

1. The Saviour - the light of men

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[0 : 00] Well, let us bow our heads and we'll pray together now. And let's rejoice that we can turn to our wonderful God in prayer.

Let's rejoice that we can lean the weight of our concerns upon him, knowing that as we come to him in the name of our Lord Jesus, he loves to hear our requests and our praises and our thanks.

Our gracious God, we lift our hearts together to you again today, conscious of the many and great blessings that you have showered upon our lives.

We bring you our thanks today. We think of the lovely material blessings of life that you've given us to enjoy even today.

We think of the warmth that we can live in in our homes and in a public building like this in cold weather. We think of the food with which you have nourished us this day.

[1 : 09] We think of the blessing of shelter and clothes. We think too of those things that warm our hearts, our friends and our loved ones and families. And we thank you for all your kind provision.

And even more, dear Father, much more, we want to thank you for the provision that you have made for our hearts and souls. We think of the Bible, which brings us your words of life.

No other words are like it. And we turn to it day after day so as to learn the truth and to come to know you better, to come to know you and the Lord Jesus more deeply.

We thank you for the gospel, this wonderful gospel that we have not deserved at all, and yet you have given it to us, that we should believe it and find it to be the basis upon which our lives are transformed.

We thank you for the power and reality of the new birth given to all those who put their trust in Christ. And we thank you that you, dear Father, have looked down upon helpless and sinful men and women like us and have opened our hearts to believe this good news about Jesus.

[2 : 26] We thank you that you have not abandoned the world, but have sent a saviour, that it was always your plan to do so, and you brought that plan to fulfilment just over 2,000 years ago at Christmas time when Jesus was born.

And then we think of those 30 years of his earthly life, his death on the cross, to bring atonement and forgiveness for us as he died in our place.

We think of his wonderful resurrection and his ascension into heaven, seated as he now is at your right hand in glory. We thank you that he's gone ahead to prepare a place for those who trust him.

So today, dear Father, please build up our assurance afresh in our hearts. Help us to know you better. Help us to delight in you more deeply.

And all these things we ask in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, you'll see from the order of service that we have the subject, the saviour, and our reading is from John's Gospel, chapter 1.

[3 : 39] And if you'd like to follow this in the Visitor's Bibles, you'll find it on page 886. 886.

Welcome, friends. We'll just have a little pause as a few are settling themselves down, shaking the snow off their shoes, out of their ears.

Very good to see you. So, John's Gospel, chapter 1, and I'll read the first 18 verses. We're just looking at verses 1 to 5 today, and I hope to cover verses 6 to 18 over the next two weeks.

So, John, chapter 1, verse 1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

[4 : 45] There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[5 : 47] John bore witness about him, and cried out, This was he, of whom I said, He who comes after me, ranks before me, because he was before me. And from his fullness, we have all received, grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Amen. These are God's words, and may they be a blessing to us and our hearts now. Well now, the John, who wrote this Gospel, was of course Jesus' great friend.

Not John the Baptist, but John the Apostle, John the Evangelist. He was the brother of James, and James and John were two of the twelve apostles. And as you'll remember, they started life as fishermen.

And Jesus first met them as they were mending their nets beside the sea. He called James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and also Peter and Andrew, to be amongst his first followers, as he drew together his initial band of twelve.

[7 : 03] And it's quite likely that John would have been one of the youngest of the twelve apostles. He might have been only about eighteen years old when Jesus was preaching and teaching in public, perhaps ten or twelve years younger, humanly speaking, than Jesus himself.

And he seems to have lived a very long life. Most of the scholars date the writing of John's Gospel to about 85 or even 90 AD, when John himself would probably have been 75 or 80 years old.

And as he sets down the 21 chapters of his Gospel, he's therefore looking back some 50 or even perhaps 60 years to the events that he records. Now the big question is, why did he write all this down for us?

He was much more than a chronicler. He was much more than a mere recorder of events. He writes his record of Jesus because he has a message for the reader. He is seeking to persuade the reader about something.

By the way, every Bible book is seeking to persuade the reader about something. There's a message in every Bible book. But in the case of John the Evangelist, he is seeking to persuade the reader, as he puts it towards the end of the Gospel, that Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Christ, the Son of God, and that we should believe in him.

[8 : 24] Because by believing in him, we shall have life, or eternal life, in his name. So John writes this book out of great concern for his readers. He wants us to know the grounds on which we can be sure that we shall enjoy eternal life.

John knows those grounds like the back of his hand, because he knows Jesus so well. But he wants us to know Jesus also, so that we can enjoy eternal life through believing that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

So here at chapter 1, verse 1, John the Evangelist is beginning to make his case. He's telling us about Jesus, who he is, and what he came to do. Now if you're a Christian, and I'm sure that the great majority here are Christians today, I trust that looking at these familiar verses afresh will be a refreshing and revitalizing thing for you, revitalizing your love for the Lord.

And if you're not yet a Christian, and I very much hope that there are some here who are inspecting the Christian faith, thinking about it, if you're not yet a Christian, can I ask you to consider whether John the Evangelist might be right about Jesus.

John has this case to present about Jesus. So he is asking you, quite simply, to believe that what he says about Jesus is true. Now at one level, I realize that John's case sounds improbable.

[9 : 53] Because to the ordinary man, the idea that Jesus of Nazareth, the idea that any human being might be the son of God, God in human form, that is a strange idea.

I acknowledge that it sounds rather odd. But I believe it myself. And as we look at verses 1 to 5 today, I hope that we begin to see what John is driving at. So I've got three main sections. First, from verses 1 and 2, John is telling us that Jesus is eternal. Let me read those two verses again. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. Now that phrase, in the beginning, takes us straight back to Genesis 1, verse 1. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. So here, in the very first verse of his Gospel, John is being very bold. He is claiming that the Word, by which he means Jesus, has always existed.

[10:58] He was there in the beginning, he says, with God. In other words, he himself, Jesus, has no beginning. Now that's John's clear teaching here.

He has no beginning. But that's not something which has sunk deeply into popular culture. You think of the popular culture around us today. At Christmas time, there's not much about Jesus these days, is there, in popular culture?

But where there is something about Jesus, the focus is upon the babyhood of Jesus. So many schools, for example, over the next two or three weeks, will be putting on traditional nativity plays. You know the kind of thing. The focus will be on the beginning of Jesus' earthly life. We'll have stables, cows, asses. We'll have Mary and Joseph, shepherds, wise men wearing tea towels. An innkeeper, usually a big burly fellow who stands there and says, out the back please, or something like that. And we'll have a baby, a doll wrapped up in simple cloth, and Mary, its mother, holding it.

[11:58] And the assumption behind the nativity play will be, this is the beginning. This is the start of Jesus' life. This is where it all began. But in John's very first verse, he says, no, there is no beginning to Jesus' life.

What happened in the stable at Bethlehem is described at verse 14. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. So at Bethlehem, began Jesus' life as an incarnate human being.

But his existence as the divine word has no beginning. The start of his incarnation, yes, can be dated 2,000 years or so ago. But there is no point at which his divine life began.

He is eternal, says John, exactly as God the Father is eternal. Now to the Christian, this is very encouraging. And let me explain it like this.

If our saviour, our rescuer, were a mere mortal, how effective could his rescue of us be? There have been plenty of rescuers with a small r or saviours with a small s on the human level.

[13:09] And they can be very beneficial. But their benefit quickly comes to an end. Think, for example, of Winston Churchill. I think you could say that Winston Churchill rescued Britain in the 1940s.

And indeed, we are still very grateful for his extraordinary work as we look back. Nelson Mandela is honoured in South Africa as the man who rescued the black peoples of South Africa from apartheid. There are many rescuers of that kind in human history. And we look back at their lives with real gratitude. But there is something in the human heart that has been made for eternity.

Why do we find death such an outrageous and horrible thing? Because it seems to sabotage what we were made for, which is eternity.

In fact, the Old Testament says, the book of Ecclesiastes says, that God has put eternity into the human heart. There is something about us that is never able to come to terms with the speed at which time passes.

[14:11] You know how you can visit a friend, a family, where the daughter was, when you last saw her, was a little girl of perhaps seven or eight years old. And you haven't seen her for ten years. And suddenly there she is, a fine-looking young lady of eighteen.

And you say, how have all these years passed so quickly? Or at the other end of the scale, you visit somebody quite elderly, maybe somebody of sixty or seventy that you haven't seen for twenty years.

And as you look at them you think, goodness me, hasn't he got older? You forget that you yourself are looking just as much older too, don't you? But we just aren't used to the speed at which time passes. We say things like, can it really be 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down?

Twenty-one years ago, it seems like yesterday. So we can't quite cope with the passage of time, which perhaps points to the fact that time is not really our native element. God has put eternity into the human heart.

So if our saviour is eternal, we have a saviour who matches something in our own make-up. And if our saviour rescues people for eternal life, and that is the constant message of John's Gospel, we have a saviour who promises us a wonderful future, quite beyond the confines of life in this world as we understand it.

[15 : 26] So there's the first thing. The word, Jesus, is eternal and divine. He was God, eternal because he is divine. Well now secondly, he is the agent of creation.

Let me read verse 3 again. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. Now this verse 3 is a very carefully worded statement.

All things were made through him. In other words, by means of him acting as the Father's agent.

And this adds a certain detail to what we learn from the opening verses of Genesis chapter 1.

Genesis 1 speaks of God creating and the Holy Spirit brooding over the face of the deep. But this verse, John 1.3, tells us that God the Father carried out his creative work through the word who is Jesus.

All things were created through him. In fact, the Apostle Paul in Colossians chapter 1 is even more explicit. He writes this, by means of him, that is the Son of God, by means of him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him.

[16 : 50] Now John is briefer here in verse 3, but we need to notice the second half of the verse as well. All things were made through him. Now here's the second half.

And without him was not anything made that was made. Now why should he add that second part of the verse? Well let me say this, that second part of the verse is fighting talk.

In the first century AD, in the ancient world, a lot of people hesitated to believe that God made everything. And the reason for this was the presence of evil in the world.

So people said, there is so much that is wrong with our world. There are natural disasters, floods and famines and so on, and there are man-made disasters, wars and cruelty.

So if God were thoroughly good, as we would like to believe that he is, if he were thoroughly good, he can't have made those parts of the universe where evil lurks.

[17 : 48] Those parts must have existed already to account for the presence of evil. So when God created the world, he must have used a certain amount of material that already existed.

Material where evil was lurking. Material that God is not responsible for himself. Now you can understand why some people believed these things.

They were wanting to protect God from the charge that he might be responsible for evil. But in doing so, they were reducing his almighty-ness. They were saying that he wasn't actually responsible for creating everything.

Now John won't have that, John the evangelist. That's why he says so strongly in verse 3 that not one single thing was made except through the powerful agency of Jesus the Word.

God the Father and Jesus working with him are almighty and have made every last thing, John is saying. Every peacock's feather, every cat's whisker, every duck-billed platypus's bill, every last pig's squeak.

[18 : 55] Not that that means that God the Father and the Lord Jesus are the sponsors of evil. Not at all. The Bible insists that evil is the devil's work, not God's.

When God made everything, Genesis 1 insists that everything he had made was very good. So in verse 3, John is saying to his readers, you mustn't have a diminished view of the power of Jesus. He is God's agent in the creation of everything. And John is going to go on to explain as his gospel unfolds how Jesus is the vanquisher of Satan.

Evil may have its temporary triumphs, but the devil is no match for Jesus and will be defeated in the end. So Jesus the Word is eternal, that's the first thing.

He's the agent of creation. And now thirdly, he is the light of men. Here is verse 4. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

[19 : 58] Now let's take John's first statement in verse 4 first. In him was life. The was there, in him was life, that does not imply that life is no longer in him.

It simply means that the life that is in him was always there. In him there always was life. That's what John means. Jesus says something in John chapter 5 that helps us to understand this.

He's talking about the Father and the Son. He says, for as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted to the Son also to have life in himself.

Jesus says later in the Gospel, chapter 14, I'm the way, the truth, and the life. I am the life. So when Jesus, as God's agent, created everything, he gave it the life which was already within himself, welling up from his own being.

But more than that, this life of Jesus is not just biological life, the life of cats and hamsters. It's eternal life, the life of heaven, real life that cannot be snuffed out in those who possess it.

[21 : 07] It was this power of eternal life in Jesus that made it impossible for death to keep him, to hold him down after his crucifixion. It's a great paradox, isn't it?

Charles Wesley puts it very beautifully when he says the immortal dies. That's the paradox, isn't it? The immortal dies. Jesus says in John, chapter 10, that he has authority to lay down his life and authority also to take it up again.

He has the power of life and death. And he tells us several times in John's Gospel that he gives eternal life to all those whom God the Father has given to him.

So eternal life is his gift. If you have eternal life, it's been given to you by Jesus. So that first statement in verse 4 is very important and very comforting.

Life is not merely biological but eternal. And this life was always in Jesus. But John doesn't stop there. He adds this second phrase in verse 4.

[22 : 08] In him was life and the life was the light of men. Now what does that mean? Verse 5, I think, helps us to see. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Now darkness in John's Gospel always means the power and realm of the evil one. He's not simply talking about the darkness that we get in December. It means the realm of the evil one.

Jesus speaks of Satan as the ruler or prince of this world because of the grip that he has upon people's minds and lives. So this darkness here in verse 5 is the spiritual darkness of sin.

It means the godlessness of human society. The way in which men and women by nature are alienated from the life of God and are at the mercy of greed, cruelty, lust, envy, love of money, hatred and anything and everything that spoils and damages human life.

But into this darkness of human sin there shines a light. Perhaps the best way to picture it is to think of a lighthouse standing on the rocks in a very dark place in a Scottish winter.

[23 : 22] Perhaps in the Shetland Islands it doesn't really get light does it up there at this time of the year. You think of a lighthouse in the Shetlands. The lighthouse casts a powerful beam of light out into the darkness the light cuts through the darkness and the darkness has no power to put it out.

Now think of Jesus, his light shining into the darkness of the world. The experience of 20 centuries of history confirms that the darkness has never been able to overcome the light.

Since Jesus' birth at Bethlehem there has been much darkness in the world. Wars, bloodlettings, ethnic cleansings, genocides, massacres, holocausts.

There has been great violence as well against the church, the Lord's people. It goes on today. The persecution of the church is perhaps as strong today as it ever has been in the last 20 centuries. But this darkness is not restricted to the big life and movement of nations and the world. It's personal and private and destructive as well.

[24 : 28] Every person carries elements of darkness in their own hearts. For example, the darkness passed on by a dysfunctional family, the darkness of a marriage destroyed or a friendship ruined by selfishness, the darkness of depression or mental illness, the darkness created by addiction.

Not one of us, I guess, has fully escaped all these things. There are dark things in all of us that have cramped us and diminished our lives, have robbed us of joy and energy.

But verses 4 and 5 in our passage bring such good news to us. However dark the darkness has been, the light shines steadily into it and the darkness has not been able to overcome it.

So think of this on the big scale first of all. The church, despite the fierce persecutions that it has endured, it keeps on shining and growing. And on the personal scale, and I'm thinking of each of us here as an individual now, your life may have had more than its fair share of darkness and yet the truth about Jesus remains and nothing can diminish it and the truth about Jesus remains for you.

You wouldn't be here today if the light of men had somehow been extinguished. It's because you know that the light still shines that you're drawn to him and you seek him. Now look at verses 4 and 5 again.

[25 : 57] This light shining in the darkness, this light which the darkness cannot overcome is the life that is in Jesus. If John had not told us that the life was the light of men, we might think that this light was merely something like moral illumination, moral instruction, no more than that.

Just as if the Bible were no more than a rule book, light for your path or rules to live by, a kind of highway code for how to behave as a decent citizen. But Jesus brings us so much more than moral instruction.

He brings us that certainly, but he brings us life. This light is also life. He brings us the life of heaven. And to be a Christian is to begin to enjoy and experience the life of heaven even here and now.

There's nothing magical about it. It's not just for special people who have special qualifications, thank God. God, the life was the light of men, the light of humanity.

That's what John is saying, by which he means all humanity. The darkness is what all humanity finds itself in. And the light of Jesus is available to every man, every woman, every child who is willing to come to him and put their trust in him.

[27 : 15] So let me sum up what we've covered so far. John is saying to all of us, to all his worldwide readership, including ourselves, I want to persuade you to put your trust in Jesus and to find eternal life, which only he can give.

He's uniquely qualified to do so. How so? Well, first he is eternal and divine. No point in history marks his beginning. He was in the beginning with God.

And he is the agent of creation. Through him, God made everything that can be seen and everything is not seen as well. And he is life. He's the origin and giver of all life, both mortal life and eternal life.

And this wonderful life that comes from him is the light that shines in the darkness. And the darkness is powerless to extinguish the light. So, friend, if you're a Christian, you belong to this Jesus.

And already you're enjoying the breath of eternal life, even in this life. Even in Glasgow in December. And if you're not a Christian, well, think of it like this.

[28 : 28] Every person here who is a Christian was once as you are now. But they came to Jesus. They submitted to him as Lord. And then began for them the great adventure of getting to know Jesus better, which is the heart of the Christian life, coming to know him.

So if you're in this position, if you're not yet a Christian, don't cling to the darkness as though it's the place that you want to be in forever. It's not. Come to the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Let's thank God that he has sent us a saviour like this. how we thank you, our gracious Father, that the gift of eternal life has been given to us by the Lord Jesus. It's available through him. And we pray for all of us who are Christian believers now that you'll encourage us and revitalize our trust and help us to know the Lord Jesus better and better.

And for any here who have not yet come to the Lord Jesus and submitted to him, as their master, we pray that you'll have mercy upon them and help them to come to the light which the darkness has never been able to put out.

[29 : 49] Please bring them and give them the joy of knowing you. And these things we ask in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen.