

God is Light

by Ray C. Stedman

We are continuing our studies of the great letter from the hand of the Apostle John – John the Mender – the man who was called to follow Christ as a teenager when he was mending his nets. That act became symbolic of the ministry of this man, the one who mends things, who calls us back to fundamental matters. As we saw in the last message, John began by presenting to us a life, a life which appeared in history in the form of a person, a person who was touched and seen and heard and handled. He was, therefore, no mere figment of the imagination. He was not an invented person, a composite of the longings and desires of men, projected by their wishful thinking upon a being who never really lived. He is a man who lived, and walked among us, John said. We touched him, we saw him, we heard him, we handled him.

The great and exciting message he has to declare to us is that there is a way to share this wonderful life today. There is a way that you can have this person, and he can have you, and the two of you can live together. When you do, John says, you will experience two wonderful things:

First, fellowship: The experience of having everything in common, with all that means in view of the One with whom you are sharing life, One who is God himself, dwelling in you. This, in turn, will result in joy – that secret, quiet excitement within that is not subject to circumstances, but burns like a steady flame, keeping life interesting, free from boredom, lending richness and color to every experience you go through. These are not just hopeful words, these are real facts. This is what John says he is writing to us about. All this will occur as we come to know this living Lord.

Now, going on, he says that this life was also a message. Jesus said, and is yet saying to the world, a very badly needed thing; his life is a message.

We know how a man's life can become a single message.

The life of Adolf Hitler, for instance, has become a message to the world, a message which all have read, how pride, pursued to the full, opens the door to demonic powers, and terrible, frightening things can follow.

In contrast to that, I have just read the life of that amazing American, George Washington Carver, the dedicated Negro scientist who, though born into slavery, became one of the greatest scientists this nation has ever produced and whose discoveries have blessed the whole world. What is the message of his life? It is that true humility is the open door to learning. If you are humble enough there is nothing you cannot learn. It is exactly the opposite of the message of Adolf Hitler.

Now the whole life of Jesus Christ is also a message. What was the message? John goes on to tell us in one verse:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. {1 Jn 1:5 RSV}

That is the message of the life of Jesus. That is what he came to tell us, and what he imparts to us as we learn to know him. "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." It is put positively and negatively and it is easy to see how that message was incorporated and fulfilled in the life of Jesus. John opens his Gospel with the words: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness can never put it out," {cf, John 1:4-5}. That is the glory of this life. Our Lord himself said, "I am the light of the world. If any man follow me, he shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life," {cf,

John 8:12}. There it is again, a life that is light. Again, he said, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men love darkness and will not come to the light because their deeds are evil," {John 3:19 KJV}.

What, exactly, does this message mean, "God is light"? Obviously the Apostle John expects us to think about this a bit, for he says this is the sum, this is the meaning, of all that Jesus came to do and to be. It is imperative that we understand this, for this is the meaning of the life of Jesus, whether it is his life lived in history, or the life he will live in us right now. It will all come out here, "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." Notice something else. John does not say, "Light is God." It is, "God is light." You cannot reverse that. If it were, "Light is God," then, of course, the Indians who greet the rising sun with arms outstretched and burn incense to it are truer worshippers of God than we. No, it does not say "Light is God," but "God is light."

That means that what light is, on a physical plane, God is on every level of human experience. If you want to understand the character of God, then observe what light is. What light does, God does. What light accomplishes, God can accomplish in your life. Well, then, what does light do?

In this enlightened 20th century we feel we have learned a great deal about light, much more than men knew fifty or a hundred years ago. We have analyzed it, broken it down into its spectrum; we can take fractional parts of it and use them for various purposes; we have timed it, measured its speed; we know that it is the fastest thing known in the universe; we have managed to produce x-rays and laser beams which do amazing and phenomenal things. But after all this we have really learned nothing essentially new about light. That is the humiliating thing about it. We have not learned anything really important about it. The great functions of light are universally known and have been known ever since the beginning of history. In the earliest dawn of humanity men experienced what light could do as equally and fully as modern men do today. We have not learned one thing of any real importance.

Now what does light do? Basically, it is three-fold:

1. First, the most characteristic thing about light, the thing we are enjoying at this very moment

and probably the first discoverable fact about light, is that light reveals. I can see you because there is light in this room; and you are unfortunate enough to see me for the same reason. Light reveals. If there were no light I could hear you but I could not see you. Darkness conceals, but light reveals.

A number of years ago I visited the Grand Canyon for the first time. I was driving alone from Texas to Southern California and on the way picked up two high school boys who were hitch-hiking. On the spur of the moment the three of us decided to leave Highway 66, and drive up to see the Grand Canyon. It was about ten-thirty at night when we made our decision and we knew we would have to spend the night somewhere. We were traveling on very limited funds for that is the way I traveled all the time in those days. We did not have money enough to stay in a motel, but since we had sleeping bags with us we decided to drive up inside the park, find a place to sleep, and see the Canyon in the morning. We arrived in the park long after midnight and not knowing where the Canyon was we drove on into the park, found a wide spot in the road, pulled the car over. Taking out our sleeping bags we walked a few feet into the trees, threw them down and went to sleep. When we awoke in the morning the sun was high. I woke first, rolled over, and to my astonishment found that I had been sleeping within arm's length of the edge of the canyon. If I had rolled over in my sleep I would have fallen over the edge of a 500-foot precipice. In the darkness we had not seen it, but the light made it clear. That, in turn, made us grateful that we had not tried to go further from the car that night.

That is the first function of light. It enables us to see things that have been there all the time but which we could never see till the light shines. That is exactly what John means. God, also, does that. God reveals reality. God, through Christ, opens up the eyes of the heart and life comes into focus and we see clearly, without distortion. It does not all happen in one amazing transformation. Often, it is a gradual process for we would not be able to take the full revelation at once. But the purpose of God's entering into human hearts is that we might see reality. Light reveals, and so

does God. The enigmas of life will gradually unfold, the great mysteries will become clear, illusions will be seen for what they are, deceiving phantasmas that disappear as the light shines upon them.

This time of the year always makes me remember the days when, as a young man, I was entering college for the first time. That was a critical period in my life. Like so many young men facing college, I was not at all sure about what I was getting into. I had an outward appearance of confidence and the ability to handle anything that came, but within I had a deep sense of uncertainty. I was aware that I really did not know the ground rules of life. I pretended I did but I didn't, and inside I knew it. It was like trying to play a game when you didn't know the rules, but were trying to guess them as you went along. It was rough. I was baffled, as all young people are baffled, by the great questions of life. What am I here for? What is it really all about? What really is worthwhile about life, and how do you tell? How do you fit death into this whole picture? How can I understand and control myself so as to handle rightly what comes? The more I learned about life the more baffled I became until I met Jesus Christ and began to understand the message of his life, the message revealed in his Word. Bit by bit things began to come clear. First the answers to some of the greater issues: What is life all about? What happens after death? Where do we go from here? Then details began to filter through the fog and little by little things became much clearer. I confess to you that much remains, but I am no longer confused. The road ahead is clear.

Out of my darkness one fact became increasingly clearer to me. A great mystery was cleared up that impinged upon every other question of my life. I discovered that it was the key to many things. It was the fact that the solution to most of my troubles lay within me. The problems were not outside of me, as I once thought – the way other people acted – but it was me. I was the big problem. As I began to see that, I saw what it was in me that was creating the problems. Little by little I began to understand myself. The mystery of self was revealed by the light as it shone upon me from

the word of the only One who knows what is in man. I began then, to see the answers to the problems of life.

A friend and I were talking this past week about President Johnson. We were discussing the phenomenon of a man who is obviously an able individual, who has had a great deal of experience in running governmental affairs, perhaps more so than any other President before him, but who is increasingly losing popular standing and is increasingly baffled by the fact that he cannot put his finger on the solution to his problems. It occurred to us, as we were talking, that the reason was because he cannot see himself. President Johnson is the kind of man who interjects himself into every problem. Then he no longer sees it as a problem outside himself but his primary interest is how it relates to him, what it is going to do to him and to his image. Because of that he can no longer see it objectively. He plants himself squarely in the midst of every problem, and since he does not understand himself and cannot see himself, he cannot understand why he cannot solve his problems. The increasing bafflement of the President's life is continuous testimony to this.

I only mention him because he is so well known, but many of us suffer from this, do we not? There is some undefinable, unknown factor in our problems that eludes us. We cannot get our fingers on whatever it is that makes everything turn out so differently than we expect. That always indicates that we, ourselves, are the problem. We need the light to shine upon the mystery of darkness in our own lives. That is what God does. God is light and light reveals.

2. But that is not light's only quality. It also measures.

Did you ever watch a man pick up a stick of lumber, hold it up, and sight along it? What is he doing? He is trying to see if it is crooked or not. What reveals that? A beam of light. He is measuring it against a ray of light, because light is straight and anything that does not correspond to the light is crooked. Light is the most common measuring stick in the universe. We measure whether things are straight

or crooked by light. Surveyors use light to measure distances and angles, to see whether they are up or down, high or low, right or left. They have a little instrument they sight through with a small telescope on it. How does it work? It uses light as a measurement. In the vast, illimitable reaches of space today the only adequate measuring stick is light years, the distance measured by the speed of light.

That is what light does, and that is what God does. God is a measuring stick, a point of reference. You can use God to measure everything else. Men are forever seeking to solve the puzzles of life on every level around us. In economic life, political life, social life, scientific life, psychological life, whatever it may be, we are confronted with mysteries and puzzles wherever we turn. As men seek to ferret out the solutions to these puzzles they come up with many proposed solutions. Some are contradictory, some are supplementary to each other, some are absurd, some are stupid, some are very appealing and practical. Every one of us, facing this welter of advice, are constantly asking ourselves the question, how do I know which one is right? How do I know who has the real answers? Where do I get a measuring stick that can be applied to these voices I hear? That is where God comes in.

I'm now reading a very interesting book on the great economic philosophers of the past, men who have analyzed the social and economic structure of life and have tried to explain what happens to the market that makes it rise and fall and thus men lose their shirts or become rich overnight. It discusses the theories of men like Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Keynes and others. It is an interesting book because it reveals that no one can really put their finger on the secret of economic management in society. The reason is that none of the thinkers sees man as God sees him. None of them sees man as he is. Each of them approach the matter on one plane or another but they do not see man in the totality of his being, and therefore they miss the point. But God sees man according to the truth, according to the light and all the conflicting voices that we hear today can be sorted out and measured by his revelation of what man is.

Now that is very practical. Is your marriage working out? Do you get all kinds of advice on how to make it work? Well, the light that shines from God's word about marriage is the full truth about what makes marriages work. If you measure the advice you get by that, you can see what to believe. It is the only measure there is. When you fall in love with another woman or another man, and your own home looks dull and hopeless, and you are drawn by the temptation to forget it all and run off with the other person and start all over again, because it all looks so lusciously attractive. But then you measure it against God's Word and there you learn the unpleasant truth that may be quite unpalatable to you at the moment, that your dream will not work, it will only increase your misery, it will hurt and destroy everyone involved. Because you see that and have learned to trust the light a bit, you say "All right, even though I want to do this, I won't." Later on, the blindness passes and you are so grateful, so eternally thankful, that God's light stopped you from going on into darkness. "The light shines in darkness," John says, "and the darkness cannot put it out," {John 1:5 RSV}.

3. Light not only reveals and measures, but light energizes too. That is the most dramatic quality about light. It imparts life, it activates, it quickens. Some years ago I ran across a most eloquent description in one of the sermons of Philip Brookes along this line. He says,

"When the sun rose this morning it found the world in darkness, torpid and heavy and asleep, with powers all wrapped up in sluggishness; with life that was hardly better or more alive than death.

"The sun found this great sleeping world and woke it. It bade it to be itself. It quickened every slow and sluggish faculty. It called to the dull streams and said, 'Be quick;' to the dull birds and bade them sing; to the dull fields and made them grow; to the dull men and bade them think and talk and work.

"It flashed electric invitations to the whole mass of sleeping power which really was the world and summoned it to

action. It did not make the world. It did not start another set of processes unlike those which had been sluggishly moving in the darkness. It poured strength into the essential processes which belonged to the very nature of the earth. It glorified, intensified, fulfilled the earth.”

That happens every morning. That is what God does. God is light and God intensifies, fulfills, and glorifies our essential humanity. He does not destroy it. He takes it and leads it on through the darkness into an ever-growing experience of life and vitality and productivity. Many all over the earth have lost this vision, and for them life has become dead and dull and meaningless, filled with increasing despair. I recently read an excerpt from one of the papers of Frankfurt, Germany, and this sentence stood out:

“Newspapers and reports are mentioning the phenomenon of the beatnik which is spreading throughout all European countries. Young people, whose life consists of idleness and complete senselessness. They are lying for hours – as dead persons – in the parks and public places. One of them summarizes the content of his life as follows: ‘Eat every day, evacuate your bowels every day, go to bed every day. That’s all.’”

That kind of a low-voltage substitute for life cries out for light, and God is light. We all recall the testimony of a young man in our midst who was trained as a scientist and had an exciting job exploring the frontiers of the universe with radio telescopes, but his life was empty, hollow, dead, unattractive. Then the light came and he found Christ. Now his life is filled with constant excitement and he is a challenge to young people up and down the

whole of the West Coast. God is greatly using him to convey to others that electric sense of vitality that has come from knowing Christ.

Right here at this point someone asks the often unspoken question, “All right, I grant you this happens to a few, but why only to a few? What’s the matter with the rest of the Christians? Why is it that all Christians are not this way? Why are they not alert and informed, stable and dependable, alive and attractive? Why is it that the Christians I meet are so untrustworthy, so critical, so harsh, repelling, and negative? If God is light and he can do this, why does it only seem to happen to a few?”

That is the question the world is asking, is it not? And that is right where John begins next. He goes on to point out that which will be the subject of our examination in several messages; three conditions that are like umbrellas that we Christians erect to shut out the healing, cleansing, glorifying, fulfilling light so that though it is shining it does not change us. Those three conditions will be very revealing to some. God is light and he does reveal truth, he does measure life, he does give us a reference point by which the false can be separated from the true. Best of all, he fulfills, he glorifies, he energizes, he vitalizes. But he does so only as we learn to take down the umbrellas that hide the light from us.

Prayer:

Our Father, we ask that you will grant to us the ability to walk in the light. You who are the Great Light, shining upon our darkened lives, break through the darkness and teach us how to become the kind of persons you intended us to be, responding to the light like plants seeking the sun, opening, unfolding, bearing fruit for your name’s sake. We ask in Christ’s name, Amen.

Copyright: © 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.