

Light and Life to all he brings

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[0 : 00] Now, for a few minutes, I want us to think about a theme that keeps recurring in so many of our carols, so many of the Christmas readings that we hear in churches, and it's the themes of light and life.

As people, instinctively, I think, we love the light. I was picturing the advertising mix-up, you know, come to Edinburgh's Festival of Darkness.

Probably wouldn't be such a big, maybe it wouldn't, or welcome, we're having carols in the dark this year. That'd be different, but it probably wouldn't be very attractive.

We love the light. In fact, more essential than that, we need the light. At this time of year, our little rock in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, we desperately need the light.

And so we love it, don't we? You know, we need it to survive. But at that basic level, as winter comes, as the nights get darker and longer, those lights that we put up in our houses, that go up in the cafes and the streets and the shops, they give us that sense of hope, don't they?

[1 : 19] They give us that sense of joy. So we love lights. I imagine for so many of us, an important marker in the beginning of the season will be putting up the Christmas tree and stringing up the Christmas lights.

Boys and girls, we love to do that. And then probably when you go to bed, your parents rearrange it, make it look all nice. But it's at that moment, often, we think, ah, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas now.

And we're drawn to light. And it's not just in our part of the world, across cultures, across religions. Everybody celebrates festivals involving light. And so clearly, there is something essential, fundamental. There's some deep longing that's been spoken to there.

So we love the light. And I guess by contrast, often we find ourselves in different ways hating the dark. Because sometimes, the dark can make us scared. Sometimes, the dark makes us feel sad.

[2 : 28] And isn't it interesting that we use darkness as a way to describe the sorrows and the sadnesses of life? We speak about going through dark times and dark seasons.

Perhaps, at an even deeper level, there is that language of the dark night of the soul. When we experience a loss of energy or purpose, where we feel more sadness, more disconnect.

So when it comes to this season, when it comes to the lights, when it comes to putting up the Christmas lights, at times, we are going to find, and this season, maybe at times, it will be adding to your sense of joy and sense of hope and excitement and anticipation.

But other times, if we're honest, it can feel like a bit of an act of resistance, an act of war against the dark, a determination to find hope.

So for a few minutes, I want to ask the question, why is it that the Bethlehem manger and the first Christmas story becomes so connected to that theme of light and life in contrast with darkness?

[3 : 38] Why is it that we associate Christmas with joy and hope? Why of all the babies that have been born in the history of the world, is it this one, this Jesus, who is described as and who describes himself as the light of the world?

Why is he the one we sing of as light and life to all he brings? So to help us, so we listened to a couple of readings from the book of Matthew. The book of Matthew is going to help us because we're going to think about three scenes in Jesus' story.

The first that we heard about takes us to Jesus' birth. So if you were listening in, you would have heard and seen the light in the sense of that unique star in the sky pointing the way to the reality of a unique child.

This star signaling God's promised eternal king is now lying in a bed of straw. The child in the manger is the light of the world.

But also within our reading, and I'm sure you picked up on it, there is a sense of darkness. There are those in the royal palace, the religious leaders, who have their own agendas, and they choose to ignore Jesus.

[5 : 00] They want to hold on to power. They want to stick with their plan for their life, and so they are not going to bow to God's king. There's light, there's darkness. And then as those magi have arrived at the palace and then go on their way, we see the light again.

That light that leads the wise men to the child. And when they come to find Jesus, they worship with joy.

It's an amazing thing. Here's a group of people, they don't have a Bible for themselves, they don't have a long history with God's promises, but they see this star, they recognize it, announces that God is doing something, giving someone special, and they act, and they believe, and they worship. They understand God's king is here, and that means joy, and that means life. And here is somebody who's worth sacrificing for. See the treasures that they gave.

And so we find these wealthy men bowing before the little Lord Jesus. But there's also more darkness. We don't often read to the end of chapter 2 in our Christmas events.

[6 : 15] But when we continue reading, we discover more of this wicked king. This wicked king who is opposed to God, and who is opposed to God's Son coming.

We get that sense that within the world there is this battle between dark and light. And so we have this tragic reality around that first Christmas season of innocent children being killed by an evil king who wants to extinguish God's light.

There is light, and there is darkness at Jesus' birth. But we're next going to fast forward about 30 years or so to when Jesus' public ministry begins.

It's really interesting. When you read any of the accounts of Jesus' life, we learn a little bit about his birth, and we get one or two stories about his early years, but really not much about his education or about his work, his time as a carpenter.

But we do get a lot of attention to when he's around 30 and he's about to begin his public ministry. So here is Jesus, recognized as the Son of God, declared to be the promised king, and now he's about to start speaking and start acting.

[7 : 30] And how does Matthew explain it? Well, for Matthew, he turns to the Old Testament, and he turns to this passage in Isaiah chapter 9.

In Matthew's gospel, it's in Matthew chapter 4, verse 16 and 17, in which he says, The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.

And so Matthew, one of Jesus' followers, is looking and listening, reflecting on Jesus, and he's the only way that I can describe this man is he is that promised great light.

The light that shines God's glory in his life, his teaching, his miracles, his claims. The guiding light that can bring people who are far away from God back home to God.

The light that shines declaring the good news of God's rescue, good news of God's salvation to the world. He looks at Jesus and he says, This man, this man is the answer for those who feel that they're living in the darkness.

[8 : 34] Living with the reality under the shadow of death. A people who are lost and confused and who are hurting, who don't know God. Who don't know hope.

Who've lost their joy. Those who have a sense of utter despair and hopelessness. Matthew says, For such people Jesus has come as light and as life.

A beacon of hope in the darkness. And if you want to know more about Jesus as he's described in the Gospels, when it's time for refreshments, I've put some Gospels up there.

You're very welcome to take them and read them. But the third scene, as we think about light and darkness in Jesus' life, takes us towards the end of his life. Indeed, it takes us to Jesus' death.

Because there's something that's really important for us to understand. At Christmas time, of course, we think a lot about the child in the manger. We think about his birth. But to make sense of that event, we need to understand his mission.

[9 : 38] We need to understand why he came. To appreciate this claim that Jesus is the light that is able to drive out darkness, we actually need to move ourselves out from the stable and go all the way to the cross and then to the empty tomb.

Because, obviously, the contrast between light and darkness is great. And the Bible, we use this image of darkness to explain something of the human condition.

And one thing that you'll find in the Bible is it will never offer sort of pithy, simple, self-help, superficial answers to our deep questions and fears and longings.

And there's something wonderful about that. When we go with our deep needs and our deep questions and deep fears, there is an answer in God's Word. So, the Bible goes really deep in terms of explaining what darkness is at its most fundamental level in the human experience.

So, we go through all kinds of things we describe as dark times, but ultimately, at its bottom, at its core, it brings us to consider death, both physical and spiritual.

[10 : 47] Separation from God. Being far from his light and from his life. Where we discover that because of our turning our back on God, everything begins to fall apart.

Have you ever had that question? Why is life never as it should be, never how we want it to be? Why is it all too often our hopes and dreams seem to fade to darkness? The Bible's answer is because we are separated from the true light source.

If we are missing life with God. And so, God knows that and God has responded to that by sending Jesus, the light of the world. And so, we have the amazing fact that the child in the manger is the creator God, who has entered into the world that he has made.

He has humbled himself by becoming fully human. The child in the manger born to be the savior of the world. In Jesus, we have a light that shines from outside of us.

The light of God's glory. We have in Jesus this one who came on a mission to defeat death, to defeat the darkness, in order to restore us to light and life with God.

[11 : 56] And the question is, how does he do it? How will he do it? And again, the Bible doesn't offer a simple, pithy explanation. It offers us the cross.

It offers us the death of Jesus. Two verses to read. Matthew 27, right towards the end of Matthew's gospel. From noon until three in the afternoon, when the sun should be blazing at its hottest and highest, darkness came over all the land.

About three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? What's happening here is that the light of the world has entered into darkness.

The darkness of God's judgment at the cross. That the eternal Son of God.