

# JESUS, THE LIFE

## John 1:4-5

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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 (Jn. 1:4-5).

**A**bout this time of year, children begin asking, “Daddy, how long until Christmas?” When asked why they are so eager, most kids will be honest enough to admit that they are looking forward to presents. I am not old enough that I do not look forward to Christmas gifts. But what I love best about the Christmas season are the decorations, and especially the Christmas tree. I look forward to draping the room in darkness, then plugging in the strands of lights draped around the tree. Light shines forth, chasing away the darkness. And I hear in my mind the words at the beginning of John’s Gospel, speaking of Christ: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness” (Jn. 1:4).

It is common for New Testament books to preview their main themes in the introductory verses. The Gospel of John begins with a prologue that is probably the most elaborate of them all (Jn. 1:1-18), presenting the themes that will be important to John’s portrait of Christ. Three of these themes are gathered together in John 1:4-5, offering an eloquent summary of John’s account of the gospel of Jesus.

### IN HIM WAS LIFE

**T**he first of these theme-words appears in John 1:4, “In him was life.” The word *life* appears 36 times in the Gospel of John, far more than any other New Testament book. It is one of his most important themes. The preceding verses say that “the Word was with

God” and “was God,” and that “all things were made through him” (Jn. 1:1-3). The Second Person of the Godhead, the “Word,” who is the subject of this Gospel, is the source of all life in this universe. Not merely does he possess life, but life itself is found in him and comes through him. Jesus said, “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (Jn. 5:26).

All life is in Christ, including *physical* or *biological* life, but John is especially referring to *spiritual* life. The expression he often uses is *eternal life*. John 3:16 says that God loved the world and sent his Son “that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” We should think of eternal life not merely in terms of its quantity, but also of its quality. It is the life that God has, lived in us now. It is not the prolonging of our earthly kind of life, but the heavenly life that begins in us the moment we believe on Jesus and never ends. Unending millions of years from now, the life that is of God will still be ours in and through Christ.

According to John, the opposite of eternal life is not mere death, but eternal condemnation. He said, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36). So to receive eternal life is to be saved from God’s holy judgment and enter into Christ’s eternal reign of glory.

People think that turning to Jesus will take all the fun out of life. But when you come to Jesus your capacity for joy is vastly increased. Sin only deadens us and saps our life, whereas Christ fills us with wonder and purpose. G. Campbell Morgan tells of meeting as a boy an older man who had been converted to Christ through the ministry of his father. A few days after the man’s conversion, Morgan encountered him in a garden. He was holding something small and gazing into his hand with wonder. Morgan asked him what it was, and with a voice filled with awe the man showed him a leaf that had fallen from a tree. “The beauty of God,” he exclaimed. He had been awaked to the wonder of life! In contrast is the experience of Charles Darwin, the father of the theory of evolution. He turned his back on God and committed himself to secular humanism. His biography reveals that in so doing he lost his taste for life. As Darwin grew older, he admitted that he could no longer get anything out of poetry, music, or art. Life lost its flavor and he lived out his days in a world without wonder or joy.

This is what John wants us to see in Christ: “In him was life.” Are you really living? Do you feel that your life matters for something important? Are you excited about things, or just keeping occupied? Jesus has life to give to those who trust in him. “I have come that they may have life,” he said, “and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

We should observe the link between this verse and the preceding ones, that is, between Jesus as the *Word* and Jesus as the *Life*. It is through God’s Word that Christ’s life comes into us. This means that if you want to be green and growing – if you want to be flourishing with spiritual life – then you need to be drinking from God’s Word. Psalm 1 speaks of the “blessed man,” whose “delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night... He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (Ps. 1:2-3).

Perhaps the prime example of God’s Word bringing spiritual life is the conversion of St. Augustine, the great theologian of the early church. Augustine had a brilliant mind, but was an ungodly youth. His Christian mother, Monica, was burdened for his salvation and his lifestyle broke her heart. As Augustine grew older, bouncing from philosophy to philosophy and indulging himself in sin, he began thinking about Christianity, even listening to the famous preacher, Ambrose of Milan. But that did not bring him to life until he turned to the Bible. As he tells in his *Confessions*, Augustine was seated on a bench, grieving for the deadness of his soul, when he heard children’s voices from over a nearby fence. They were singing a child’s song with the words “*tolle lege, tolle lege*” – that is, “take up and read, take up and read.” Augustine fetched a book of Paul’s letters he had with him, opened it and read Romans 13:13-14: “Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Instantly, he was converted, turned from his sins, and began his new life as a Christian. Just as Christ is the Word and then the Life, it was by the Word that new life came into Augustine.

“Instantly,” he recalled, “with the end of this sentence, by a light as it

were of confidence now darted into my heart, all the darkness of doubting vanished away.”<sup>1</sup>

## THE LIGHT SHINING

This is the very connection John makes, that the life in Christ comes as a light shining in the darkness. “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness” (Jn. 1:4-5). *Light* is another of John’s great themes. The first recorded words of God are “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). Light is an image that everyone understands, and it brings a rich array of meaning.

The first thing light does is *reveal*. When you walk into a dark room, you turn on the light to see. This is what Isaiah prophesied about the coming of Jesus: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isa. 9:2). Man was living in a spiritual darkness, ignorant about God and living in superstition. So Jesus came to reveal God. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” he said (Jn. 14:9). James Boice comments, “Jesus is revealed as the One who knows God the Father and who makes him known... Before Christ came into the world, the world was in darkness. The world did not know God. Christ came. His light shone before men. Then men had light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

Do you know God? Do you what God is like? Jesus came to reveal God to you. Do you know God by personal acquaintance, by his presence within your spirit? Jesus came also to bring us into fellowship with God as worshipers in spirit and in truth.

Light not only reveals but it also *warms*. To “walk in the darkness” is to walk in sin and moral depravity, but the light of Christ warms the heart so that it is changed. This spiritual transformation is what Jesus meant in John 12:46, “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”

The evangelist Harry Ironside was once preaching outdoors in San Francisco when a famous atheist approached and handed him a card.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, *The Confessions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999), VIII.12.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), I:45.

It read, “Sir, I challenge you to debate with me the question, ‘Agnosticism versus Christianity’ in the Academy of Science Hall next Sunday afternoon at four o’clock.” Ironside read the card aloud and replied, “I am very much interested in this challenge... Therefore I will be glad to agree to this debate on the following conditions, namely, in order to prove that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has something worth fighting for and worth debating about, he will promise to bring with him to the hall next Sunday two people... one man who was for years what we commonly call a ‘down-and-outer’... a man who for years was under the power of evil habits from which he could not deliver himself, but who on some occasion... heard the glorification of agnosticism and his denunciations of the Bible and Christianity, and whose heart and mind as he listened to such an address were so deeply stirred that he went away from that meeting saying, “Hence-forth, I too am an agnostic! And as a result of imbibing that particular philosophy found that a new power had come into his life. The sins he once loved, he now hates, and righteousness and goodness are now the ideals of his life... all because he is an agnostic.” Ironside likewise asked the atheist to bring a woman who was similarly delivered from corrupt living by the power of unbelief.

Then Ironside turned to his side of the bargain. “I will bring with me at the very least 100 men and women who for years lived in just such sinful degradation as I have tried to depict, but who have been gloriously saved through believing the gospel which you ridicule. I will have these men and women with me on the platform as witnesses to the miraculous saving power of Jesus Christ and as present-day proof of the truth of the Bible.” At this, the atheist walked away, for while Ironside could easily produce 100 men and women transformed by the light of Jesus Christ, the secular debater could not provide even one who have been changed by his philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, light not only reveals and warms, but it also *guides*. We think of the glory cloud of light that guided Israel through the desert during the exodus. Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Likewise, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). If you come to Jesus Christ in faith

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<sup>3</sup> H.A. Ironside, *Random Reminiscences from Fifty Years of Ministry* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1939), 99-107.

and follow as his disciple, he will be a light to guide you “in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Ps. 23:3).

Fourthly, light *conveys and stimulates life*. If you want a plant to grow, you place it in the sunshine. Likewise, you will grow upwards as the light of Christ’s Word shines in you. His light shines with the power of his life through his Word.

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4). This great verse also summarizes what it means for us to be Christ-like. Jesus wants you to be a lamp that reflects his light in the world. He wants you to reveal God to those around you; he wants you to warm others so they will seek after truth and love; he wants you to be a guide to others; and he wants his light shining in and through you to bring others to life. He said: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:19).

## DARKNESS AGAINST THE LIGHT

**T**he third image John uses is *darkness*. This is the opposite of light. If light stands for the knowledge of God, darkness represents the spiritual ignorance in which the world is perishing. If light stands for warmth and goodness, then the darkened world is that which is enslaved in sin and evil. If the light leads us in good paths, darkness is the realm of the lost and blind. If light brings life, then darkness is the realm of death.

Darkness is opposed to light. John 1:5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.” This indicates that the coming of Christ as the light meets the opposition of the darkened world. Jesus said, “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:20). Nothing has ever condemned this world more than its response to the coming of Jesus Christ. If people tell you the world or the human race is basically good, remind them what it did to Jesus. He came without any sin, healing and teaching the way to God. He was a light shining in the darkness. But for that very reason the world hated him. The hypocritical Pharisees resented him for exposing their legalism. The priests and scribes envied his popularity. The power-hungry Romans thought him a threat to their

military domination. And it wasn't just the elite, for the ordinary people also called out for Jesus' blood: "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" they demanded of Pontius Pilate (Jn. 19:15). When God's Son came into the world, the world nailed him to the cross – the cruelest form of execution they could possibly devise – to suffer and die. People today similarly despise Jesus; for all their supposed admiration they refuse his claim to be Savior and Lord and resent his holy example that exposes their sin.

What about you? Do you ever notice how nervous you are when a police car drives behind you? Why? Because you are conscious of guilt. This is why people are unnerved to face the light of Jesus as it shines in Scripture, and why they flee his light for the more comfortable darkness. His light shows our darkness for what it is. Will you turn away from that light, scurrying into spiritual shadows? Or will you worship the glory it reveals, humbly confess the darkness it exposes in you, and come into the light of Christ to receive life and salvation? It is only when we humble ourselves before God, admit our need for his grace, and realize that Jesus came to help and save us that we no longer flee. When our car is broken-down at night, we welcome the arrival of a policeman. And when you realize your need of God's mercy, and how willing he is to save you, then you will welcome the light of Christ into your heart. But whether you accept him or not, realize that you will never put out his light, and for all eternity that light will shine either in you with life or upon you so that you will never escape God's condemnation of judgment and death.

John uses a word at the end of verse 5 (*katelaben*) that can be taken in a number of ways. Some translations render it as *comprehend*: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not *comprehended* [or *understood*] it" (see KJV, NIV, & NASB). That is a possible translation, though I think it unlikely because darkness does not seek to understand light but to oppose it. Another way it can be rendered is to *extinguish*, as in snuffing out a flame. This is the sense given in the English Standard Version: "the darkness has not overcome it." Leon Morris explains, "The light and the darkness came into bitter and decisive conflict and the darkness could not prevail."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 77.

At one point Jesus' opponents formed a mob to stone him, but he walked right through them. They sent soldiers to arrest him, but they were too awed by him. They nailed him to a cross, but he saved the thief hanging next to him. Finally, as the dark storm clouds of God's wrath fell upon him for our sins, Jesus died, and they laid him in the pitch black darkness of the cold tomb. But Jesus rose from the grave; even the darkness of death was unable to overcome him. He ascended into heaven, and though the world has tried to snuff out the light of Christ it shines all the more brightly still. When John wrote this Gospel, "fifty years of opposition and persecution... had not extinguished the light of Christ in the gospel. Since then, two millennia have passed by and the light still shines."<sup>5</sup>

The world cannot overcome the light of Christ, but how often his own people neglect it. Are you seeking to grow in grace through the light that shines in God's Word? Are you walking in the light? In other words, are you living in conscious fellowship with Jesus, obeying his Word, living in step with his Holy Spirit, and enjoying his blessings of righteousness, peace, and joy (Rom. 14:17). Walking in the light of Christ is the only way to live in the power of his salvation. You will never get rid of the darkness within you by trying to remove it yourself or by following some manmade program of life improvement. You don't take a bucket into a basement to pail out the darkness; you turn on the light and the light chases it away. John writes in his first epistle: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7).

Therefore, I say to you what the children sang to St. Augustine: *tolle lege, tolle lege*, take up and read God's Word of salvation for you. Turn on the light of Christ in your heart; especially in the darkest places, let the truth and the warmth of God's Word shine as it reveals the glory and grace of God to your soul, and you will be guided into life more abundant in Christ.

## THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

“**I**n him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” These

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Johnson, *Let's Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 6

are great themes that we will encounter all through John's Gospel: life, light, and darkness. But remember that John is really pointing to Jesus. What matters in life, then, is not what we are and have been, not what others have done, not what challenges or trials the future might hold. What matters is that Christ has life through his light that shines in the world, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

One who learned this was John L. Girardeau. A college student in 1840, he was lost in the great darkness of his deep awareness of unworthiness and sin. His biography tells us:

He had just entered college when a gloom like that of eternal night fell upon his soul. His conscience pointed to his sinful nature, the unbearable holiness of God, and the flaming bar of judgment... The lurid glare of an eternal hell was ever before his fervid imagination. His case seemed hopeless. He was afraid to put out his light at night lest the darkness should never end... He had no appetite for food. He could not study. No earthly thing interested him... In vain did he strive to make peace with God; he wept over the consequences of his sins, but there was no sense of pardon; he tried to repent and reform, but there was no peace; he strove to make covenants and agreements with God, but the earth was iron and the heavens were brass. One beautiful morning while on his knees begging for mercy, it occurred to him that he had already done everything that it was possible for him to do, and that all of these things had availed him nothing. He would, therefore, just surrender himself to Jesus and leave the case in his hands. This was faith. Instantly the Holy Spirit assured him that he was accepted in Christ, that his sins were forgiven, and that God loved him with an everlasting love.<sup>6</sup>

That is the way to life and light: to cease trusting in yourself or in anything else of this world that might commend you to God, and surrender your case into the hands of Jesus. "I have come into the world as light," he said, "so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (Jn. 12:46). That light is still shining, and through him you can have life everlasting, life abundant, life in Christ. "These are written," says John, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31).

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<sup>6</sup> George A. Blackburn, ed., *The Life Work of John L. Girardeau*, (Columbia, S.C.: The State Company, 1916), 22-23.