

O Christ, Our True and Only Light

Johann Heermann (1585–1647); tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878)

O Christ, our true and only Light,
Illumine those who sit in night;
Let those afar now hear Thy voice,
And in Thy fold with us rejoice.

Fill with the radiance of Thy grace
The souls now lost in error's maze,
And all whom in their secret minds
Some dark delusion hurts and blinds.

Shine on the darken'd and the cold,
Recall the wand'ers from Thy fold,
Unite those now who walk apart,
Confirm the weak and doubting heart.

So they with us may evermore
Such grace with wondering thanks adore,
And endless praise to Thee be given
By all Thy Church in earth and heaven.

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Life Was the Light

Kevin T. Bauder

In the opening verses of the fourth Gospel, John refers to Jesus as the *Word*. In 1:4, the apostle claims that life is in the Word. He also states that this life is the light of humankind.

This is a cryptic statement. In what sense is Jesus Christ the light of humanity? To answer this question correctly, we must recognize how John uses the contrast between light and darkness in his Gospel.

It is a contrast to which he returns repeatedly. In the very next verse (1:5), John says, “The light is shining in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” Here the verb for *comprehend* could mean to *understand*. It could also mean to *appropriate as one's own*. It could also mean to *overcome* or *gain control* of something. A correct understanding of the verse depends less on how the word is translated than on recognizing the vast difference and opposition between light and darkness.

John also employs the contrast in 3:18–21. He declares that failure to believe on the only-begotten Son of God results in condemnation (3:18). Someone who refuses to believe on Christ is condemned by that very act. Then John adds, “this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (3:19). People who do evil hate the light. They fear that the light will expose their deeds. But people who practice truth seek the light, and the light makes their deeds obvious.

The contrast continues in John 8:12, where Jesus states that He is the light of the world. He says, “he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” Here again *life* is joined with *light*, and both are contrasted with walking in darkness.

The most extended contrast between light and darkness comes in John 12:35–36. In the immediate context, Jesus has just foretold His “lifting up” or crucifixion. The crowd cannot imagine a Messiah who would die. They insist that the Messiah will remain forever. As for Jesus, they ask, “Who is this Son of Man?”



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

Jesus tells them that they have the light among them for a little while longer. They ought to do their walking while they have the light so that the darkness does not overtake them. His word for *overtake* is the same word used for *comprehend* in John 1:5. He warns them that anyone who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While they have the light, they should believe in the light so that they can become sons of light. To be overtaken by darkness here is to lose the ability to find one's way.

These passages cluster ideas around light and darkness. Associated with light are the concepts of life, truth, and understanding. The light is something (someone) to trust. Associated with darkness are the concepts of evil, obfuscation, and condemnation. Such things must be shunned.

John calls the Word the light of humankind (1:4). This label must mean that He is the one who brings life, truth, and understanding to humans. When such light shines, darkness can do nothing to contain or obscure it (1:5). Light illuminates darkness, but darkness cannot extinguish light.

John the apostle then takes a brief detour to talk about the other John, John the Baptist (1:6–8). The Baptist's role was to bear witness to the light. He was not the light, but he pointed people toward the light. His purpose was to introduce the one who is the light so that people could believe on Him.

But the Word—the Son—Jesus Christ—He was the light. He is the one who came into the world. In doing so, He enlightened every human being. But what does that mean?

The apostle is emphasizing the unique role that God the Son plays in securing our salvation. From one perspective, God is one. There are not and never could be multiple Gods. Because God is one, then the whole Godhead must be involved in every work of God. The label for this mutual involvement of all three persons is “inseparable operations.”

But because God is three persons, each person appropriates certain functions with which He is most clearly associated. The Father is most associated with creation (though the Son and Spirit were involved). The Son is most associated with redemption (though the Father and the Spirit were involved). The Spirit is most associated with sanctification (though the Father and the Son are involved). These “divine appropriations” are one aspect of the classical doctrine of the Trinity, and John seems to be thinking in these categories.

The Son—the Word—had a special role to play in securing our redemption. This is not to deny that the Father and the Spirit were also active. It is to note that the Son is the one who was “lifted up.” He is the one who died according to His human nature. He is the one whose blood purchased forgiveness. There is no salvation outside of Him.

The Son's mission was to save humans. No human could ever be saved apart from the work of the Son. Since the cross, no human can be saved without the knowledge of that cross-work. The presentation of the gospel is never less than the message of the crucified and risen Christ. No one can be saved in any other way.

That, I think, is what John means when he says that the light enlightens all humans. He has made it possible for God to offer salvation to everyone. Whoever believes on Him will never die but will receive everlasting life. Everyone who does not believe on Him is already under condemnation.

Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is also the Word. The Word has life in Himself, and that life is the light of humankind. Salvation is offered to all people through Jesus. Salvation can only be received by trusting Jesus. This is the main theme of John's gospel, and John introduces it within the first few verses.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
