



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 • John 1:1-14 • Tim McConnell • December 24, 2017

If you've been around to hear me preach a few times, you know I usually say something funny toward the beginning of a sermon. You've gotta connect! My son, Liam, who is eight, picked up on that recently. He said to me, "Dad, you always say funny stuff at the start." I said, "Yeah, I do. You like that?" That funny stuff at the beginning can be the hardest part to come up with, and my eight-year old noticed! I was feeling pretty good about myself. But then he said, "You should make the whole sermon like that." Sorry. Not tonight! There are basically two passages of Scripture that get read on Christmas Eve. One is really popular, the one Linus recites to Charlie Brown (Luke 2). This is the other one. It sounds a little strange actually. If you're waiting to hear me talk about shepherds and angels and stars, you'll have to come back next year. This passage sounds more like a scene from some cosmic drama. In the beginning, out of the darkness, in a galaxy far, far away... In the silence there is a light. The Light of the World. The Light of God. That light was, "The true light that gives light to everyone." I wonder if you're ready for a little light tonight. When you think about the last year, has there been some darkness? Jesus is the light and that light shines brighter than any other. Jesus shines brighter. God doesn't give up on you, even when you give up on Him. He sends a light to shine brighter.

Into the darkness comes our Christmas passage tonight. It is a Christmas passage, this reading from John. John gives us a different look at Christmas. God has entered the world in Jesus. The Word of God, which is God, has entered the world. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) That's Christmas. The Light of God has come to shatter the darkness—and it's right here in the manger: it is Jesus. Here is how Jesus addresses the problem. He knows that without Him we are lost. He knows that unless He speaks we sit in silence. He knows that we are groping around in darkness and each step we take is as likely to lead us away from Him as toward Him. He knows all that. So He comes. He comes and speaks His word into our lives. He comes and sheds His light on our hearts. The true light, the light that conquers darkness, the light that dispels despair, the light that shows us where we are and where we need to be, the true and everlasting light that is life and life eternal, the light that lights up every soul comes into the world in Jesus. You and I, we need this brighter light.

You can hardly open a page in the Bible without finding something about light and dark. We don't live in a lot of darkness like in Bible times. We live in the age of electricity; we always have lights on. I watched a documentary about Thomas Edison this year—I know, if you could only have my life, right?—but I was fascinated! Edison was not the first to invent electric light. By the 1870s experiments were breaking out all over. In 1879 twelve arc-lights were installed in the public square in Cleveland. They promised to make the park as bright as day, but not everyone loved the idea. The big argument was about the cattle nearby. If they think it's day, they won't sleep. If they don't sleep, they'll die. "Your fancy lights are killing my cows!" We live in constant light. It's hard to find darkness. Eighty percent of Americans can't see the Milky Way at night. It is a little ironic that they were worried about the cows. The cows are fine. It's you and me that hardly get any sleep staring at phones and computers and screens all night. Hey! It's nice to brighten up the dark night. We have hundreds of lights stapled to our house right now. But there is something brighter. Have you ever left your twinkle lights on in the daytime? They hardly shine at all compared to the sun. Jesus is the brighter light. The light you can have in your life from Jesus is like the sun compared to the twinkle light. The light of God in Jesus is a rising sun that never sets.

We have our own ways of pushing back darkness, but they don't always work. Eric Jacobsen came for our Christian Life Conference last month and said we live behind three panes of glass: our windshields, our big screens, and our phones. Each one promises to bring us closer but actually drives us apart. The car is great, we can travel quickly—but how do you *feel* about the people on the other side of your windshield? Isn't it funny how that pane of glass makes everyone else around an enemy? "You are all against me!" TV pretends to put us in relationship but drains and isolates us. The phone is like a shield we carry. If there is a moment of awkwardness or boredom, the slightest threat of conversation, we throw that little pane of glass in front of our face. It's nice to have smartphones and iPads, but it costs us something too. The light God brings in Jesus is brighter. These little lights trap you behind glass. You need the brighter light to set you free.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5) The Bible isn't talking about Thomas Edison there. It's spiritual light. God's light. Do you ever feel like the world has gone spiritually dark? Maybe you feel in the dark spiritually,

trapped behind glass. In the darkness we lose stuff. The world is full of beauty and color. In the dark we can't see it. All the colors are gray, we can't figure out perspective—we lose the beauty. In the dark we can't see other people. We start to lose relationships. In the dark, you can lose track of where you are. You can lose your way. The three panes of glass aren't going to help you much. The twinkle lights aren't going to help you walk very far. But listen, God doesn't give up on you even when you give up on God. The hope is found in the little baby lying in the manger. The brighter light is in Jesus.

When you are in spiritual darkness, life starts to lose that sense of purpose. The first time I seriously thought about purpose was college. I was having a hard time figuring out who I wanted to be—who God wanted me to be. Yes, I was in Christian groups and even some leadership. But there was also this other Tim who showed up every once in a while. He was kind of a party guy. There was half of me that wanted to save the world and half of me that wanted to party it all into oblivion. These two halves didn't like each other very much. Even though I knew Jesus, it was a time of spiritual darkness. A mature Christian man came into my life and said, "Tim, you know what you need." "Yeah," I said, "I need to stop acting like a fool and be a man of God." "Sure," he said, "but you've tried that, haven't you?" He said, "What you need is *purpose*." I thought I already had purpose. The purpose of life is to have a personal relationship with Jesus. I knew that. But he said, "No, I mean *your* purpose. Tim's purpose. You need a mission statement for your life." I prayed. I sought the Lord, took a day to fast, and asked Jesus for my purpose. What I wrote down was this: "To promote the knowledge and love of God found in Jesus Christ." That mission still guides my life today. God doesn't give up on you, even when you give up on Him. He sends a brighter light. God had something better in mind than the fool I was pretending to be.

Why did I need purpose? In the dark you lose your way, you lose perspective, and you lose any sense of purpose or mission. God wants more out of your life than escape from the world. God wants to use you to spread His light. A purpose can call you higher. People try to change their habits by stopping the bad things. But you can't stop the bad stuff by concentrating on the bad stuff; you need to find the good stuff that calls you higher. This is the classic pink elephant problem. If I tell you, "Above all else, no matter what you do, don't think of a pink elephant." What do you do? You think of a pink elephant. You need a better

thought, something else to call you higher. A farmer doesn't make a field produce just by killing weeds. No. The farmer plants rich, thick, healthy wheat. Self-control isn't just not doing bad things; it's about wanting good things more. Higher. Better. Brighter. Self-control is choosing what you want *more* over what you want *now*. When Jesus comes into your life, that's what He brings. Jesus brings a brighter light. You have lost all color in the dark. Jesus brings color. You have lost the ability to see and know and love those around you. Jesus restores relationships and renews your connection with God. You have lost any sense of purpose and meaning. Jesus shines a brighter light to show you just what you were meant to do to be a part of bringing His light and life to a darkened world.

"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:9-12) The true light to renew and heal all things, to set all things right, to bring health and life, that light came into the world in Jesus. Some turned away. Some received. Which do you want to be? To receive Him is to become His child, to enter His family and become His own and join His mission and find your purpose. Mark Twain said "The two greatest days of your life are the day you were born and the day you find out why." Having more to live *with* is nothing compared to having more to live *for*. You were designed for good. In the light of Christ you are sent to heal and restore. You have more to live for. You have purpose.

Dorothy Alvarez works as an advocate at Westside CARES. A woman just out of jail came in to speak with her a couple of weeks ago. This woman had gone down some dark roads, made some bad mistakes, but jail was a turning point. She took it as an opportunity to stop the drug abuse and other things, but even more importantly—she met Jesus while she was in jail. Her Bible was getting torn up she was reading through it so fast, every word jumping off the page as though God was shining His own flashlight on it. After she left jail and was walking with Jesus for the first time, she looked down on the street and found something. "I found this card," she said. She pulled it out and placed it on the desk. It was this—the tag from one of the votive candles we gave to every member a few weeks ago. "Look at this," she said. "Jesus shines *brighter*. 'When the little lights you look to don't chase away the darkness, remember that Jesus

brings light to the darkest places. He shines brighter.' That was a message for me straight from God." God didn't give up on her, even when she gave up on God. He sent a brighter light. No more fear. No more shame. Dorothy had tears in her eyes—the woman had no idea Dorothy belongs to First Pres. Now, do you know what that means? It means one of you should be very embarrassed that you littered! But it also means this: God is at work shining His light in this city. Darkness has no chance. The dim lights of the world pale in comparison. Jesus is the light that shines brighter.

Eight years ago, a mine collapsed in Chile trapping thirty-three miners. Teams worked around the clock for two months to reach them. They had to make a special cage to go down the drilled hole to the trapped miners. It could only carry one man at a time. They couldn't just send this weird contraption down the hole; the miners might not know what to do or, frankly, they might all be dead. They had to send a man down in the cage. A man was chosen, and he left the surface of the earth and went down into the darkness. They were saved. No, actually when the lights came on they were all looking at their phones and didn't notice! Can you imagine? A man came. Light came and they were saved. This is the nativity of Jesus. This is the Word of God made flesh. Jesus came down from heaven; God came down to make salvation for us! This is the good news of Christmas. God doesn't give up. He doesn't give up. God came down, and we have seen Him—we have seen His glory, full of grace and truth. Have you noticed? Look up.

The light shines in the darkness, and it can shine in you. Turn toward Jesus, look to Him just a little bit, and you will feel the light of God flooding into your life. Tonight we lift a light for Jesus. You were not only meant to see the light, you were not only meant to receive the light, you were meant to become part of the light—join the family of God, be a child of the light shedding hope and purpose, color and beauty everywhere you go. Christ has come. Salvation has been created. We lift a light to Jesus. Jesus shines brighter; Jesus shines purer. "Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations! Son of God and Son of Man! Glory and honor, praise, adoration, now and forevermore be Thine!"

STUDY GUIDE

BRIGHTER • John 1:1-14

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

Read our passage for the week, John 1:1-14. 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?
- What do we learn about Jesus, the Word of God, in this passage? (Consider both who Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do)
- Re-read verse 9. What does it mean that Jesus is the true light? What are some of the lesser lights that you have been drawn to this past week? In what ways does Jesus outshine those false lights?
- Jesus shines brighter. Name some of the ways that you have experienced the true light of Jesus over the past few weeks. Think about times of worship, personal devotional times, or other encounters with the Lord.
- 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

- Did you know Christmas is not just one day in the Christian year but actually 12 days? (That's right, 12 days of Christmas. It isn't just a song!) Plan out a few ways to celebrate the birth of Jesus over the next 12 days with other brothers and sisters in Christ. Consider sharing a meal together or some other form of celebration.

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

- In our passage today, we read about John the Baptist who came as a witness to the light. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we also serve as witnesses of Jesus. What does it mean to be a witness to the light of Jesus?
- Think about your week ahead. What are two or three practical ways you can serve as a witness to the light of Jesus?