



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: Turn to the Light • John 3:16-21 • Tim McConnell • December 17, 2017

Some people need to know why they are doing what they are doing; others get along just fine without it. I was once a knife salesman (for a summer). Long story, but I wound up traveling to the factory where these knives are made. I walked up to one woman who was breaking off a cast, sanding it down and dropping it in a box. I said, "Oh that looks like the handle for the carver. Is that for the carver?" She looked at me and said, "Honey, I have no idea. I just do this." Crack. Buzz. Drop. Do you know why you are doing what you are doing? Next week is Christmas Eve. We'll host thousands and we will speak sweetly about Christmas. My prayer is that some will see something of the light of God they have not seen before, and maybe even come to a saving knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But for many it will be another part of the process, another cog in the wheel, another event we get done to make it through the holidays. Crack. Buzz. Drop.

Well, this morning is a little different. Before you wrap another gift, lick another envelope, or decorate another cookie, I want to give you an opportunity to know what it is all really about. At the end of this message I will ask you to pray with me to give your life to Jesus Christ. If you have done that before, then this will be a good review for you. If you have never given your life to Jesus, you have a chance to go through Christmas next week like you never have before—knowing the Savior of the World. Where you turn for light will determine your course for life.

John 3:16 is the most famous summary of God's work in all of scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) If you ever wondered which verse in the Bible to memorize first, here it is. I have a buddy whose grandfather didn't let him in the house until he recited the fruit of the Spirit. You should make your kids stand outside in the cold...well, you should have your kids memorize this! Why are we doing what we are doing? Why are the presents under the tree? Why the fudge and the cookies and the big meals and the ugly sweaters? It's right here. Watch now: "loved" leads to "gave" leads to "believes" leads to "life." Loved. Gave. Believe. Life. Jesus was born in Bethlehem because God sent His Son. God gave His one and only Son. God came down Himself in His Son Jesus on a mission motivated by love. Love made Him give. Love made Him give. I hope you are giving out of love this month. Ever see someone coming and you think, "Oh no! She's not bringing me a gift is she? If she gives me something, then I have to give her something and

I haven't thought about it. I sure hope her gift isn't very thoughtful..." I know, I know. But that's not where this all started. Love made Him give. And what did God give? He gave His Son, who gave His life, so you could live.

There is something wrong with the world and it runs straight through our hearts. John calls it the "verdict." "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19) This is the sum of it, John says. Tired of warfare and greed? Tired of confusion and lies? Tired of the ways people take advantage of one another, abuse the environment, trash everything and everyone for their own gain and pleasure? Tired of how your own relationships get bungled up and how your own heart isn't what you want? Here's the sum of it. The judgment, the verdict—you've got a rebellion going on. You, and all people, all of us...we have a rebellion going on. We don't want the light of God to shine so bright because we don't want everyone—God and everyone—to see. "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed." (John 3:20) Everyone who does evil hates the light. Well, that's me. I've done the wrong thing. I do evil, if evil is anything less than holy. I've been less than holy. I have to come to honest terms. There must be something in me that hates the light. There is something in you that keeps you from turning to the light. Something that keeps you from surrendering to God's love. It's a rebellion, and it is time to lay down your arms and surrender. The one who stands before you is love itself in the flesh. Stop fighting Jesus and surrender to His loving arms.

You say, "Oh there you go. Are you calling me a sinner? Are you saying that because you go to church and you read your Bible you're any better than me? What is this condemning message?" Listen now, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." (John 3:17) God loves; that's why He gave. God wants to save; that's why He sent. He sent His Son so that whoever believes in Him will not perish. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3:18) Here's how it goes. This isn't a message that says, "Wouldn't you like to add Jesus to an otherwise brilliant and successful life?" The message is: the direction you're going leads to destruction, the life you are living has an expiration date.

It is as if you are a deep sea diver walking around the bottom of the ocean with one of those long air tubes coming down from the boat. Your buddy on the boat is trying to send you a message, and it isn't "Turn left to see something pretty" or "Head north to find more pearls." It's: "The oxygen is running out." Jesus is God diving down to where you are to get you that message. Before you in the manger is a rescue operation—a rescue plan for your life. That's what John is saying. Jesus is your rescue plan. You must take it.

It means laying down your rebellion. But, it was a stupid rebellion anyway! "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed." (John 3:19-20) As ridiculous as it may seem, there is a rebellion in our heart that prefers darkness over light. We do not want our "deeds exposed." We prefer darkness to opening our lives up before Jesus. Do you see how dumb that is? God already knows all our deeds. There is no such thing as hidden sins. Psalm 139 says about God, "even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you." (Psalm 139:12) The little voice creeps into your head, "Oh you can get away with this one. No one will know. Nobody's looking, you can go ahead. It's nighttime. It's dark. Nobody can see." Does that sound like the voice of Jesus in your life? Because it isn't! God sees. God knows everything you have done and thought about doing. There is no darkness dark enough to hide from God. He knows you through and through, and loves you just the same. There is no hiding in the dark. Jesus has come to open heaven and offer forgiveness to all who believe in His name. I would rather join the refrain of the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well. She had been through five husbands and was living with a man she didn't marry when Jesus told her, "Come to me and I will fill your heart so full of love you will never thirst again." And she went to town later to say, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (John 4:29) Yes it could. And yes it is. And yes, He is here for you. There is no life in loving the darkness. Turn to the light in Jesus. Where you look for light will determine the course of your life.

Maybe you say, "But your standards are not my standards. I don't subscribe to Christian standards about life so don't judge me by your religious views." Okay. Jesus came to save not to judge. But okay. No Bible standards. How about your own standards? Are you

living up to those? Because I don't know about you, but I can't even live up to my own ideals. I'm not fully the man I want to be. We've got a problem, and it is tearing our lives apart, it's tearing our world apart. It's time to walk out of the darkness and pull everything into the light; it's time to lay down the rebellion and lay down our arms; it's time to give it all over to Jesus.

Why? Because God loved, so God gave. He knew the air was running out. He knew our rebellion leads to death. So He came in Jesus to take our death upon Himself. Jesus was born to die. Some say they are more Christmas than Easter Christians; I like Christmas and the sweet baby more than the cross and grave and all that. The Bible doesn't know anything of this; the scriptures don't allow creative speculation about why God came down in His Son Jesus. We sweeten up the birth of Jesus with our sparkly angels and nativities with frosty flocking nestled between snow globes, but it was not a sweet scene. Jesus was born, of water and of blood He came into the world in a muddy animal pen. He took on flesh to become a sacrifice. Bethlehem is where sacrificial lambs are born. Christmas and Easter are the same. The shadow of the cross lies over the cradle. The wood of the manger is the tree of Calvary. Most kings are born to live, but this king was born to die.

God loved, so God gave. Jesus took on flesh to die the death that belonged to us. The Immortal put on mortality. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9) Or, "rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:7-8) It's one thing, one movement in God's eyes. He took on flesh to carry our sins to the cross: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24) That's Christmas. That's why Jesus came. God loved. God gave.

Bring John 3:16 back now. "For God so **loved** the world that he **gave** his one and only Son, that whoever **believes** in him shall not perish but have eternal **life**." (John 3:16) "Loved" leads to "gave." But this leads to "believes." Salvation is a gift received by believing. By believing, trusting in Jesus you gain eternal life. It says you may "have eternal life." Not just something you get after you die. "Have" is present

tense. Life starts right now when you turn to Jesus, receive forgiveness from your sins, lay down your rebellion and give Him your life. Right now. Christmas will never be the same once you know what it's all about. J. I. Packer wrote, "We talk glibly about 'Christmas spirit,' rarely meaning more by this than sentimental jollity on a family basis." But that's not what the birth of Jesus meant: "It meant love to the uttermost for unlovely human beings, that they through his poverty might become rich. The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity—hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory—because at the Father's will Jesus Christ became poor and was born in a stable so that thirty years later he might hang on a cross. It is the most wonderful message that the world has ever heard, or will hear." (*Knowing God*, p. 63) How do you respond?

I want to give you an opportunity to pray. And this is no small thing. This is no small moment here. The rescue plan met in Jesus is life-sized. It is an eternal question before you. There is a woman here in the church who gave her life to Jesus this spring. She stopped me in the hall the other day at church and said, "Pastor Tim, this is my first Christmas—my first Christmas with Jesus." How about you? I want to invite you to pray with me, and if this is your first time addressing Jesus then I want you to make this prayer your own. This is a moment of salvation. The Lord is near. His light is all around. You can pray and turn and know the Lord. But all of us, let's all pray together, no one prays alone, please follow me in prayer: *Almighty God, I have wandered from You for long enough, the time in the darkness is enough, today I turn to You, thank you for sending Your Son Jesus to die for me, thank you for forgiveness and eternal life, I give You my life, my faith and trust, in Jesus name. Amen.*

STUDY GUIDE

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John 3:16-21

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

Read our passage for the week John 3:16-21. 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?
- Reread verse 19 and 20. According to these verses, why do people reject the light? What are they afraid of?
- For those who turn to Christ, the light of Christ brings not condemnation but freedom and salvation. What does it mean to turn to the light of Christ? In our daily lives and practices, how do we turn to the light? What happens when we turn to Christ's light?
- 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

- Each week in worship, we confess our sins to the Lord and to each other. How does the practice of confession help us turn to the light of Christ? Have you ever practiced confession on your own or with other brothers and sisters in Christ? What was that experience like? What did God reveal to you in that?
- Each week in worship, we also declare the forgiveness of God. The good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. What's the good news declared in our passage today?

OUT: Connect with the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

- Reread verses 16 and 17. How do these verses motivate us in our daily interactions with others?
- When are you tempted to show up with a posture of condemnation towards others? How do we develop and embrace a posture of love?