

The Light Came Down

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[0 : 00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through Him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to 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.

But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

[1 : 30] This is the word of the Lord. You may take your seats. The year was 1866.

A Welsh man named Robert Thomas boarded an American ship, and his goal? To bring the light of Jesus Christ to the people of Korea.

Thomas had served in China prior to this, and he found out that the Korean language had substantial overlap with the Korean language, with the Chinese language.

So he prayed, and he planned for an opportunity to bring the gospel into Korea. And last opportunity came. He set sail aboard a ship with a large supply of Bibles.

However, as they neared the coast, Korean governments attacked the ship. They filled smaller boats filled with rubble, and they set them on fire and pushed them out next to the large ship, knowing that the ship had gunpowder on board.

[2 : 48] And before long, the ship exploded into flames along the river, forcing many of those on board to jump into the water. Many drowned.

Others attempted to swim to shore, only to be met by government troops, carrying out the policy to kill all foreigners.

Thomas couldn't stay on the boat any longer. So he jumped into the water and began to swim with as many Bibles as he could carry.

And after reaching the bank, he knew that his time was limited. Thomas scattered the Bibles along the shoreline as quickly as he could. And in his final moments, Thomas prayed for the soldier approaching him with a sword.

He gave his executioner his last Bible just before being stabbed to death along the shoreline.

Thomas' body was then burned on the riverbank.

[3 : 58] He never made it more than a few hundred feet into Korea. What motivated Robert Thomas to go to this dark place?

I'd be willing to guess that most of us in here have never even heard of this man until a few moments ago. Was his life a failure? Why did he do this?

I'll tell you why. Robert Thomas had a right theology of Christmas. He understood the character of God, the darkness of the world, in the light of Christ.

He was so gripped by the good news of great joy. The light of life had broken into his darkness years before and Thomas had been transformed by this good news of great joy.

He was compelled to bear witness to the light in the midst of a dark world. I don't know what you think about Christmas.

[5 : 21] Maybe it's just a cultural thing. Maybe it's a tradition to you. Maybe coming to church is just a polite thing to do this time of the year. Or maybe to keep mama off your back.

But this morning we must push culture and tradition and all the politeness off to the side.

And we must come face to face with the witness. You must stare at Robert Thomas in the eyes this morning.

His same message has surfaced on the shoreline of your life today. You have the sword in your hand. You must listen to the witness and then you must either reject or receive the testimony. Will you cut him down? Will you reject him in self-protection and wield the sword to defend your own kingdom?

[6 : 25] Or will you receive him? Will you lay down your sword and be transformed by this light? I want to join with Robert Thomas this morning and plead that you receive and rejoice in the grace of Jesus Christ today.

I think the main point of our text this morning is to believe in Christ and be born again as children of God. Believe in Christ and be born again as children of God.

We're going to look at this in three movements I think is faithful to the text. Witness, rejection, and reception. So point one, witness.

Humble and sent. Starting in verse 6 it says there was a man sent from God whose name was John.

The man named John here is not the disciple John. We know this because the author of this gospel is very careful in other places to differentiate between the names that are the same.

[7 : 34] However, he never reveals himself as John in the gospel. Instead, the author he only reveals himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved.

All throughout the gospel. So the name John here is exclusively reserved for John the Baptist. And verse 6 says that John the Baptist was a man sent from God.

He was appointed as the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah. In other words, this was not like an ad-hoc operation. It was not a spur-of-the-moment decision for him to show up and he was not self-appointed.

He was sent and he was sent by none other than God himself. God, why is this so significant? Well, when I hear clanking and banging going on upstairs at my house, I can send Arlo, our youngest child, with a message.

And even though he's the youngest and he's the smallest, he's sent with a message to communicate on my behalf, the one who owns the house. These aren't Arlo's ideas that he's bringing upstairs.

[8 : 51] He's delivering a message from another with an authority from another. The one who does the sending validates the message and the authority of the messenger.

That's what we've seen here. The apostle John is showing that God, the maker of heaven and earth, validates the message and sends John the Baptist with his own authority.

And not only is he sent by God, he has a role here. He is a witness who has come to bear witness three times and just the first couple verses we're looking at the witness concept comes up.

That idea of witness is borrowed from the courtroom language. It means to lay out persuasive evidence about the truth. In other words, John is not only sent with the authority of God, he also is intended to contribute to the line of many witnesses all pointing to the same message.

The gospel of John is replete with witnesses. If you were to read through the whole gospel, and I encourage you to do so, you would see at least eight different groups of witnesses throughout the gospel of John.

[10 : 20] Jesus' works are a form of witness. It says they bear witness to who he is, the crowds, the ones that saw Lazarus raised from the dead, people like that, and groups, crowds, they are bearing witness.

Those with personal encounters, like the Samaritan woman who interacts with him at the well, she gives testimony to the Samaritans and many in the town believe. The man born blind, another personal encounter, one thing I know, that though I was blind, he bears witness, now I can see. Scripture, bears witness. It says in John 5, you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness about me, Jesus says.

We also see the apostles bearing witness. We see the Father bearing witness. We see the Holy Spirit bearing witness. We see Jesus himself bearing witness. The point is, eight different groupings of witnesses all throughout the gospel.

So John the Baptist is unique, but he is not an isolated witness. He testifies in unison with written, divine, and human witnesses throughout the ages.

[11 : 42] What was his message? He was not the light, but he came to bear witness about the light. imagine you work at Walmart, and someone comes up to you, sees the logo on your shirt, and

then asks, are you Walton?

Do you own this place? It would not be fitting to take credit for Walton's \$920 billion company in that moment, right? No, you have his name on your shirt, but that does not mean you are him.

You are not the founder, you're not the CEO, but you represent him. You know your place. John knows his place. He is not the light, but he bears witness about the light.

Interesting, Jesus later describes John the Baptist as a lamp. But if you think about the properties of a lamp, both the fuel and the flame come from another source.

this lamp bears witness to the autonomous, the independent source, the true light. In verse 9, we see that the light John bears witness to is not just light, but true light.

[13:06] You see that in there? In John's gospel, the word true is often used for something more than just a way to say, that's not false.

Because it hints at the idea of being ultimate. John uses the word true, not to contrast what is false, but for what is provisional, temporary, something that anticipates something greater.

Think of it like a model building versus a real building. It's not that the model is false, but it is an insufficient, temporary precursor, and pointer to the ultimate.

So we don't walk around a new building and scoff at the earlier model being a false building. We recognize the model in its place as part of a progression. This is the flavor of the meaning carried by the true light.

The true light. Later in John's gospel, Jesus claims to be the true bread of heaven. true bread of heaven. He contrasts himself with the temporary provision of bread in the wilderness to show that he is ultimately satisfying.

[14:25] In John 15, Jesus claims to be the true vine. Remember this? He contrasts himself with the disobedient and fruitless people of Israel to show that he is ultimately obedient and life-giving.

He is the true light. Well, in a unique way, John the Baptist was this anticipated witness to the Messiah at a specific turning point in history.

But Christ's people, you and I, Christ's people are called to continue bearing witness to the light. In fact, Jesus' parting words in Acts 1.8, he says, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

So if you're a believer, there are a few principles that we can draw from John the Baptist here. the focus of our message is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ.

We came to bear witness to the true light. The delivery of our message should be characterized by humble courage.

[15:49] Humble because we recognize our position. We are representatives of God. We are not God. We are not the light. Rather, we are dependent upon him.

Richard Phillips wonderfully captured this, saying, just as a lamp requires oil, we depend on our fellowship with Christ and the Holy Spirit's enlivening presence so that Christ's light will shine through us.

Humble. Dependent. But in addition to being humble, we should also be courageous. Courageous. Our message is not dependent on our own authority.

Isn't that encouraging? It's not dependent on my good ideas. It's dependent on the authority of the one who sent us, who sent you to your family, to your neighbors.

What's the goal of our message? Look at verse 7 again. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

[17:01] All might believe. This is instructive for us. The goal is not to win an argument.

The goal is not to just put people in their place or to try to humiliate them. The goal is to persuade people to believe.

To believe. We want people to believe Jesus is who he says he is. This is what a witness of Jesus Christ does. This is what we aim to do as long as we're in Athens.

We go with the message of Jesus Christ sent by the authority of God to humbly and courageously persuade people to receive the light of Christ. That's why we go to the apartments next door.

That's why we engage our unbelieving family and friends and co-workers and neighbors. That's why we're here. So what should we expect?

[18:09] Point two. Rejection. Darkness and rebellion. John testified that the true light was coming into the world.

The world it's a major theme in the gospel of John. That word occurs 78 times in the gospel of John versus eight times the second runner up in Matthew and then only three times in Luke and Mark. So in John's usage the world it's not the universe but the created order in rebellion against its maker. It's kind of a shorthand for sinful humanity.

You can use that almost as a substitute there. In fact the way John thinks of it the world has no believers at all. Those who come to faith are no longer of this world.

They have been chosen out of this world. John 15 if the world hates you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world the world would love you as its own but because you are not of the world but I chose you out of the world therefore the world hates you.

[19 : 29] So here John the Baptist is giving testimony to the world that the light is here. Isn't that weird to you? How many people have you ever told about light?

If you're given a tour of your home you flip on the switch did you have to say anything about that? You probably didn't notice this but I just turned on the light. You didn't have to say that.

They could see it, right? Why did John need to tell people about the light? Theologian A.W. Pink, he helps us, he says this, when the sun is shining in all its beauty, who are the ones unconscious of the fact?

Who need to be told it is shining? The blind. How tragic then when we read that God sent John to bear witness of the light.

How pathetic that there should be any need for this. How solemn the statement that men have to be told the light is now in their midst. What a revelation of man's fallen condition.

[20 : 41] That's what he's getting at. The world has been so steeped for so long in darkness, the darkness of sin, we cannot even see anymore.

Even when the light is broken in, we can't see. This is why the light gives light to everyone, even though it's not perceived by everyone.

It is not bringing salvation to everyone, but it's hidden because it's an objective reality that Christ has come into the world. And this wasn't just a fleeting visit, like some kind of famous person trying to stay under the radar, trying to travel without being spotted.

No, he embedded himself in this dark and indifferent world. The light wrapped himself in flesh and he dwelt among us.

To live in the very world that was made through him, the creator come as creature, as we just sang, and yet the world did not know him.

[21 : 46] This not knowing, it's not a form of just innocent ignorance, it carries this tone of this willful rejection. Think of the moment when Christ is heading towards crucifixion, at the hands of both the Romans and the Jews.

As he's being tortured and killed, Jesus cries out, Father, forgive them! They know not what they do.

For the Romans, there is a sense of ignorance about the magnitude of their rebellion, but they don't want to know.

They don't want to know. The one who made their hands receives their blows. The one who made their mouths receives their curses and mockery.

The one who made the trees is nailed to a tree, hand and foot. the grand irony we see here is that the world is rejecting the one through whom it was made.

[23 : 06] And what's more, in verse 11 it says, he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. So not only was Jesus not received by a world made through him, but he was also rejected by a people specially chosen by God as his very own.

I mean, this first and foremost refers to a rejection of Jesus' claim of equality with God, and his revelation of the Father through his words and his signs.

The picture is that, of the word, not being a welcome guest at his own home, his own people, his own family, the very ones who should have received him at the door, lock the door.

If you think about verse 10, it tells us why unreligious people reject Christ. They are spiritually darkened and morally depraved. But verse 11 shows why moral and religious people often reject Jesus.

They want to keep his glory for himself. Richard Phillips helps us. He says, the irreligious love darkness because it provides a cover for their sin.

[24 : 33] 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 are shown up as the dim lights that they are. Oh, my friends, we live in an area with many churches.

We live in the friendly city. We live with many religious people who do good things. Plenty of folks have grown up in church and are familiar with the Bible even.

people who do good But remember, it was the most religious, Bible-saturated do-gooders that worked alongside the Romans to see Jesus killed.

So the most important question is not first and foremost your church attendance or your Bible knowledge or even your good works. you can still be in darkness living for your own glory.

[25 : 48] The more important question is what have you done with the light of Jesus Christ? What have you done with the light of Jesus Christ?

Is your sword still raised against the witness on the shoreline of your life? does he have access and authority over your kingdom?

Or will you deny him and continue living in darkness? For those who reject the light, God will hand you over to your desire.

A kingdom without his presence. It's a sobering reality. those who reject this light will be cut off from God in hell forever in darkness.

Oh, the world is dark and the light has come. But the light did not come simply to be rejected.

[27 : 01] There's more to the story. There's more to the story. Point three, reception, light, and new birth.

Verse 12 reads. Verse 12 reads. Some of the most glorious words.

things. You have a pivot from absolute darkness and hopelessness and obstinance and rebellion to verse 12.

It says, but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

This is glorious. Notice that the receiving and believing in his name, they're linked together here.

Those who were his own did not receive him, it said earlier.

[28 : 18] But now we see this contrast that all, all, all who did receive him. The receiving is explained further with this description, who believed in his name.

This is the kind of receiving, the ones who believed in his name. This is not just believing about Jesus or that there was a historical Jesus. the name is more than a personal label.

It is the character of the person or even the person himself. So to receive and believe in his name is to receive and believe Jesus Christ and all that he revealed about himself in his person, in his character, and in his saving work.

I used to work at an outdoor recreation youth camp and I would often work with folks on top of a very tall tower to send them on our zip line. And in order to move from the top of the tower across this chasm to the other side of the mountain, you have to not only believe in the existence of the harness, you must also put the full weight of your life into the harness and complete an utter dependence and then step off.

That'll make you sweat. I tell you, I've seen it so many times this kind of belief that I'm talking about, that John is talking about, requires us personally to receive Jesus as he has offered himself.

[29 : 47] The only one able to bear the weight of our sin and to take us into relationship with the living God. It's a journey impossible apart from relying totally on him.

Totally on him. And what happens to those who receive and believe in his name in this way? Christ gives them the right to become children of God.

Children of God. The implication is that all those in the world are by nature creatures of the creator, but not children of the father.

Did you catch that? All people are creatures of the creator, but not children of the father. Some from the world are given the right to become what they are not already, children of God.

So how is this possible? How is this transformation possible? If we all are lost in darkness and content to rebel against God, if that's the facts about our hearts and our posture towards this witness, how do some believe and become transformed into children?

[31 : 09] Well, here, John draws out the contrast of being born of God versus natural means of birth. You see it in our text.

What he's doing is he's clarifying how some are saved out of the world in order to become children of God.

So there are wrong reasons people think God saves them. That's what he's getting at. There are wrong reasons why people think that God saves them. Some may wrongly think that they can be saved into the family of God because of natural descent or sincerity or effort.

But John here is making the point that being born of God is not a matter of your family pedigree or human initiative. It is dependent on the blood of Jesus alone.

Jesus argues this case against the Jews who are attempting to find their righteousness before God based on their family lineage in John chapter 8. These are John's, this is Jesus' words to the Jews in John 8.

[32 : 26] They're arguing with him. They answered him, Abraham is our father. And Jesus said to them, if you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did.

Jesus said to them, if God were your father, you would love me. For I came from God and I am here.

I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. This is the work that Abraham was doing that he's talking about.

The primary work that Abraham did was to look forward in faith. Trusting God's promise to provide what he could not provide for himself.

A promised son. Every time he tried to not do that, he messed it up. But the work that is being celebrated here is faith that God will provide.

[33 : 38] Faith. So Jesus' point is that those who do the same by trusting in Christ are spiritual children of Abraham.

Not by birth, but by faith. By faith. Thinking of salvation as being born again, it highlights that God is the one who starts our spiritual life.

life. That's usually how it goes, even in natural conception. The baby didn't have the choice. The parent initiated it.

God is the one who starts our spiritual life, bringing something to life that was dead or did not exist before. This metaphor, it negates the idea that we can do anything spiritual before we're spiritually alive.

You can't act like a new person before you are a new person. You can't behave before you are born, in other words. Jesus clarifies this reality with Nicodemus in chapter 3.

[34 : 44] He says, that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. So, if not by blood, nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, how can we be born again?

There's one reason. God's amazing grace. Amazing grace. I read a story of a man who found himself in China on Mother's Day.

He and his wife were there to pick up the newest member of their family. A 10-month old girl who had been abandoned the day after she was born. A few months before they went overseas to meet her and bring her home, he wrote about their decision to adopt.

He writes this, I think within a nanosecond of deciding to adopt, we knew that our daughter's name, we knew what it would be. In fact, I don't ever really recall discussing it that much.

Perhaps it's because of why we chose to adopt in the first place. Our driving motivation was to rescue a little girl and give her a family with hope for the future.

[36 : 02] children. This helpless little girl who lives on the other side of the earth will receive all the benefits of being my child. I will clothe her and feed her.

She will take my name and receive my deepest affection. She will be the object of my love. My energies will be directed towards helping, instructing, and training her to be happy with the secure knowledge that I will never leave her.

I will pour my heart to introduce her to the Savior of the world who can take away all her sins and give her eternal security. Of course, all of this is done as we completely depend on God and His strength.

Where would we be without the love of God? Where would we be without Him revealing Himself to us in Scripture? Where would we be without Him divinely sacrificing His own Son and seeking us out to rescue us?

So for us, and what this adoption is a reflection of, we only had one name to choose from. Grace. Grace.

[37 : 19] Undeserved favor. God's soul is until someone did for us what we could not do for ourselves.

God chose to love us. He received us to Himself and He gave us the right to be called His children. This is grace. That story of adoption is just beautiful, isn't it?

It's vibrant. It captures so much of God's saving work, His grace on display. But there is an aspect that this adoption doesn't quite capture.

Because we weren't just an innocent child waiting to go home with a loving father, with a smile on our face. We were the Korean guard, standing on the shoreline with the sword drawn. Enemies against the light. Threatened by His very presence. And this is the astonishing part about Christmas.

[38 : 37] The Word still came to us. It still came. And He's still knocking at your door.

That night in 1866, on the shores of Korea, Robert Thomas bore witness to the Word. His body was set ablaze.

But by the glow of His sacrificial witness, the Word of God could be seen and received by some. According to the accounts, the executioner, a man named Park Chun-Kwan picked up one of those Bibles.

He took it home with them. And after studying it, He is said to have believed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. He received the right to become a child of God.

[39 : 55] The obstinate, hateful, murderous enemy of God could not ward off the light it broke through.

He became an elder of one of the first churches in Korea. So for those who are living in darkness, I join the voices of John the Baptist and Robert Thomas to call you to believe in the name of Jesus Christ.

To receive forgiveness for your sins. Lay down your sword and let Him rule your life. Today, let Him rule your life.

Believe in Christ and be born again as children of God. My friends, let us rejoice in Christ's coming. Let us rejoice in His coming and let us bear witness until His return in Athens and beyond for the glory of God.

Let's pray. Lord, thank You that You're not intimidated by our darkness. Oh Lord, we praise You that You came to our shoreline and You conquered us with kindness.

[41 : 04] Thank You for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Word made flesh. The light that came down. Thank You that You're making new children even today.

We give You the glory. We give You the praise. May we bear witness to our dying day or You come for us. Come, Lord Jesus. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

You've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.