



BRIGHTER

The light of Christ is brighter than all competing lights. He is the light shining out of darkness. In our own darkness, we search for light and sometimes attach to lesser lights. Faces and rooms lit by television, computer and phone screens are a familiar scene in our world. What light are we looking for? Brighter, truer, more beautiful is the eternal light we find in Jesus Christ.

Brighter: No Brighter Deed • Isaiah 64:1-9 • Tim McConnell • December 3, 2017

Why do we hang lights? Does anybody know? The question occurred to me the other day while I was up on a ladder, balanced uneasily on a bush in front of my house leaning out a little further than I should to fire a staple gun into my fascia board. Thoughts go through your head like, "Well, if I fall into the bush I'm okay. I could probably grab that gutter. If my head hits the edge of that concrete that could be the ball game." You wonder in that moment, why do we hang lights on our house? When the days get short and the nights get long, we need light. When the darkness comes we want to throw a little more light.

There's something in all of us that wants to add light, even though we lament the loss of our night sky—I read last week that 80% of Americans can no longer see the Milky Way due to light pollution. Even so, we don't sit in the dark. We put up lights. We want light. We know we need it. Why? Because without the light, you're in the dark! And when it's dark, you can't see! Everybody following? Think about what you lose in the dark. You can't see where you're going—you lose your way. You can't see other people—you lose relationship. But you lose even more than that. When it gets dark you lose colors—everything is gray. You lose beauty. You lose perspective. It's no good. We need light. So we have a tendency to add some—we add 5,000 120-volt LED warm white steady wave twinkle lights! Or something like that. It's the same way in your spiritual life. Without light, you're in the dark. You lose relationships. You lose warmth. You lose color and perspective and beauty. Your spiritual life needs light too.

The hymn Fairest Lord Jesus was not written as a Christmas hymn, but this year we include it in all our Christmas celebrations. The Christmas Joy concert next week will make you look at that hymn like never before. "Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moonlight, and all the twinkling, starry host; Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer, than all the angels heaven can boast." There is no light brighter than Jesus. Jesus breaks the darkness and brings the light. Jesus brings the light into dark places; he carries the light into darkness with conquering victorious power. It isn't even a contest; when light comes darkness is gone, the darkness cannot overcome it. Jesus is the light. Jesus shines

brighter. Now, today, of all the deeds of history, of all the great moments and life-changing, epoch-shaping acts, nothing compares to this. What Isaiah saw nearly 700 years before it happened was an event like no other. Of all that has ever been done or accomplished, no deed, no act, no event in the history of the world can hold a candle to this: God was born a baby so you could be born again.

Isaiah prays, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!" (Isaiah 64:1). We know we need light, we hate darkness, so we try to cast a little light. We throw up our twinkle lights, we light our candles. Not that it makes much difference. We light everything up. Virtually everything I own of any value lights up! My car, my television, my computer screens, my home. My books light up on my iPad. Even my watch lights up. You can hardly turn your eyes anywhere without seeing something light up, but it hardly breaks the darkness. In fact a lot of those lights offer one thing and deliver another. A lot of them promise to make our world big, to bring back the color and the relationship and the beauty, but they don't deliver. Our efforts are very small. That's a problem. But there's an even bigger problem than that. Look at verse 5: "You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?" (Isaiah 64:5) Isaiah says, I think God helps you if you do everything right; I think God's there if you gladly do right. But I don't do everything right. Will God be there for me? Our disobedience shuts things down between us and God. Verse 7: "No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins." (Isaiah 64:7) We are not in God's light. We are separated, hidden in darkness. Back in verse 6: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." (Isaiah 64:6)

But what if God did something about it? What if God pressed toward us when we couldn't press toward Him? What if? "Oh, that you would rend the heavens." One of my favorite bands is a praise band from Ireland called Rend Collective who took

their name from this verse. What if God ripped the heavens open? What if God pushed through and tore open any barrier to get to us in our distress? "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down." What if God came down to earth; if the very God who made the heavens and the earth came into His own creation? Isaiah says, "the mountains would tremble before you!" Like at Mt. Sinai when the people of God had just escaped Egypt and Moses went up the mountain and the sky was full of the glory of God. Remember that? God, do that again! Come down like that. Remember Moses? How he was sent to seek and to save, to rescue and redeem. God do that again. Send to seek and save and help. What if? If God did that the mountains would tremble. The nations would know about it. The idols would be exposed as frauds. The powers that claim to rule the world would be powerless before Him. If only God came down. "As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!" (Isaiah 64:2) You know what it would be like? It would be like when you are bending over a campfire trying to get it to light, but the wood is wet, nothing will burn, and you bend over with your knees in the mud and the darkness closing in and you blow and blow into the smoke. Then suddenly, FWOOF! Something is there that wasn't there before. Light and color and warmth and beauty—flame. It would be like that, if God came down.

Many bright deeds illumine the runway of history. The use of fire and steel and cement. The rise of great ancient empires in Egypt, or Persia, or China. The conquests of Alexander the Great or the Pax Romana of the Roman Empire. Paper and the printing press. The industrial age, the railroads and the combustion engine, electricity...and the invention of the lightbulb. Think of how far we have come in the last hundred years. Incredible things. If God came down—a deed like that, an event like that would shine brighter than any other thing. If God came down. All the great works of men and women, queens and kings and conquerors—a string of twinkle lights compared to this: God was born a baby so you could be born again.

Long ago a pastor named Athanasius was trying to explain the incarnation, God come down in

Jesus, to people who didn't get it—to Greek philosophers and even to devout Jewish friends who couldn't get why God would do what we believe He did in Jesus. He said, well, think about it. What was God supposed to do? God never sat in heaven worried about what to do. God never called a meeting with the heavenly host and said, "What's going on around here? Anybody have any ideas to fix this?" That's not God, but it helps us to think about this moment in a way we can understand. What was God to do? The world He made, the people He made, the whole creation was pitched toward its own destruction. It was corrupted and bound to corruption. The illness in it was, well, it was *in there*—inside it. Like a staph infection. What is a good God to do? There's no better thing to do than to get in there yourself and start the healing: "For the race of human beings would have been utterly dissolved had not the Master and Savior of all, the Son of God, come to put death to an end. Truly this great work supremely befitted the goodness of God...For this reason he was both born and appeared as a human being, and died, and rose again, dulling and overshadowing by his own works those of all human beings who ever existed, so that from wherever human beings were predisposed, from there he might raise them and teach them of his own true Father." (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*) A good God gets in there.

Why? Because we need His light. Without God coming to me, I'm lost. My little twinkle lights are not going to cut it. The picture scripture gives us is right. Who am I? I'm the one who has picked up a few stains along the way. I'm the one whose best deeds are like filthy rags—tainted with sin. All of us are like that. "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." (Isaiah 64:6) Who am I? I'm the leaf detached from the tree of life, shriveled up and fallen to the ground. Helplessly tossed here and there by temptations and impulses; pulled up by pride, cast down by fear, twirled along by desires and blasted far by winds and gusts. What is a good God to do? What if God came down in Jesus, walked to the end of the road where I was pitched headlong toward my own destruction, took my death on Himself, then conquered death and carried me up to eternal life? What if God did that?

Have you ever been in a last match situation? Here in Colorado it's easy to make a fire. You can almost think something on fire. I have held lighters to logs. But in other places it can be a battle to get a fire going, especially if it's misty or it's been raining. You find yourself leaning over the mud looking at this pile of wet leaves and trying to find some kind of kindling that will take a flame. I've been there. Not in a life or death kind of way, but I've definitely been down to my last match and thinking, "You know, this is gonna be bad! No fire means no warmth. No dinner. No coffee. All wet and cold all night long." It's in that last match situation that the flames bursting out make you jump out of your skin. Thank God! It's humble that little cradle in Bethlehem. You might have walked right by, when God came down, born that you might be born again. In all time there has been no brighter deed.

STUDY GUIDE

Brighter • No Brighter Deed

Isaiah 64:1-9

UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in God's Word

- Read our passage for the week, Isaiah 64:1-9. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Read it one more time.
- What do you notice about our passage? What stands out to you? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- In our passage today, there is the imagery of God "coming down" and working for our good, for our deliverance. Ultimately, God comes down in Jesus Christ. God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ shines brighter than anything the world has ever seen. What does God's "coming down" to us and for us reveal about the character of God—who God is? Where in your life today, do you need to remember that God is a God who comes to us?
- Re-read verse 6. In what ways, do we trust in our works, our righteous acts? Why are we tempted to rely on our own good deeds? Is there any area in your life right now where you are tempted to trust in your own ability?
- What is a word, phrase, or thought from today's passage that God seems to be lifting up as being significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

IN: Connect with the Family of God

- Think about some of the awesome things God has done in your life--- the things you did not expect. Share one of those stories with someone this week. Celebrate together God's kindness towards us!

OUT: Connect with the World around us by Joining God in God's Mission

- God comes down. God enters into our situation. We go and do likewise.
- Think about where God has you right now—work, neighborhood, relational network. In what ways can you enter into the story of those around you? What keeps you from entering into the lives of others? What is the cost? What is the gain?