

MATT RAWLE

JESUS
REVEALED

THE I AM STATEMENTS
IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Jesus Revealed

The I Am Statements in the Gospel of John

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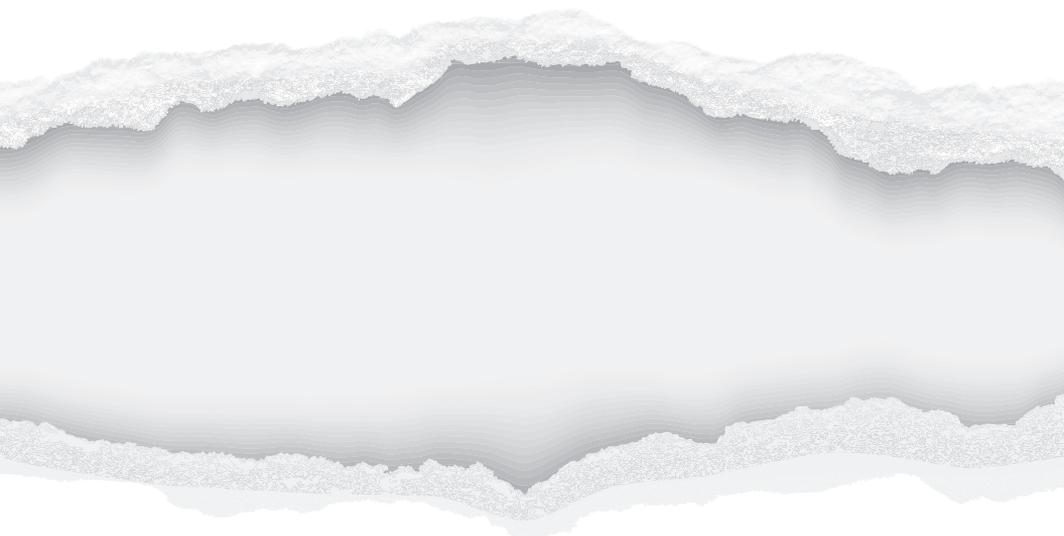
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INTRODUCTION

Symbols are all around us. From stop signs to corporate logos, religious icons, and artwork, graphics and images are inescapable. In fact, you're looking at some right now. The lines and curves of letters together form words, and these words create a picture in your mind that often corresponds to something tangible in the real world. For example, if I say the word *apple*, what do you see in your mind? Are you picturing a piece of fruit, or the Big Apple of New York City? Maybe you're thinking about an electronic device like your phone or laptop? Sometimes words point to intangible or imaginative things. If I say the word *unicorn*, you likely picture a horse with a single horn, a creature that doesn't exist in the real world but does have a rich existence in our imaginations and stories. We often think about words on a page as being black and white, fixed with a singular and definitive meaning. But all symbols, even our words, always point beyond themselves.

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The Gospel of John's use of symbolism is unique in the New Testament. In the Gospel of John we find seven I Am statements, where John uses rich symbols to describe who Jesus is. "I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life," and so on. Like the other Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—John's Gospel narrates Jesus's life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Unlike the others, however, John's story reads like a drama, saturated with imagery and nuance, metaphors and symbolism. It's not that the other Gospels are void of deeper meaning, but John's voice masterfully uses symbols to communicate who Jesus is and what it has to do with us. Like all good art, John's Gospel points beyond itself, calling the reader to look deeper than the words on the page.

John is full of symbols. It starts from the opening sentence: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The scene is set. God's grand drama is being retold from the beginning in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Later in the prologue, John tells us that "the Word became flesh and made his home among us" (John 1:14). John begins his Gospel with an unapologetic apology, announcing that Jesus is both one with God and part of creation in order to save creation . . . except this hardly is clear. This presents quite a challenge. How are fallible creatures able to recognize the infinite and holy? Our limited faculties (sight, taste, smell . . .) can hardly grasp physical reality, never mind that because of sin, what we perceive is "a reflection in a mirror" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Through signs, wonders, and imagery, Jesus slowly unveils God's truth to a variety of peculiar characters, none of whom seem privy to the summary of salvation the readers have seen in John chapter 1.¹ Throughout the Gospel, John communicates the profound truth of the Incarnation through symbols.

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A symbol is an image, person, or action that is understood to have a transcendent meaning.² Symbols don't have to be artful or profound. Several years ago when driving home from a Dave Matthews Band concert in Dallas, the little yellow picture of a car engine lit up on the dashboard revealing that I needed to get to a mechanic. I wouldn't consider the check engine light to be a work of art, but it is a symbol that is easy to understand, and it is meant to elicit a quick response.

Jesus's language in John's Gospel works in a similar way. On one level, we clearly understand many of Jesus's words. In John 9 Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," and a blind man was able to see. Jesus is light, and a blind man can see. On the other hand, sometimes symbols aren't so clear. Nicodemus meets Jesus in John 3 and seems to be completely blind to the truth. So, Jesus is the light of the world, which both dispels the darkness (at dawn) and overpowers to make one blind (at high noon). The key is the connection between the image or experience and the deeper meaning it points to. New Testament scholar Craig Koester writes, "A splash of cool water on our faces helps chase sleep from our eyes in the morning, and the aroma of fresh bread wafting through a bakery door sets our mouths watering, but unless we connect the water and the bread with transcendent realities, they are simply refreshing, not symbolic."³ The check engine light on my car is just a light unless I understand that it highlights a need within my automobile. Light is just light unless we understand how it points to Jesus.

Jesus's I Am statements help to bridge the gap between the finite and the transcendent. In this study we will focus on seven I Am statements:

"I am the light of the world" (8:12)

"I am the bread of life" (6:35)

"I am the gate of the sheep" (10:7)

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“I am the good shepherd” (10:11)

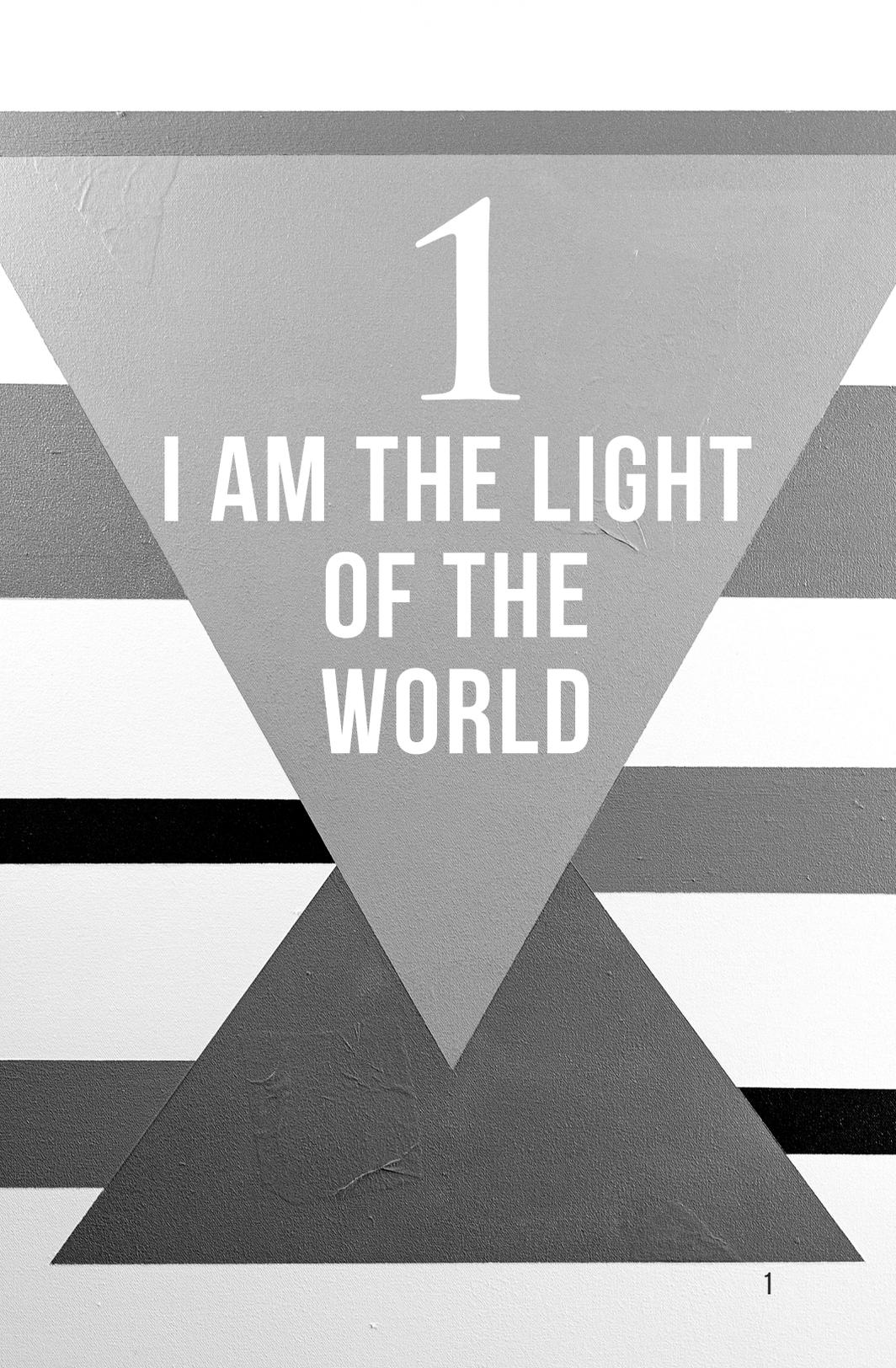
“I am the vine, you are the branches” (15:5)

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6)

“I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25)

Each statement builds upon the others, offering an invitation to dive into the mystery of the Incarnation. The light opens our eyes; the bread nourishes our soul; the good shepherd leads us on the way of the cross; the vine connects us as branches; and ultimately, we find resurrection when death itself could not consume Christ.

John’s Gospel is most appropriately read as a drama, an unfolding narrative in which we play a role. Accordingly, each lesson is divided into four sections: The Scene, The Act, The Drama, and Your Role. We begin each chapter by investigating the I Am statement within its immediate context, and then we slowly widen our interpretive lens to incorporate the rest of John’s Gospel, the larger story in Scripture of God’s relationship with Israel, and ultimately how this statement affects our discipleship today. My prayer is that this study will help you more fully understand the significance of Jesus’s statements so that you may fully love God and be led by the Spirit to love your neighbor as Christ loves us.



1

I AM THE LIGHT
OF THE
WORLD

LIGHT BY SARAH DUET

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1

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won’t walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

(John 8:12)

Ready for a story that changed the world?

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God...*

*What came into being
through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.*

*The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.*

(John 1:1, 3b-5)

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What is light? How would you describe it? Maybe you would say light is “radiant” or “bright.” Maybe the first thing that comes to mind is the speed of light, or that light is both a wave and a particle. Maybe light is a simple campfire around which stories are shared. Light is all those things and more, and it is where our story begins.

When God began creating the heavens and the earth, light was the first of God’s creations. Genesis 1 records that light shined in the darkness even before the sun existed. Before the mountains touched the sky, ahead of any flora or fauna, even before the keeping of time, there was light, and the light was good. But light is a funny thing. A single flashlight can brighten a dark room, but stare directly at the flashlight and you will be temporarily blinded.

Ultimately, light is passive. Light is meant to illuminate everything but itself. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). The light goes ahead of us, revealing where to walk. If we stare directly at the light, we actually stumble. The same rocks and divots will catch our feet, just as if our eyes are closed or if there wasn’t any light at all. Light is meant to illuminate our surroundings so that we can clearly see the way we are meant to go. When Jesus reveals that he is the light of the world, we are to understand that Jesus illuminates the truth of God, but we must be careful not to become blind with an obsession with religion itself.

When I was in college, I often used meditation as a centering practice. I loved diving into the mystery of God’s presence. I would light a single candle and sit in a dark room for up to thirty minutes at a time. It wasn’t often, but every now and again I would find myself in a place where God’s presence felt very close. One afternoon I had quite a clear vision. I envisioned myself walking outside Jerusalem near the walled-up Eastern Gate. I saw Jesus there. It was similar to

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the well-known “Sacred Heart” image of Jesus, where his heart is glowing and emitting light. There were shadowy figures all around me, through whom I had to push to get to Jesus. As I walked closer to Jesus, his heart became brighter to the point where the light shining from his heart was the only thing I saw. It was blinding. I heard Jesus say, “Turn around.” Turn around? I thought I was supposed to follow the light. I thought I was to gaze upon Jesus. “Turn around,” I heard again, so I did. When I turned I then saw the shadowy figures clearly. They were a multitude of people of a every color and creed, all searching for Jesus.

For me, that moment meant we aren’t supposed to stare at the light; rather we are to allow the light to illuminate everything else. The light of Christ doesn’t call us to stare at the Son so much as to clearly see those to whom the Son offered himself. The light is to reveal those whom we are charged to love: neighbor, enemy, and friend. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” meaning that Christ reveals the way of love.

THE SCENE: BLIND FROM BIRTH

In 2019 I was diagnosed with early glaucoma. The pressure in my eyes was so great that there is irreversible damage to my peripheral vision. Although with early detection the progressive tunnel vision can be dramatically slowed, there’s nothing that will stop it. I know that I will never see old age, at least not literally. Though scientists are making great strides in the area of vision recovery, blindness and the loss of vision continue to affect many people.¹ The story of Jesus healing a blind man in John 9 sends shock waves through the rest of the Gospel because no one has ever given eyesight to the blind. Even today, such a full and immediate gift of sight would be dramatic. Along with raising Lazarus from the dead, much of Jesus’s popularity in John’s Gospel is rooted in the healing of this blind man.

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Of course, this healing is more than a miraculous retinal restoration. When reading John's Gospel, you must always look past the words on the page. Like any good work of art, the stories of Jesus from John's community point beyond themselves. I have a picture of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth hanging near my office doorway. Every time I see it, I remember what it was like walking the winding path to the meditative, candle-lit center, and how in the center of the labyrinth I felt the presence of Christ. The picture hanging on my wall is simply a picture, but it represents an experience that is as real as the breath in my lungs. The healing of the blind man in John 9 not only reveals a miraculous recovery of sight but it also represents what it means to recognize and understand who Christ is, or how to correctly "see" God because Jesus is the light of the world. These I Am statements always point to a deeper meaning to elicit a response—belief in Christ.

Jesus says "I am the light of the world" in John 8:12, at the beginning of a long section of teaching and dialogue with the Pharisees. The central issue in that immediate context is Jesus's identity as God's Son, and the truth and freedom that his disciples can find by following him. Jesus announces to the Pharisees, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won't walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). This "light of life" recalls John's prologue, identifying Jesus with a divine origin, purpose, and reality. "What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people" (John 1:3b-4). Interestingly, the Pharisees don't seem to care much if Jesus is claiming to be light or bread or stapler or tree. The Pharisees brazenly reject that Jesus can testify and claim an identity at all. Jesus said that he is light, and ironically the Pharisees are unable to see clearly because they are looking at Jesus with a magnifying glass instead of allowing Jesus to enlighten their understanding of God. When you bring a

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magnifying glass too close to a light source, the light becomes too focused and intense, and usually leaves something smoldering in its wake.

All these issues come into sharp relief in the following chapter, where Jesus heals a man born blind. Chapter 9 is when “I am light” is truly unveiled before the Pharisees. Light is the overarching theme of the story of the blind man’s healing, and it illustrates the deeper significance of Jesus as the light of the world.

The scene begins with Jesus seeing a man who had been born blind. Already the tone of the scene is clear. Jesus could have noticed the man or even happened upon him, but the story is intentional in its language. Jesus *saw* the man. The light of the world sees those who cannot. The disciples, as usual, do not see the point. They ask, “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?” (John 9:2). The disciples assume that this man’s blindness is a punishment as the result of sin.

It is not without precedent to assume that sin caused the man’s blindness, because Scripture includes passages like, “I punish children for their parents’ sin even to the third and fourth generations” (Exodus 20:5). God punishes sin, the thinking went, and blindness surely was evidence of God’s punishment. In associating blindness with sin, the disciples were drawing on the conventional theological wisdom of their time. Jesus, however, turns this thinking on its head. Sin is often the result of blindness, not the other way around. “Neither he nor his parents,” Jesus said. “This happened so that God’s mighty works might be displayed in him” (John 9:3). This is not so much that God caused the man to be born blind, but rather the powerful truth that not even physical blindness is a stumbling block to perceiving or seeing Christ clearly. As Koester writes, “Instead of trying to look back to determine what lay behind the blindness, Jesus looked ahead to what he might do with the blindness.”²

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Jesus heals the man by spreading mud and spit on his eyes and sending him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man follows Jesus's instructions and receives his sight.

The tension between light and dark, sight and blindness, plays out throughout the rest of the scene. After Jesus heals the man, his neighbors are obviously curious as to who restored his vision. They ask him where this miracle man might be, to which he replies, "I don't know." He knows that Jesus is the one who opened his eyes, but he doesn't know where he is, from where he came, or where he is going. In other words, his eyes are healed, but that was never quite the point. He is beginning to see and understand who Jesus is. It's like when you've been sleeping all night and someone turns the lights on without warning. Sure, you can see, but you're disoriented at first and maybe a bit confused. The man Jesus healed has experienced a sudden, miraculous revelation, and it will take him time to fully adjust and understand it.

The Pharisees seemed to be confused, but in quite a different way. The man's friends bring him to see the Pharisees, where we discover that this healing happened on the Sabbath. The story unfolds as if the reader is a character in the narrative. The audience discovers the Sabbath violation at the same time as the Pharisees. The question is, will the reader become blind like the Pharisees, or will the reader begin to see Jesus more clearly as the man who had been born blind eventually does? The outcome is up to you.

Instead of rejoicing or marveling over a miracle no one had ever seen, the Pharisees repeat a question we've already heard, and the man repeats his answer, as if we're all blinking our eyes and taking a second look at what we think we see and understand. The Pharisees become divided, though neither camp is celebrating Jesus's work. They seem obsessed over explaining away why this could not have happened instead of celebrating what is just before

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them. They are staring at the light, debating the light itself rather than allowing the light to illuminate everything around them.

At this point, the man who had been blind begins to see a little more clearly than before, because he now reports that Jesus is a prophet. Yet his understanding is not quite complete, and partial sight can often be more dangerous than no sight at all. The parents of the man whose sight was restored represent the dangerous and fearful result of his partial sight. When the authorities ask the man's parents what happened, they reply, "We know he is our son. We know he was born blind. But we don't know how he now sees, and we don't know who healed his eyes. Ask him. He's old enough to speak for himself" (John 9:20-21). They avoid the crucial question by placing the responsibility back on their son. Their avoidance is rooted in their fear of shamefully being put out of the synagogue. It's a movement of self-preservation. They are apathetic and fearful. They do not come to their son's defense. Imagine being flooded with sight for the first time in your life and those whom you need to trust to help you interpret this strange new world cast you aside. This exchange between the Pharisees and the blind man's parents elicits sorrow as we see they have left him to fend for himself.

While the man is gaining insight into who Jesus is, the Pharisees are losing theirs. In a way this is the moment when their sight intersects, and their roles are reversed. They call the man a second time, and this time the Pharisees are completely blinded with pride. They "know" that Jesus is a sinner; they are utterly convinced of it. When the Pharisees ask him about Jesus, the man replies, "I already told you, and you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" (John 9:27). The man who had been blind now sees clearly enough to play the role of the teacher. The Pharisees, accustomed to religious things, have forgotten what it's like to experience a new revelation or a miraculous moment with God.

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Several years ago, my congregation put together a team called “The Ambassadors” who were charged with leading church growth. They were divided into four teams: first responders (who deliver first-time guest bags), inviters (who invite guests to an event after their third visit on campus), connectors (who connect guests with like-minded families after their fifth visit), and guest experience (those who look at our campus and website with the guest experience in mind). All the different teams are important, but the guest experience team has a unique task. They have to empathize with guests, seeing our facilities and web presence as if for the first time. How exactly are you supposed to see something that you’ve seen every week for years as if it’s the first time you’ve seen it? How do you see something with “new eyes”? I’m not quite sure, but I marvel at those who have mastered this rare ability.

After one of our meetings, one of our guest experience members mentioned that our worship times were published nowhere on campus. Worship times were published on our website and our outreach material, but you could not find information about worship times if you were physically present at the church. One could argue that if you’ve made it to campus, you’ve probably run across worship times in some way, but I had been lead pastor for years and never realized this missing guest-friendly detail.

Even before becoming lead pastor, I knew the worship times; therefore I never sought them out. Sometimes knowledge can get in the way, certainly if we think we already know all there is to know. *Seek* is the operative word in “Seek and you will find” (Matthew 7:7 NIV). But if you already know everything, then you will not seek out anything new. That is what prevents the Pharisees from seeing Jesus more clearly. The Pharisees followed Moses saying, “We know that God spoke to Moses, but we don’t know where *this man* is from” (John 9:29, emphasis added). Because of their certainty, they were unwilling to seek out the truth about Jesus, who came as the light of the world and showed it by giving a blind

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man sight. Their knowledge blinded them to the larger reality of who Jesus is.

Have you considered to what you might be blind? What is it that you might be missing? Have certain experiences become so mundane that you have become blind to their worth? Have you forgotten to dedicate the time necessary to seek, to look, or to discover how God is calling to you? Maybe there's someone you haven't seen in a while and her or his presence is missing in your life. Maybe you've forgotten to connect with them because precious time has been missed since you've seen each other last. In other words, there may be more of the Pharisees' blindness within us than we care to admit.

Light and dark, and blindness and sight, do seem to be opposites, but that's not entirely correct. It's not so much that light and dark are diametrically opposed because there is only light and the absence of light. Darkness is nothing—no thing. What matters is what we do with the light. The man who had been born blind is learning to see the world through Christ, allowing light to illuminate his surroundings. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are attempting to stare directly at Jesus, with accusations on their lips, and therefore they can see nothing.

At the end of the scene the Pharisees ask themselves, “Surely we aren't blind, are we?” (John 9:40b). This self-reflective question is important for us to ask ourselves. To some degree, the answer always is yes. Thankfully there is grace in the one who offers the light by which we see, and as this drama unfolds we will discover how fundamental is our belief that Christ is the light of the world. This belief shapes our understanding of everything.

THE ACT: LIGHT AND LIFE

If we take a step back and gain a broader perspective we will see that light, and the absence of light, is a major theme in John's

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Gospel. Throughout John, light and dark play off each other, not as opposing forces, but sometimes as partners. If you hold your index fingers closely together about three inches from your eyes so your fingers are slightly out of focus, you will see an interesting phenomenon. Looking past the gap between your fingers at something in the distance, preferably a bright, plain-colored wall, you will see that the light between your fingers contains tiny, shadowed lines. The light in between your fingers actually is casting shadows due to an interference pattern. This is similar to what we see in John, where there is a juxtaposition of light and dark throughout the whole Gospel. We can see this when we examine Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in John 3 and 4.

A picture is never bigger than its frame. A frame sets the boundaries inside of which the work of art is contained, and it directs where our focus should be. A frame is a shortcut for interpretation. For example, if I go to a museum and see a piece of art inside of a frame, I don't have to ponder whether the light switch nearby is part of the work. A picture is never bigger than its frame, except that good art always points beyond itself.

To set a frame around Jesus and Nicodemus's conversation in John 3 reveals important truths about being born from above, God sending the Son for the world's redemption, and that Jesus is the light that has come into the world. In the following chapter Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. This story, too, has a definitive frame focusing the reader's attention to living water, the scandalous nature of Jesus's ministry, and the importance of proclaiming the gospel to all who have ears to hear it.

Light is not so easily contained. Although light can be focused into a single beam, most often it bounces, reflects, refracts, exposes, and bleeds. These two stories in John 3 and 4 exist perfectly fine on

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their own, but when you put them together they take on a whole new meaning. The light revealed in the person of Jesus cannot be contained within the frame of each story. It is true that a picture is never larger than its frame, but keep in mind how you are seeing the picture at all. The only reason you can see the picture and the frame and the wall upon which it hangs and the light switch you were sure had nothing to do with the artwork is because light is bouncing off of it into your eye. In a way, light is what causes a picture to extend past itself, but physically to the viewer and interpretively in the viewer's mind. When we put John 3 and John 4 together, we begin to see the masterful way John is revealing Christ as the light of the world.

A man named Nicodemus chooses to meet with Jesus under the cover of night (John 3:2). Already John is giving us a clue about what is to transpire. Darkness isn't signaling a temporal setting. We would miss the point if we wondered if Nicodemus met Jesus at 9:00 p.m. or 2:00 in the morning. The experience happens at night because Nicodemus is confused as to what Jesus is revealing. Christ's message is shrouded and difficult to understand. Jesus says that no one can *see* the kingdom of God unless they are born anew (born from above). Nicodemus replies, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" (John 3:4).

After a lengthy discussion Nicodemus still seems confused. The scene ends with Jesus saying, "Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God" (John 3:21). Now we see that the initial nighttime setting isn't about time of day at all; rather it is a means of expressing that Nicodemus, here representing the Pharisees as a whole, avoids what the light reveals. As we saw in the story of the man born blind, the Pharisees represent a blindness and avoidance of what God is doing in Jesus.

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Jesus's interaction with Nicodemus stands on its own just fine, but as we keep reading into John 4 the Gospel points to a larger narrative being unveiled. It's true that Jesus doesn't use "light" language in his interaction with the Samaritan woman, but the story itself is like a light that shines in the darkness of the previous story. Earlier Jesus spoke with a named man of high status in secret in the middle of the night, and the man walks away confused. In John 4 Jesus meets an unnamed woman of low status in the public center of town in the middle of the day, and she leaves enlightened and converts her entire city. The stories are inverses of each other. Much like the blind man whose sight and understanding slowly grew, these two stories together create a kind of "dawning" that reveals Jesus's identity as the Messiah. From the confusion of night to the truth of the midday sun, the light of Christ extends the boundaries of where we thought the frame was supposed to be.

This light extends throughout the entire Gospel.

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God. . . .*

*What came into being
through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all the people.*

*The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.*

(John 1:1, 3b-5)

Right from the beginning John gives away the punchline if we are patient enough to see it. Life was the light for all the people. Christ is the vehicle through which we find life and discover what it means to be alive, and this life is made manifest in light. It is a light that reveals and blinds, convicts and comforts.

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At the end of the Gospel John writes, “After these things Jesus showed himself...in this way” (John 21:1 NRSV). Jesus *showed* himself. Life was revealed in the Resurrection. Early in the morning while it was still dark, Mary came to the tomb and found the tomb empty. Jesus was raised in the midst of the darkness, fulfilling John’s prologue that the darkness would not overcome him. The darkness that veiled Nicodemus’s understanding, the darkness that surrounded Judas when he betrayed Jesus, is now redeemed. After the Resurrection the disciples—Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two other disciples (how would you like to be remembered forever as one of the “two other disciples”?) go fishing. They caught nothing, and it was night. They go fishing at night and catch nothing. Of course they didn’t catch anything. They are surrounded with darkness, the darkness of what is familiar, the darkness of their previous life, the darkness of what life was like before they knew Christ.

But then, there is daybreak and they see Jesus standing on the lakeshore. He calls out to them saying, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” When Jesus asks a question, he already knows the answer. It’s like when the man and woman in the garden eat of the forbidden fruit. They hide behind shrubbery and God asks, “Where are you?” You mean that God, the creator of everything in the universe, can’t see them because they are hiding behind a bush? Of course not. He is calling them out of themselves, calling them into forgiveness, calling them to not be afraid of divine presence. With God there is abundance. With God there is grace. When you surround yourself with the light of Christ, your net becomes overflowing with fish. That’s what good art does. It’s so abundant that the frame can’t hold it. The Gospel begins with light and ends with light, but the story isn’t yet finished. The light of the Gospel is so abundant it spills beyond the frame of the New Testament to call us to the beginning of it all.

THE PLAY: LIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING

Out of the darkness God speaks the first words ever spoken. “Let there be” creates the very molecules on which the sound travels, and existence happens. Words are how ideas travel through time and space. Three simple words started it all. The permissive command “Let there be” matches the power and passivity of the first thing in Creation—light. Again, light is fundamentally passive. Light is meant to illuminate everything that isn’t the light. When God says “Let there be,” it seems to be a powerful phrase, and it is, but what we see in this power is humility. “Let there be” is more permissive than forceful. It’s no accident that light is the first thing in all creation.

Creation is baffling because we don’t have to be. The universe would work perfectly without us, and this baffles both the scientist and the theologian alike. The same is true with the Creation account in Genesis. The first chapter of Genesis is full of beautiful, colorful, superfluous, ostentatious descriptions that don’t need to be there, but they are. God names the light “Day,” and the darkness “Night,” the heavens above “Sky,” and the ground below “Earth.” When God creates things, God doesn’t leave them as things; God claims them and gives them a name. Not only does God give them a name, God provides purpose, a calling. The sun is in charge of the day and the moon is in charge of the night. The waters and the earth below are charged with bringing forth life, the fish and the animals. God creates. God names. God gives purpose. Let there be light so that there might be day. Let there be water so that there might be fish. Let there be...but why? The reason is three little words: *I love you*. “Let there be” because I love you. Love isn’t practical, love doesn’t have to make sense. Love is like God naming the light “Day.” It doesn’t have to be, but it is.

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Throughout Scripture there are words describing the magnificence of Creation. Some of the most beautiful come from Proverbs 8, which formed the basis for an early Methodist hymn by William Cowper. It reads in part:

Thus wisdom's words discover
thy glory and thy grace,
Thou everlasting lover
of our unworthy race!
Thy gracious eye surveyed us
ere stars were seen above.
In wisdom thou hast made us,
and died for us in love.

And couldst thou be delighted
with creatures such as we!
Who when we saw thee, slighted
and nailed thee to a tree?
Unfathomable wonder,
and mystery divine!
The voice that speaks in thunder,
says, Sinner I am thine!³

“Thus wisdom’s words discover thy glory and thy grace.” *Creation* is God’s word searching for a way to express itself. There’s so much love bound up within the Godhead—the Father, Son, and Spirit—that the divine presence spills forth upon a formless void and God brings order to chaos. God’s love is searching for a way to express itself, and waters part and mountains form. God’s love is pouring out, and plants sprout, fish swim, birds fly, animals creep, and humanity awakens. God’s love is searching for a word to describe the unfathomable beauty of creation, and God says, “It is good, very good”; and God and creation rest in each other, and none of it would have been seen without light as the first in creation.

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The light was good. Although God separated the light from the dark, the darkness persisted—the disobedience of the first man and woman and their expulsion from the garden of Eden, the murder committed in the second human generation, the evil that spread throughout all of humanity until only Noah and his family were understood to be righteous. And what is it that God offers as a sign that God would never flood the world again? Light—the refracted light of a rainbow. Just like a single beam hitting a prism, separating into the different vibrant colors, the rainbow reminds us that from a single righteous family the beauty and diversity of all the earth would come into fruition.

Darkness is not how the story ends. At the end of God's story we read, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. . . . I didn't see a temple in the city, because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. The city doesn't need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because God's glory is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it" (Revelation 21:1, 22-24). There is an interesting absence happening here at the end. The sea is no more. This doesn't mean that heaven is a desert. Water is a symbol of chaos throughout Scripture. At the beginning of God's story water is already present. It must be separated and subdued. Out of the chaotic waters God brings forth dry land, on which we stand, build, and cultivate. At the end of the story the chaotic waters are gone. There is no room for chaos in heaven.

Likewise in the Creation account God separates the light from the darkness. When God brings the divine story to completion there is no such thing as darkness. The Lord, the divine self, is the source of light. The Book of Revelation records that there is no temple. This isn't because there is no worship or God's presence is lacking. There is no temple because there is nothing that exists

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outside of God's presence. The whole reason there was a temple is because there were structures that weren't the temple. There were gathering places not dedicated for worship. At the end of it all, there is no need for a temple because God's presence is ubiquitous, discernible, and tangible in everything.

God's story begins with light, a light that was spoken into existence and needed to be separated from the surrounding darkness. At the end of the story there is only light, radiating from the Divine. Darkness, pain, chaos, and all that isn't within God's grace are overshadowed and expelled. In other words, in the beginning there was light. At the end, there is only light.

YOUR ROLE: ADJUSTING YOUR EYES

When Jesus says "I am the light of the world," there is a sense that Jesus's identity is "up there" and "out there"—holy, divine, ethereal, other worldly. In large part, that's correct! The speed of light is the boundary of the universe. Nothing travels faster, as far as we know. Jesus identifying himself as light is another way to understand why Colossians says,

*Because all things were created by him;
both in the heavens and on the earth,
the things that are visible and the things that are invisible.
Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him.*

(Colossians 1:16)

All things were created through God's Word in much the same way that light is the boundary of the universe. Nothing exists outside of its reach. Light also doesn't age. It's timeless. Jesus saying "I am the light of the world" is also another way of saying "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end." Christ is the timeless

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wisdom of God through which all things find being and meaning. “I am light” means far more than Jesus simply showing us a path or helping us navigate through the dark places of our story. It means, well, everything.

God’s grand drama begins and ends with light. If we look at the entirety of the story, we recognize God’s word as narrative about light. If the Bible were a play or a movie, you might describe it as a play about light itself. After all, any show you see on stage or screen begins and ends with some kind of light. The lights are dimmed in the house signaling that the show is about to start. The stage illuminates where the director wants your eyes to move. The way the light begins a story is crucial. Too much and your eyes uncomfortably squint. Too little and you aren’t quite sure the show has begun.

The way light, or lack thereof, is used to tell a story is no more obvious than at Disney attractions in theme parks. For example, when you queue up for the Haunted Mansion, you first enter a room that seemingly has no doors and no way out. You wouldn’t be wrong to say that this room is designed for crowd control or to begin telling the Haunted Mansion story; but the room serves a much more practical purpose. Moving into a dark room with minimal visuals, where the story is mostly told audibly, simply gives your eyes time to adjust from the bright Florida (or California) sun.

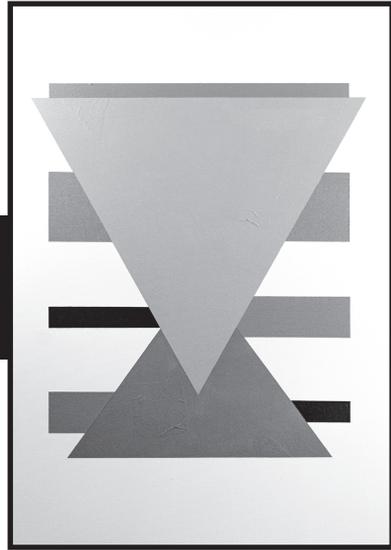
One could argue that Scripture, as a whole, is the word of God giving our eyes time to adjust to Christ being the light of the world. As we narrow our focus from the Play to the Act, it’s almost as if the light that sprang forth when all things began is focused as a spotlight. Across Scripture to the New Testament, the tension between light and dark becomes more pronounced, almost as if they are dueling forces vying for control of the world. Instead of light being separated from darkness, light struggles against it.

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But as we move closer into the scene, where Jesus says “I am the light of the world” and heals a man born blind, light is no longer cosmic, but intimate. Light is the difference between seeing Christ clearly as the way that leads to life or being blinded by religiosity and institution.

The scenes that most clearly illustrate Jesus as the light of the world—the interactions between Jesus, the blind man, and the Pharisees—remind us of how intimate light can be. The man’s sight being restored changed his life, but not simply as a result of his eyes being able to see. At the beginning of the scene there is the question of whether his or his parents’ sin contributed to his blindness. Jesus says neither. The man’s restoration is not only a restoration of sight; rather it is a restoration of the man’s role in society itself. “Seeing Christ” is not so much an intellectual ascent “as it is” recognizing our shared humanity and our role within one another’s lives. “I am the light of the world” reveals Jesus’s identity as the timeless, divine wisdom of God through which all things are held together and find their meaning, and this is only the first of seven portraits through which we understand Jesus. What might it mean for Jesus also to say “I am the bread of life”? Do light and bread somehow work together? Are these images supposed to be counter to each other? Just when we think we have discovered everything we need to know about Jesus, God surprises us with more.

**DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS**



How did the blind man's understanding of Jesus grow over the course of John 9?

Do the Pharisees and others in the story increase their understanding of Jesus and the miracle that has occurred, or does their understanding decrease? Why?

Sometimes, thinking we have all the answers can prevent us from seeing clearly. In what ways might your spiritual vision and understanding be limited?

What can you do to open yourself to the light of the world and come to see Jesus, and everything else, more clearly?

How does the theme of light and darkness carry through the Gospel of John?