.'" But through Jesus' incarnation, he became the object of his own revelation. Jesus said, "I am the Bread of life" to those who are hungry; "I am the Good Shepherd" to those who are vulnerable and lonely; "I am the Way" to those who are lost; "I am the Resurrection and the Life" to those who suffer under the power of death. In a word, he is everything to everyone. Now he says "I am the light of the world" to those walking in darkness (12).

What is light? There are many lights: sunlight, moonlight, flashlights, candlelight, fluorescent light, headlights, and so on. Light is so mysterious. Can you imagine how many kinds of light there are? According to the electromagnetic spectrum there are radio waves, microwaves, infrared

radiation, the visible spectrum, ultraviolet radiation, X-rays, and gamma rays. Since each kind of light covers a wide range, there are literally hundreds of thousands of manifestations of light. Among them we humans can perceive a very small percentage. We are so impressed by the color spectrum of HDTV, but this is so small it is hardly mentionable. Where did light come from? Did a scientist invent it in a laboratory? Is it self-existent? No. It came from God. On the first day of his creation, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Gen 1:3). This light reflects the power, beauty and mystery of God. In fact, the Bible refers to God as light. 1 John 1:5 declares, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." Psalm 104:2a says, "The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment...." 1 Timothy 6:16 says that God lives in "unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see." When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," it means he is the Creator who made all these lights. Light is energy. Light produces tremendous power. Light gives life. In the spring season, all kinds of plants, flowers, trees and so on come alive through the power of sunlight. Light provides warmth and beauty. Light dispels darkness and reveals reality. Without light there is only darkness.

When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," he implied that the world is in darkness. The word "world" appears 74 times in John's gospel. Though God made the world through Jesus, the world was estranged from its Creator due to people's sins. The world came under the power of the "prince of this world," Satan (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). In such a world, people don't know who God is. They are bound by the power of sin and death and will eventually die in their sins, be judged, and receive eternal condemnation. Yet people have no idea where they came from or where they are going. People try to make the world a better place by working to restore the environment, bring about social justice, and improve the quality of life with new inventions and technology. We absolutely need to do these things. Despite our efforts, the life expectancy for Americans dropped in 2015 and again in 2016 from 78.9 to 78.6. It was the first drop in two successive years since 1962-63.<sup>1</sup> According to researchers, it is largely due to substance abuse and despair, an increase in suicides and mental disorder.<sup>2</sup> Our fundamental problems are sin and death. When we cannot solve these

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/21/health/us-life-expectancy-study/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://fortune.com/2018/02/09/us-life-expectancy-dropped-again/>

problems, our lives have no real meaning; we just exist with transitory human dreams. We need the light of life. When we have the light of life, the elements of darkness disappear from our hearts. The question is how can we have the light of life?

Jesus promised, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." What does it mean to follow Jesus? Simply, it is to believe and obey Jesus and to live in fellowship with him. The problem is that sin and evil break this fellowship. If we claim to have fellowship with Jesus and yet remain in our sins, we lie. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1Jn 1:7-9). Then we can have fellowship with him. This is the meaning of following him. When we follow Jesus, he protects us from darkness and enables us to live in the light of God's presence, which gives us joy and peace, hope and vision. Our lives become meaningful, dynamic, and fruitful.

Last week I had the privilege of attending the regional Bible conference in Ukraine. Each speaker revealed a different aspect of God's love for mankind based on the theme, "Love is...." The testimonies of Ukrainian young people revealed how Jesus met them in a dark time and led them into his love and light. Politically speaking, there is tension between Kiev and Odessa based on how they perceive their relationship with Russia. Yet, shepherds from both cities knelt in prayer before Jesus, their Savior and Lord, and expressed deep love for one another. They are shining the light of Jesus and making a new history for Ukraine. Based on Mark 10:45, I shared a short message at the leadership succession ceremony. Ukrainian brothers and sisters heard about Jesus, they accepted the message warmly. In that moment I experienced in a new way that Jesus really is the light of the world.

Sometimes we take our eyes off of Jesus and look at ourselves and our situation. Then we become dim, and lose meaning, joy and motivation. We need to see again Jesus' great light. As I prepared this message, I could remember how Jesus' light has shone in my life in spite of my sins and shortcomings. In the 1990's I taught the Bible to a man named Jerry. He about 20 years older than I and came into our church off the street. Another pastor had told him that his mother would go to hell because she did not

believe in Jesus. From that time he hardened his heart. Yet, he could not totally deny God. We studied Genesis and then John's gospel over a period of about five years. After each Bible study, he would say, "Well, I still don't believe in God." Earlier this year, I got a call from him. He is in a nursing home and enjoys watching nature shows. Amazed by the beauty and mystery of nature, he said, "I think I believe in God." I was so surprised and realized that Jesus' light has been shining in many ways, even when I was not aware of it. Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus has been and is shining his light in our midst despite our sins and weaknesses. Let's continue to follow Jesus.

Second, powerful testimony and warnings (13-30). When Jesus declared that he is the light of the world, the Pharisees challenged him: "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid" (13). This was a kind of legal objection. Rabbinic tradition did not recognize self-testimony, and the Law required two witnesses to establish a fact. In response, Jesus explained that in his case self-testimony is valid, and he gave two reasons. First of all, it is because he knows where he came from and where he is going. But they were ignorant--they had no idea where Jesus came from or where he was going (14). Unless Jesus revealed himself to them, they had no way of knowing who he was. The only way they could know him is if he revealed himself to them. Secondly, it is because his judgments are based on truth. The Jews judged by human standards, which are ever-changing (15a). For example, in the 1950's many people smoked cigarettes thinking it was cool and stylish. But in our times, it is well known that smoking is hazardous to our health and it is strongly discouraged. On the other hand, marijuana use--once criminal behavior in every state--is now legal in some states. Human standards are relative; they cannot be an absolute criteria. Jesus said that he did not come to judge, but to save people (15b). However, if he does judge, his decisions are true because he stands with the Father and his authority comes from God (16). God's word is true in every generation and culture. For example, the Ten Commandments forbid idolatry, adultery, murder, and more. To call these out as sins is not judging by human standards; it is standing with God and his word of truth.

In verses 17-18 Jesus humbly introduces two witnesses to satisfy the Pharisees' demand based on their Law. Jesus' witnesses are himself as the Son of God, and the Father God who sent him. These are the best and most credible witnesses, beyond comparison with any others. The Jews assumed that Jesus meant his human father. So they asked, "Where is your father?" (19a) They could not imagine anyone talking about God in such an intimate way. Jesus exposed their ignorance, saying, "You do not know me or my Father" (19b). They did not know who Jesus really was; they did not see God in Jesus. They were spiritually blind due to their pride. If they had humbly accepted Jesus' signs and words, they would have known that he is the Messiah who was sent by God. If they knew Jesus, they would know the Father also (19c), because Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15a). Jesus and the Father are one (10:30). Though Jesus made this bold claim in the temple courts, no one seized him, for his hour had not yet come (20).

Though Jesus was risking his life to converse with the Pharisees, he did not shrink back, but spoke to them once more with strong words of warning. He said, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come" (21). The Jews ignored Jesus' warning and assumed he might commit suicide (22). But Jesus clearly explained what he meant, saying, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world" (23). Jesus would soon return to his heavenly origin, the kingdom of God, a place they knew nothing about and would not enter. The only way to enter the kingdom of God is to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus repeated his warning: "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins" (24). Jesus repeated the phrase "you will die in your sins" three times. Why is this such a serious warning? To die in one's sins is to be separated from God eternally. There is no hope of restoration and it is eternal condemnation. Though we may fail in something, if there is a second chance, we can have hope. But in this matter, there is no second chance and no hope. Many people think of Christian faith as a cultural matter which gives many benefits. If they don't see any immediate benefit, they can abandon their faith. But faith in Jesus is the only thing that will keep us from dying in our sins. Faith in Jesus is the only way to go to the kingdom of God. In truth,

having faith in Jesus is most important for every human being. We need to take Jesus' warning seriously.

The Pharisees once again ignored Jesus' warning and asked, "Who are you?" Jesus had been telling them who he was from the beginning, but they would not accept it (25). Jesus could have judged them harshly and even condemned them. But the purpose of his coming was not to judge them. He just trusted God and continued to testify to the truth (26). Jesus really wanted the Pharisees to know who God is so that they may know the Messiah and accept him. But they could not understand what he was talking about (27). Jesus spoke of heavenly things, but they had no understanding because they were slaves of their sins and bound by earthly things. Just as a caterpillar cannot understand a butterfly unless it is transformed, so they needed to be born again. Jesus did not abandon them. He said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (28).

In John's gospel the phrase "lifted up" appears in three places (3:14; 8:28; 12:32,34). ////It refers to his crucifixion, in which his body was lifted up on the cross. The words "lifted up" also mean exalted, and imply his resurrection and ascension, entering into his glory. The religious leaders thought that if they crucified Jesus it would be the end of everything. However, they carried out God's purpose in making him the sacrifice of atonement for our sins. In fact, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). He died in our places to bear our sins. Peter said, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1Pe 2:24). When we look at the cross, we know that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God to be the Savior of the world. When we look at the cross, our spiritual eyes are opened, and we can understand that Jesus' words are God's words.

Though the religious leaders rejected Jesus, God the Father never abandoned him. Jesus said, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (29). Jesus was greatly comforted and strengthened by God himself. This enabled Jesus to speak the truth and carry out God's mission. His effort bore fruit. Even as he spoke,

many believed in him (30). Let's accept Jesus as the light of the world so that the elements of darkness may be dispelled from our hearts and we may have the light of life.