

THE UNKNOWN CHRIST

John I:9-II

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The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. *John I:9-II*

In 1866, Robert J. Thomas left from China on a mission to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of Korea. Thomas was a missionary working for the Scottish Bible Society who realized that the Korean language is based on Chinese, so that educated Koreans could read the Chinese Bibles his organization produced. Filled with a love for the Korean people and a desire for the light of God's love to shine among them, he boarded an American ship bound for the city of Pyongyang with a large supply of Chinese Bibles. As the ship drew near to that city, however, a fight broke out between the American ship and the Korean coast guard. The ship was burned and all the passengers were killed, except for Thomas. As the ship sank, he struggled to reach the shore. He staggered to the beach, his arms filled with as many of the Bibles that he could carry without drowning. When Korean soldiers came to Thomas, he thrust the Bibles into their hands, after which they clubbed him to death.¹

Shocking as this account is, it is similar to the experience of the Lord Jesus Christ in his coming to this world. Just as Robert Thomas went to Korea with a message of light and salvation, only to be mistaken and killed, the Son of God came to this world because of his great love for it. The world did not accept him, but scorned him and put

¹ Cited from James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), I:310-311.

him to death on a cross. John 1:9-11 presents this by saying, first, that Jesus came as a light for every man, second, that the world did not know him for what he was, and third, that even those who above all should have believed in him instead did not receive him.

LIGHT FOR EVERYONE

Jesus came into the world with a purpose, to bring his light into a dark world: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (Jn. 1:9).

It is important for us to understand what John means in saying that Jesus “enlightens everyone.” To enlighten means to give knowledge, either inwardly or outwardly. Some people take this verse to mean that Jesus’ coming gave inward illumination to the entire human race, so that we can all now look into our hearts and find truth. But that contradicts what John says in the very next verse, that even though “he was in the world... the world did not know him.” This is better understood, therefore, to speak of Christ’s outward illumination. Since Jesus has come into the world, his light has shined on the human race. Some people turn away from that light, but in his coming Jesus has nonetheless brought light to us.

We have been noticing various theme-words employed in John’s prologue (Jn. 1:1-18). So far we have considered the following themes: “the Word,” “life,” “light,” “darkness,” and “witness.” John 1:9-10 presents another theme-word, “the world” (Greek, *kosmos*), which John uses 77 times in this Gospel. Understanding what John means by “the world” is helpful in interpreting John 1:9-11.

When we think of “the world,” we usually think spatially, that is, of the planet on which we live. Therefore, when John 1:9 says, “The true light... was coming into the world,” and when verse 10 says, “the world was made through him,” we think of the planet Earth. That is implied, of course, but it is not John’s emphasis. When John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world,” John does not so much have the planet in mind but the people on the planet. Moreover, he uses “the world” in contrast to the Jewish people. God loved not merely the Jews, but the whole world. This is what the Samaritans meant when they said of Jesus, “We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (Jn. 4:38). Jesus is the Savior not merely for the Jews, but for

all people. This is John's point in verse 9, that Jesus came as the light for all the peoples of the world.

This means that Jesus came to enlighten you. It doesn't matter who you are or what background you have. You may be uneducated. Jesus came to give you the knowledge of God and eternal life. As a result, many of the most spiritually enlightened Christians have been simple, unlearned people. This was true, in fact, of most of the disciples. Jesus did not use the intellectual elite to reveal his gospel. Instead, he took a fisherman like the apostle John, shined his light into his mind and heart, and through him gave us one of the most awe-inspiring pieces of writing ever produced. The Bible was written by ordinary people to enlighten other ordinary people.

But Jesus also came to enlighten the educated and refined. We will see an example of this in John 3, when Nicodemus came to see Jesus. Here was a member of the scholarly elite, yet for all his intelligence and learning he needed to be taught by Jesus. Jesus said to this great intellectual, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). This meant that until Jesus had spiritually enlightened Nicodemus through his Word, he would remain ignorant of the things of God. Likewise, all of us must come to Jesus, believe on his Word, and receive his light into our minds and hearts. Only then will we "no longer walk in darkness but have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12).

CHRIST UNKNOWN

The greatest thing ever to happen was the coming of Jesus Christ to enlighten all the world. But one of the greatest tragedies is described in John 1:10, "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him."

The reason for this is seen in John's second emphasis in speaking of "the world." To John, "the world" speaks not merely of the people on this planet but also of the attitude of wickedness and rebellion that marks the human race. The "world" means "the wicked world," or "the unbelieving world." This is why the words "worldly" and "ungodly" are practically synonymous. One scholar explains, "The emphasis lies upon the world as people who have turned away from

God to deceit and delusion.”² This is why John distinguishes between the world and the people of God who are saved out of the world. In his first epistle, he writes, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn. 2:17).

John 1:10 is a statement of the great problem with this world, that it does not know Jesus Christ, its maker and Savior and Lord. But why does the world not know Jesus? Why is there such unbelief? Let me suggest two reasons, the first of which is that the world does not *recognize* Jesus. This is a spiritual problem. Herman Ridderbos explains, “The world to which the [Word] came was his own creation. The world did not know him, not because he was a stranger but because it was estranged from him... The world *should* have known.”³ This seems to be John’s point in reminding us that “the world was made through him” (Jn. 1:10). Nature recognized Jesus as its creator and Lord; the winds and the waves obeyed his voice (Mk 4:35-41). The fact that mankind does not also recognize him shows that because of our sin we are spiritually dead.

The second cause of unbelief is moral. The world did not recognize God’s Son because it did not *want* him. The world instead loves sin, and Jesus is a threat to sin. “This is the judgment,” he said. “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19).

All through Jesus’ life he was unwanted by the world to which he came. When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem and needed a place to give birth to Jesus, the innkeeper did not want him. Then the magi came from the East, telling Herod that the King of the Jews was born. But Herod didn’t want him, so he murdered the babies of Bethlehem and caused Jesus to flee. On it went throughout his life, until the day came when Pontius Pilate wanted to release innocent Jesus, but the crowd called instead for the criminal Barabbas. They didn’t want Jesus, but shouted, “Crucify him, crucify him!” (Jn. 19:6).

Because it is spiritually dead, the world did not recognize Jesus for who he is, and because it is morally depraved, the world did not want Jesus. For these reasons, though Jesus revealed himself so clearly and

² B.J. Dodd, “World,” in Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Development* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 1223.

³ Herman Ridderbos, *John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 44.

powerfully, they were not willing to believe and follow him. The world is not interested in what Christ has to offer, so it takes no interest in knowing him, and it is not persuaded to believe in him or motivated to follow where he leads.

Nothing is more revealing about this world than how it responded to the coming of Christ. But the same is true of you individually. How greatly it speaks of spiritual deadness if the very rocks and seas recognize Jesus as Lord and God, but you do not. And if you recognize from the Bible at least something of his deity and his holiness, yet choose a life of unbelief, refusing to trust and follow him, what more could condemn you in the sight of God? There is no one more excellent than Jesus Christ, and no calling more worthy than his call to faith and discipleship. So what could be more dreadful than to love darkness instead of light? What could be worse than to see Christ, and leave him unknown. Understand, then, that if you will not know Christ, then Christ will not know you. Jesus said, “Unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24).

REJECTED BY HIS OWN

I named it a great tragedy that the light came to the world but the world did not know him. But there was a greater tragedy, perhaps the greatest ever known in this world. John recounts in verse 11: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” John is pointing to the particular people called to be Christ’s own, the nation of Israel. They were the Lord’s own people, as stated in Exodus 19:5, “You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples.”

Israel had been prepared to receive its Messiah. In movies, a spy will sometimes tear a dollar in half, giving one half to the man who is later to receive a message. The other half will be presented by the messenger when he arrives. When the two matching pieces fit together, the messenger’s identity is proved. This is what God did to prepare his people Israel for the coming of Christ. The Old Testament prophecies of Christ were like one half of a torn dollar bill. When Jesus came, he matched up perfectly with the prophecies, and right on schedule he appeared as Israel’s Savior and king. According to all that, Israel should have known and received Jesus as the Messiah.

This rejection of Christ goes beyond ignorance and points to an amazing ingratitude. Think of all the good Jesus did during his years of ministry in Israel: the people he healed and the grace he showed. Then consider how they hated him in return. Charles Spurgeon observes:

The further our Lord Jesus Christ went on in life the more did he experimentally know the base ingratitude of mankind. He lived for them; in obedience to his Father he spent his whole life for men... He forgot himself, he utterly renounced all ambitious purposes, and gave himself away that he might seek and save the lost... No mother ever loved her babe as Jesus loved his own which were in the world; and yet, continually, in every way, men sought to take away his life, which was more valuable to them than it was to him... How often had he to escape their cruel hands, and, when his hour was come, how eagerly did they conspire to hound him to his death.⁴

Shortly before his arrest, Jesus told a parable that explained another reason why Israel did not receive God's Son: their spiritual pride and rebellion. A master built a vineyard and placed tenants there to work it. When the harvest came, the master sent servants to receive his produce, but "the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another." More servants were sent, and the same thing happened. Jesus was talking about the prophets, whom God had sent to secure Israel's obedience but whom the people had persecuted and killed. "Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance'" (Mt. 21:33-39).

John 1:10 tells us why irreligious people reject Christ: they are spiritually darkened and morally depraved. But John 1:11 shows why religious and often moral people reject Jesus. They want to keep his glory for themselves. They don't want to trust and worship a Messiah; they want to be Messiahs; they want to be worshiped. Instead of humbling themselves before a Savior, the moral achievers want to be glorified for their own works. The irreligious love darkness because it provides a cover for their sin. But the religious unbeliever loves the darkness because it makes him seem so much better by comparison. In the dark, the light of a candle shines brightly. But when the full, blazing light of the sun rises up, candles

⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1971), 18:409.

are shown up as very dim lights indeed. In that way, the true light that is Jesus Christ came into the world to enlighten everyone. He exposes the dimness of every other supposed light and shows even the religious peoples' need for a Savior. In the presence of Christ and his holy perfection, we are forced to humble ourselves and confess our wickedness. This is why the Jewish leaders hated Jesus. Sadly, many today would rather put away the Savior, even to their own ultimate destruction, just as Israel did, rather than put away their pride and humble themselves before Jesus.

We should realize that the example of the Jews condemns us all. Far from thinking, "What terrible people they were," we should realize that they were the most enlightened of all people. We are no better. Apart from God's saving grace, we all reject Jesus rather than humble ourselves, confessing and forsaking our sin. The example of Israel merely shows the total depravity of the human heart and our total need for the saving grace of God to enable us to believe.

Moreover, if we think the unbelieving Jews were ungrateful to Christ, let us not forget similar failings among his disciples. When Mary anointed Jesus' feet with costly oil, the disciples complained that she was wasting money, just as we today think it best to keep our money for ourselves rather than give it to Christ. When Jesus faced the agony of Gethsemane, asking only that his disciples watch for him in prayer, they fell asleep. We likewise have little zeal to labor in prayer. While Jesus faced his trial and suffered the cross, most of his disciples were nowhere to be found, just as many Christians are ashamed to bear his reproach before the world today, compromising with darkness rather than letting Christ's light shine before men. "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (Jn. 1:11). Do we receive Christ whole-heartedly, gratefully, and publicly? Or are we too enamored by the world to let it know that we have been saved out of it? Thank God that salvation is by grace alone and that there is forgiveness for our sin. But let us be grateful and receive Jesus as his people should, giving ourselves wholly to him.

UNQUENCHABLE LIGHT

This is the great tragedy, that having shined his light to the world, Christ is unknown, unrecognized, and unwanted. So does this mean that Christ's coming failed? Will our world's spiritual

deadness, moral depravity, ingratitude, and pride, keep God's Son from achieving the purpose for which he lived and died on the cross? The answer is that Jesus Christ no more died for nothing than did Robert J. Thomas, the missionary killed at the hands of the Korean soldiers to whom he had brought the gospel.

The Korea to which Thomas came was dark and barbarous, a fitting representative of the whole world to which Jesus came. Archibald Campbell, another missionary, writes, "In Korea... there was spiritual darkness until the gospel of Christ was brought in. Men sold their daughters, their sisters, and sometimes their wives into prostitution without a qualm of conscience... There was little that could be called integrity... Selfishness was in the very physical make up... Medicine men were in business for a living, but hospital service for the sick and afflicted was beyond comprehension... Lepers were outcasts. The blind were beggars."⁵

That was the profound darkness to which Robert J. Thomas came bearing light, the darkness which put him to death. His example, however, shows that even in death, the light of Christ shines in the world. It shows, despite all appearances, that John 1:5 is true: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

The light first shined in Korea the day Robert Thomas died on the beach at Pyongyang. After he was clubbed to death, the Korean soldiers picked up the Chinese Bibles that Thomas had so sacrificially brought to their shores. Some of them could read it; they kept them and in time some put their faith in Christ. From that beginning, reinforced by a host of missionaries who followed, the light of the gospel shined so that Christ was known to the people of Korea. In South Korea today, Christianity has displaced Buddhism as the majority religion, and it is one of the few Far Eastern countries with a substantial Christian population. Indeed, Korea has emerged as a leading nation in world missions, shining the light of the knowledge of Christ to others in the world.

A story will illustrate the change brought by the light of Christ. A young man named Oh In Ho was one of the first Koreans to come to America for university studies, attending the University of

⁵ Archibald Campbell, *The Seven Great "I Am's" and the Seven Miracles of Jesus in John's Gospel* (Ft. Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968), 108.

Pennsylvania just after the Korean War. One night on the street, he was attacked by a teenage gang and was murdered, a tragic reversal of the fate of Robert Thomas. Oh In Ho's parents, living in poverty in distant Korea, were heart-broken by the news. But they were a family that knew Christ. They responded to their son's death by raising hundreds of dollars from their Christian friends. They sent it to far-away America with the request that their son's murderers be told of their forgiveness and that the money be used to enable the violent youths to attend a Christian school where they, too, could come to know the light of Christ.⁶

The true light came into the world to enlighten everyone. Yes, Jesus was not received but rejected, and he is being rejected even still, as if the world could crucify him over and over again. But it is the glory of the gospel that the light of Christ does not go out, for it is the light of the ever-living Son of God. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1:5). And it never will.

So let us shine the light, telling people about Jesus, risking our comfort and reputations – and, yes, if needed, even our lives. Let us take Christ to those who do not know him – whether around the corner or around the world. Despite every kind of opposition – spiritual darkness, moral evil, ingratitude, and pride – let us believe the power that Jesus has to overcome the greatest opposition. For though the world does not know him, he will make himself known to many through us so that they will join us as bearers of Christ's light and we will together live and walk in that light forever.

⁶ Cited from Boice, I:61.