

# Christmas Light

John 1:1–13

Doug Van Meter

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**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.**

**There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.**

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## Introduction

It is customary at this time of year for lights to decorate homes, shops and, for many, Christmas trees. The custom of decorating trees with lights goes back to when Christmas trees were decorated with candles, which symbolised Christ being the light of the world. These were brought by Christians into their homes in early modern Germany (around the eighteenth century).

I remember, when I was a young boy, my father putting up a massive Douglas Fir Christmas tree in our living room. The room had a high ceiling, and the tree must have been nearly three metres tall. My dad strung the lights on it and then we heartily decorated it.

Later, we were eating in the dining room when, all of a sudden, we heard a loud crash. The tree had fallen over, and there on the living room floor were broken ornaments and smashed lights. Where there had been light, there was only darkness.

We cleaned up the mess and my dad put the tree back up, this time securing it with a wire attached to a firmly placed nail on the ceiling beams. New lights were purchased and brightness prevailed.

In many ways, this is a picture of what John describes in this prologue to his Gospel. There was a time when the world was in darkness and then God, through his Son Jesus Christ, created with the words, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). That light was experienced by a pristine, pre-fallen world. Adam and Eve knew what it was to walk in the light and to have fellowship with one another.

But then our first parents sinned, and spiritual darkness came upon the world—the world as we now know it. There was now the need for a new creation. Enter Jesus.

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Throughout history, the light of Jesus shone into a dark world. Some received the light, while most rejected it. Then, one day, the light came into the world in a very personal and very profound way. We call this the incarnation. The Christmas light came into a darkened world and, as they say, the rest is history—a history that is heading for a glorious future where there will be no need for the sun, for the Lord God will provide all the light required.

The opening verses of John’s prologue could be titled, “Christmas Light.” For in these verses, what will be a dominant theme in John’s Gospel is introduced to us: the theme of light.

As we begin to study this prologue (we will conclude this brief consideration in our next study), we will do so under several headings: the light revealed (vv. 1–5); the light reflected (vv. 6–9); the light rejected (vv. 10–11); and the light received (vv. 12–13). May these lead us worshipfully to the light revered.

## The Light Revealed

First, in vv. 1–5, we read of the light revealed:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

(John 1:1–5)

Hendriksen observes,

This Gospel opens magnificently. It begins by portraying the life of Christ in eternity, before the world was. That life was rich and glorious, filled with infinite delight and serene blessedness in the presence of the Father. Once this truth is grasped, the condescending love of Christ, in becoming flesh, will be appreciated more fully.

In other words, the more that we appreciate the revelation of the light, the more we will revere the light.

## Identification of the Light

It is necessary from the outset that we identify the light spoken of here. The light is identified in vv. 1–3: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made.” There are several things to be noted here.

First, we see that the light is a person. John speaks of the light as “the Word,” and equates the Word with a “he.” To the Jewish mind, “the Word” spoke of God’s self-disclosure and powerful self-expression. As Ryan observes, “God’s Word is the most accurate expression of himself—in Scripture and, mostly and fully, in the person of his Son.” The writer of Hebrews makes the same argument: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets” (Hebrews 1:1).

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God's Word is effective. God speaks and things come into being. Only those with personhood can do so. Jesus is not some force. He is a member of the Godhead. And this means that he loves and is loved by the other members of the Trinity.

Second, we learn that the light was pre-existent. "He was in the beginning with God." He did not have a beginning, but existed before the beginning (cf. v. 15).

Third, he is a particular and distinct person. He both "was with God" and "was God." He is distinct from the Father and the Spirit, although he is God. There is no ground in this text for modalism. The Word is a divine person. He is God.

Fourth, being God, the light is powerful. "All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made." The light was intimately involved in the creation of all that is. It is truthful to say that the light is the Creator. And he is also the Sustainer (see Colossians 1:16–17).

Lest we be left in any doubt as to the identify of this divine light, John makes it clear: "He came to his own, and his own did not receive him" (v. 11). The light is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to appreciate this description of Jesus. If we don't, then the incarnation will be insignificant to us. We need to marvel at the miracle of the incarnation. Without this miracle, Christmas lights merely mock the otherwise controlling darkness. The incarnation provides the foundation for our redemption.

## Illumination of the Light

The Genesis motif continues in vv. 4–5: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it."

Jesus was at the beginning of creation. He was at the beginning of the new creation. "Let there be light" has always been his activity. He is at the beginning of those of us who have experienced the new creation. He can be at yours.

John tells us that "in him was life." This logically follows from v. 3. After all, Jesus is the creator and therefore the source of our life. "Life" here, however, speaks primarily of spiritual life. John is telling us that Jesus is the source of any and all spiritual life for all. It is offered to all, though, as we will see, it is rejected by most. What about you?

In Jesus was life, "and the life was the light of men." The word here translated "light" is found some 230 times in the Bible—27 of which are in John's Gospel, with a further twelve uses in his first epistle and another twelve in Revelation. For John, light and Jesus are inseparable.

The corresponding concept of darkness is also prevalent in his Gospel. Carson says of darkness, "The 'darkness' in John is not only absence of light, but positive evil (cf. 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46; 1 Jn. 1:5, 6; 2:8, 9, 11)."

Though the word "darkness" only appears seven times in the Gospel (plus another seven in 1 John and once in Revelation), nevertheless, what it symbolises—opposition to God—is on every page of

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this 21-chapter book. Jesus is the light of the world but, for the most part, men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds—even their religious deeds—were evil (3:19).

“Light” speaks of the knowledge of God. This is generally how the word and concept is used in John’s writings (and, for that matter, throughout Scripture). John is laying a foundational truth: that, in the words of Ryan, “men’s hearts are darkened and we cannot see what we have no right to miss.”

By this statement, John does not mean that Jesus became the way to the knowledge of God when he was incarnated and dwelt among us. It seems more fitting to the context that Jesus, because he is creator, he has made the awareness of God part and parcel of every life made. It is akin to the teaching of Romans 1:18–20 and 2:12–16, where we learn that the knowledge of God is innate to creation and the human conscience. That is, though God is hidden from us in our sin, nevertheless, there are no true atheists. Though we might reject *what* we know, we cannot reject *that* we know.

This verse informs us that Jesus has always been active in history. The light of Christ has always been shining throughout history; not only on that first Christmas morning. In fact, many are persuaded that the star that the wise men followed was actually a manifestation of the glory of God. Could this have been Christ in his glory leading them to himself? I know that sounds confusing, but he is God and therefore able to be omnipresent.

Regardless, the point is that God did not leave the world in complete darkness until the coming of Christ. The light of God was present, for example, in the tabernacle and the temple. Yes, the light of Christ has always been present, and particularly in God’s Word. In the words of David Murray, we find Jesus “on every page.”

The question is, what are you doing with this light?

Verse 5 contains what Carson calls a “purposeful ambiguity.” There is little agreement on how the verse should be translated. Some versions say, “the darkness did not comprehend it” (NKJV), while others translate, “the darkness has not overcome it” (ESV). Which is correct—the first or the second? The answer is, yes! It could be either. It is as if God purposefully made it ambiguous, for both are true. Let me explain.

Though man in his sinful state cannot comprehend who God in Christ is (vv. 10–11), nevertheless, man can also not snuff out the light of the knowledge of God. The darkness cannot snuff out the light, and the darkness cannot figure out the light. In both of these, we are pointed to God’s sovereignty. God will not be defeated in his purpose, and so the darkness has not “overcome” the light. Only God can empower and equip us to “comprehend” the light.

All of this leads us back to an earlier observation: We might reject *what* we know, but we cannot reject *that* know.

## The Light Reflected

In vv. 6–9, we are introduced to John the Baptist—the older cousin of Jesus, who was called to prepare the way of the Lord.

## The Messenger

John is introduced to us as “a man sent from God, whose name was John” (v. 6). It is noted by commentators that this messenger is never called “the Baptist” by John. The reason is that John, the apostle, never mentions his own name in his Gospel. When we read “John,” we should therefore think “Baptist.”

John the Baptist was by in a sense an “apostle”—in the sense that *apostolos* is the verb translated “sent” in v. 6. John was called by God from before his birth to herald the light of God in Christ to a world in darkness. In the words of Isaiah, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:1–2, quoted in Matthew 4:16).

The apostle John is highlighting God’s commitment to make this light known. And one way he does this is by raising up, and sending forth, human messengers. John the Baptist was foremost in this regard. He was not the light, but was rather a passionate reflector of the Light. (See 5:35—“he was the burning and shining lamp.”)

There is a very real sense in which those who have the light are to do the same thing. John was sent by God to point people to the light that was sent by God (3:34; 4:34; etc.) who now has sent us to reflect and to declare this light (20:21). In other words, the Christmas light is a year-round illumination. It is to shine all the time and everywhere by those who have been “lit up.”

## The Mission

The mission of John was to “bear witness” to the reality of the light: “This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world” (vv. 7–9).

A “witness” (very Johannine word) is one who provides competent testimony concerning that which one has himself seen, heard or experienced. John was such a witness. He was not that light, but the reflector of the true light. As Hendriksen puts it, “John testified concerning the Christ like the moon testifies concerning the sun.”

We should note that John saw himself as merely a light-bearer. Yet there were those who exalted him. It seems that John the apostle is at pains to make it clear that this was problem back in the day. So he makes it clear that John the Baptist was merely a messenger on a mission, lest anyone make the mistake of identifying him with the Master.

The mission continues but the messengers are expendable. The Master is the light, his messengers are just that: messengers. But let John have the last word: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (3:30).

## The Mess

In v. 9, John introduces the concept of the “world,” and it is a dominant one in his Gospel: “That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.”

Of the 259 uses of this word in the Bible, 78 are located in the Gospel of John. A further twenty are found in 1 John, with one in 2 John and eight in Revelation. In total, 41% of the occurrences of this word are in Johannean writings.

The concept, as John uses it, is not primarily the physical cosmos, but rather the rebellious system of all that is opposed to God’s regal and rightful and righteous rule. It is that system that John sees as “darkness.” Carson says, “‘This world’, is not the universe, but the created order in rebellion against its Maker.” Ryan summarises, “The ‘world’ is humankind gone wrong, a world shattered by human rebellion.”

As has been well noted by many, when John mentions the “world,” he is thinking *badness*, not *bigness*. John is preparing us for the reality that the Christmas Light will not be welcomed by all. And lest we are tempted to boast, “Let’s be honest: it is abundantly obvious that ‘the world’ in John 1:10–11 is none other than us.” (Ryan)

## The Light Rejected

In vv. 10–11, we read of the light rejected. It is both a universal and a particular rejection.

### Universal Rejection

In spite of gracious visitations, there was universal rejection. “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him” (v. 10).

“Know” is a rich word, used by Jewish people to indicate perception or recognition, and even of sexual relationship (Matthew 1:25). John is revealing that, as Jesus was in the world, as he shone his light in this world, he was not recognised or pursued. The implication is that he was rejected.

The Evangelist is saying that, *throughout history*, Jesus was rejected, not merely when he walked the earth for 33 years. In other words, ever since the fall, the world has turned a blind eye to him as it careened into the darkness. The history of the world is the history of being wilfully oblivious to the light (Romans 1:18–20).

John says that the people whom Jesus Christ created did not pursue relationship with him. Throughout the history of the world, in spite of the Jesus’ presence, the world largely refused him.

Think about history, and think about all of the gracious divine visitations, and yet the world has rejected a relationship with God. From Abel to the flood, in spite of an Enos and in spite of an Enoch, the world rejected God. From the flood to Abraham, in spite of God’s gracious act of judgement at Babel, the world rejected God. Don Richardson has written a great book titled *Eternity in their Hearts*, in which he points to culture after culture that had some evidence of knowledge of the true God, but suppressed it in unrighteousness. This is the story of the world.

The Christmas light shone long before the Christmas Day. And yet man rejected it. Are you beginning to see the need for something dramatic?

## Particular Rejection

But to make matters worse, there was a particular rejection: “He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.” “His own” refers to his own *people*—the people of Israel, the physical seed of Abraham. It seems that there is here an important and even dramatic shift in thought. It seems as if John is turning our attention to the incarnation. But let’s slow down for a moment.

Whereas the light of the world was always in the world throughout history (see Acts 17—God has never left the world without witness), there came a time in history when God chose a people through whom he would shine his light. That people was Israel (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6). It was to them that God gave the light of the promises, and the light of the covenant, and the light of the law, and the light of the shekinah glory. And how did “his own” respond? The majority “did not receive him.”

The word translated “receive” means to “receive near,” to “associate oneself with in a familiar or intimate way.” In other words, “his own” wanted nothing to do with him. When the light of Christmas arrived, “his own” did all they could to unplug it. In fact, they put him on a tree, and they raised the tree with the intention of snuffing out the light of the world. Thankfully, their rejection was not the final word.

John is helping us to understand the hostility of the world to the Christmas light. And that hostility continues today. Much of the world rejects Christ. Countries like North Korea have gone so far as to ban the celebration of Christmas.

John wants us to appreciate just how dark this world is so that we will see just how bright the light of Christ is. The Christmas light is not comprehended by all, but thankfully neither is it overcome by such darkness. Christmas is a shout of victory in the midst of our battle with darkness. Christmas is a bright light that declares that the darkness will not win the day. And we see this clearly in the final two verses.

## The Light Received

Thankfully, there were some who received the light: “But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (vv. 12–13).

## A Powerful Contrast

“But” is such a wonderful word in Scripture (Ephesians 2:5, etc.)! Not everyone rejected the light. Some, in fact, *received* the light. Those who did were given the inestimable privilege becoming “children of God.” This is another term that is especially Johannine (see 11:52; 1 John 3:1, 10; 5:2).

John is writing so that his readers will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved (20:31). To “receive” is to take to oneself, to make one’s own. It even has the idea of seizing for oneself. This

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is precisely what it means to “believe in (or on) his name.” Not everyone rejects Christ, not everyone remains in darkness, not everyone refuses a relationship with God in Christ.

Rather, there are many who turn from their sins and from the realm of the devil’s dominion to live under the authority of God. Those who do are made “children of God.”

But this leads to the important question: What makes the difference? Why do some embrace the Christmas light while others refuse to know it, refuse to receive him? To answer that, we must look at the last verse in our passage.

## A Powerful Conversion

The closing verse is wonderful, for it speaks of those “who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (v. 13). “Not of blood” means not of human lineage or physical descent. “Nor of the will of the flesh” means not by procreation or sexual impulse. “Nor of the will of man” means not by the procreative urge of the male. In other words, says Hendriksen, “in no sense whatever do believers derive their birth or standing from physical or biological causes.”

No. What is required is a new creation, which only God can provide (see vv. 1–5). Nothing else can overcome the spiritual darkness. Nothing else can deliver us from the domain of evil. Nothing else can overcome our propensity to depravity. Nothing else can overcome our natural rejection of the Lord. No, the only way to become one of the children of God—the only way to stop rejecting the light and to receive the light, to turn from unbelief to belief—is to be “born ... of God.”

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, 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. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

(2 Corinthians 4:3–6)

## The Light Revered

So, how should we Christians respond to the Christmas light? Let me close with a few brief reverent responses to the revelation of the light.

First, we should respond with humility. The grace of the new birth points us to sovereign grace.

Second, we should respond with holiness, realising that those who are children of God live like it (see 1 John 3:1–3).

Third, we should respond with hope, knowing that, as we face the darkness, it will not overcome the light.

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Sometimes life is dark—very dark. Just read through this Gospel and, on every page, in every chapter, there is some kind of dark place, even some valleys of the shadow of death. Jesus was constantly under attack, under threat of life. He lived in the face of slanderous, malicious accusations and innuendo. Yet, in it all, he never ceased to be the light.

Jesus constantly warned his disciples about the darkness that surrounded them. He constantly prepared them for the darkness that they would face—increasingly—in the world (see John 14–16). He warned them of their temptation to deny him, the dark temptations to apostasy. He warned them that the world would hate them. He warned them that, even from among themselves, a betrayer would arise. All of this came to a major head in John 18 and following.

But he also encouraged them. “These things [these honestly hard sayings] I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Christian, for this reason, we should sing, with gusto, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!”

Every year, on 25 December, Christians around the world focus on the miracle of Christmas, the birth of the light of the world. It was a miraculous conception, culminating in a miraculous incarnation. And that miracle assures us of many more miraculous births—not the births of more saviours, but the births of more *saved*.

Christmas, in so many ways, points us to God’s sovereign and saving grace. Nothing is impossible with God. Like Mary, God can form Christ within you (see Galatians 4:19).

Friend, what about you? Are you in darkness? Then behold the light of the world (8:12). Confess your sin and confess the Saviour, who will cleanse you from your sins. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe on him who experienced the ultimate darkness for all who will trust him as Saviour and Lord. Believe on the one who lived as the full light of the world in sinless perfection. Believe on him who died in your place experiencing your ultimate darkness. Believe on him who rose from the dead. Believe as you experience the blessed light of the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. May you know the Christmas light—and the life that it brings, evermore.

AMEN