

The Defining Light of Life: Jesus Christ imparts unique light on the meaning of human life

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] And Ciarán Campbell is going to read to us our first reading this morning, which comes from the book of Genesis. And just listen to the words as he reads them. Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly.

Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

[1 : 09] I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

And I will be their God. Well, Kieran read in Genesis about the promise to Abraham and the one who would be his descendant.

And as we sung there, he also came as David's heir. And Esther is going to now read to us about that. The word of the Lord came to Nathan.

Go and tell my servant David. Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you.

And I will make for you a name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more.

[2 : 15] And violent men shall waste them no more. As formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel, and I will subdue all your enemies. Moreover, I declare to you that the Lord will build you a house.

When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever.

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you. But I will confirm him in my house, and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.

Would you turn with me then to John's Gospel, chapter 1. If you have one of our church Bibles, what page is it? Somebody tell me. Page 886, if you have one of the church Bibles.

We're going to read this majestic passage called the Prologue to John's Gospel, this fourth gospel, which begins rather differently from the other gospels, but nevertheless is speaking of what we call the incarnation, the coming in the flesh of God the Son.

[3 : 36] 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. 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 he came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which lightens 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.

[4 : 38] 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.

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.

Just keep your Bibles open for a moment, because over these next three days, today and our Christmas Eve service tomorrow, and on Christmas morning, we're going to be looking at John's account of the birth of Jesus.

[6 : 04] Now hang on, you might say, John doesn't seem to give an account of the birth of Jesus, not in what you read. Well, in a way you're right, but in fact you're more wrong than right, because although it's true there's no Bethlehem, there's no shepherds or angels, there's no wise men like we find in Luke's Gospel or Matthew's Gospel.

Nevertheless, John gives us, perhaps most sublimely of all, he gives us an account of the significance of the incarnation, the enfleshment of the Son of God, the coming of the one who is, in John's words, in every way imaginable, who is the light of the world.

And I want to think this morning just about these first few verses of John chapter 1, which point to the one who is the defining light of life for men. John is telling us Jesus Christ is the light that defines this whole world.

Jesus Christ imparts unique light on the whole meaning of human life. And in words, full of wonder and of mystery, John takes us way back beyond even the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, beyond even the beginning of the world.

He takes us right back into the mists of eternity, before time. In the beginning, he says. That's where we have to start. In the mystery of the triune God himself, who before all worlds, in himself, was the source of all life and light that there is.

- [7 : 49] And so John is telling us, this is a story of how eternity both created time and space and then moved into time and space in the person of God the Son for our sake.
- This whole story in his gospel is a story of light shining in the darkness. First, in the very creation of light and life itself, in these words that we know so well, verse 3, he created all things.
- But then, in the breaking in of God's ultimate light to rescue and redeem the darkness of our human lives, verse 9, he was coming into the world.
- Now, just to read this prologue of John's gospel, we're conscious, aren't we, of the majesty of these words. Most people, even who don't believe the Christian message, are struck by the majesty of John's writing.
- And yet, at the same time, the truth is that John's gospel is also a very simple piece of writing. It's no accident that often it is to the words of John's gospel that we turn in times of crisis, in times of need.
- [9 : 07] I am the resurrection and the life, John 11, 25. Or John 14, let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me.
- It's a great simplicity in these words. That's why somebody once said that John's gospel is like a pool in which a child could paddle or an elephant can swim.
- It's simple and yet it's wonderfully profound. So yes, these words in John chapter 1 are very profound, yet they are very simple and so is John's purpose in writing.
- I want to get that absolutely clear in all of our minds this morning. We should turn just to the very end of John's gospel, page 907, just before the last chapter in John chapter 20, verses 30 and 31.
- John is absolutely plain in telling us the reason he's written what he's written. John 20, verse 30. Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.
- [10 : 24] That's very clear, isn't it? John is not just a historian. He's certainly not an academic. He's an evangelist.
- He's writing with a purpose and his purpose is that you may have life in his name. How do you find this life? And by the way, whenever John talks about life, he means life that is eternal, life that is never ending.
- How do you find that life? Well, John says through belief. That's the only way that you might believe through him. But belief in what? Belief in just some vague stories that we make up in our mind?
- Absolutely not, according to John. It's clear and verifiable evidence I want you to believe in, he says. Things written down, he says. Things that were seen.
- Things that were heard. Things that were recorded by reliable witnesses. Many witnesses. Evidence. Testified to by honest men from verifiable sources.
- [11 : 28] Not like the Metropolitan Police, it seems to be. You can't necessarily believe there's a verifiable resource anymore. But John's whole book is based upon verifiable evidence from honest men.
- Be clear about that, will you? Sometimes people are very confused. They think when we talk about faith, we're meaning abandoning our faculties, believing in something that we just made up in our own minds, something that's unknown or unknowable.
- That is not at all what the Bible ever means by faith. No, in the Bible, faith means a deadly serious inquiry into the truth, into evidence.

Faith is based upon the answers to the deep questions of life that we fight therein. Satisfying answers. true answers. Answers that John says he was a witness to and many others with him.

He wants us to be able to assess these things that he saw and heard and wrote down so that we also might understand what they came to understand.

[12 : 39] And when you think about it, there's nothing unusual in that. Virtually everything in our own lives is based on exactly the same process. No need for us to be suspicious about his method. We look at news reports, we read newspapers, we look at the television, we look at the internet, we read articles.

That's how we find out about things and we assess if they're believable. I suppose if God was revealing himself today, well, it might be John's blog that we had, not John's gospel.

I don't know. Hopefully not John's Twitter account. That wouldn't be quite adequate, would it? But 2,000 years ago it was parchments and scrolls. That's just the media of the day.

It's just the same. And that's why John writes. And this prologue, this little beginning of his gospels, like the overture at the beginning of an opera, just lays out many of his themes that he's going to deal with in embryo.

He's ready to open them up in many, many variations on these great themes that he brings all through his gospel. Just like music in an opera or a symphony opens up and develops the many themes that are sometimes introduced right at the very beginning.

[13 : 51] And these three things that he puts together for us so clearly as his purpose for writing are all here. Evidence, faith in the evidence that leads to life.

This prologue is full of life, isn't it? Verse 4, in him was life. His life was the light of men. And it's full of belief and unbelief as well, isn't it?

Verse 7, he came that all might believe through him. The world, verse 10 and 11, did not know him, did not receive him, but some did receive him, verse 12, and believed in him, belief and unbelief.

And it's full of evidence, full of testimony to the revelation of God. which all belief is founded upon. Look at verse 14. The word became flesh.

We have seen with our eyes his glory. I'm going to think about these themes and how John deals with them in terms of one of his favorite images right through the gospel, and that is the image of light.

[14 : 58] As you heard, this prologue is full of light. And John is telling us that Jesus Christ himself is the defining light of life, that he is the source of life eternal.

And he's telling us also that Jesus is the dividing light of judgment. His light shines and forces either belief or unbelief. And he's also telling us, and we'll look at this on Christmas morning, that in Jesus Christ we have the definitive light of revelation.

He is the great evidence above all that God gives that we might see and believe and have life through him.

Everything, you see, points to the person of Jesus Christ. He is the one who has the answers, all the answers, to all of life's great questions.

That's how important the birth of Jesus Christ is, according to what John is telling us here. Do pick up those Bibles once again.

[16 : 13] It's always good to have the evidence in front of you and then you will know if I'm talking nonsense or not, or at least if you think I'm talking nonsense, then I'm talking the nonsense that's here on the page and not some of my own nonsense.

John says, everything I've written is so that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is this Jesus, this man who appeared in history and no other.

I'll be clear about that. What he's not saying is that here is Jesus of Nazareth, this historical figure, and let me just persuade you that he's a little bit more special than many other great teachers and prophets and so on.

Now he's not saying that. John is saying something far greater and bolder. He's saying, I have the answers to every great question of life and the universe and everything.

I have the unique revelation from God Almighty, the Creator, and I am passing it on to you. And it's found in this Jesus Christ, in this person in history alone.

[17 : 27] He is the answer to every great question in the world, in the world of nature, in the world of humanity, everywhere. That's his claim.

That in this world of darkness, of confusion, Jesus Christ and he alone brings light and clarity. He answers all the questions and that is because he is the answer to all of the questions.

Not that he just gives some light along the spectrum with many others. We have some light from Buddha perhaps and from Muhammad here and from Confucius and whoever else it might be.

That's the general approach, isn't it, of our secular world today, of the TV documentaries and so on, of our secularist rulers in power. They just think that religion is all the same really. And as long as none of it's too extreme, we can keep it under control and there must be insights to learn from each one.

That is not what the Bible teaches. John is very clear. He's saying it's not that we go and try and seek the answers, seeking truth about God, seeking light from wherever we can find it in the world.

[18 : 44] Through our science or our philosophies or any of these man-made religions. It's not that we go out into outer space, for example, to try and see if we can find God there, like that stupid cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin thought when he was the first man in space and triumphantly came back and said, I didn't find God there, he doesn't exist.

How ridiculous. Because anyone that he found floating around in outer space like that couldn't possibly be God, could he? by definition, how can someone that is temporal and earthly seek out something that is eternal and infinite and heavenly?

Noah says, John, it can't possibly be that way around, it must be the other way around. Not that we go and search for God, not that we go and find infinite eternal light from God, but rather that God, the great creator and maker of all things, must come down into his world and reveal himself to us.

That's the only hope, isn't there? If there is a God, a creator, and we're ever to know him. And that is what the incarnation, the coming in the flesh of God the Son is all about.

Verse 5, the light shines in the darkness. Verse 14, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Verse 18, the invisible God who none can see has made himself visible and known to us in the person of God the Son.

[20 : 20] See, if we as finite creatures who are made from dust and who will return to dust, if we're to know anything at all about the one who made us and who made everything, who made the whole universe, then he must proclaim himself to us.

That's what the incarnation is all about, says John. It's light. It's the light of God's eternal glory shining into our world of finitude and transience and darkness.

In Jesus Christ, he says, the absolute eternal reality of God is proclaimed to the world, proclaimed distinctly, uniquely, and forever.

That Jesus Christ, that he alone is the defining light of life itself. He is the light that defines this world and everything in it and everyone in it.

And therefore, he alone is the unique light of God, our creator. And he sheds a unique light that illuminates the whole meaning of life for all human beings.

[21 : 31] His light alone defines what our lives are all about. He tells us what we're here for. He tells us where we're going.

He tells us where we've come from. And that means that he is the only answer to every question, every longing, every yearning of the human heart.

That is what John is claiming in these majestic verses. Nothing less than that. It's a stupendous claim.

Well, if you'd pick up the Bibles one last time as we look at these verses, John is saying to us that Jesus Christ is the light of God.

There is no other. And so he is the defining light that gives light to the meaning of life itself. And that means that Jesus is the answer to the great questions, the great why questions, and the great how questions that we ask in life.

[22 : 44] Look at verses one to three. You see how there John is telling us Jesus answers the great why questions about everything. He tells us that everything in this world is because of Jesus Christ.

Verse one, he is the beginning of everything. Verse three, he's the maker of everything. Now, I don't know, I'm sure some of you have read books by Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene and the delusional God and so on.

If you've read that book, you'll remember that one of Richard Dawkins' favorite things to say is that he says, well, I admit, I've got no answer to the why question. Why is there life at all?

But he neatly gets around it by then saying, well, that's a non-question. We don't need it. We shouldn't ask it. I find myself really rather unpersuaded by the logic of that because I find that all around me and all through life, I find people asking exactly those questions.

Why? You can't just say, well, I don't want that question. It's a non-question. You try that next time the policeman stops you for speeding and he says, what speed were you doing, sir? You say, well, that's a non-question.

[23 : 59] We don't need to ask that question. I don't think that'll get you very far, will it? And people always ask these why questions. Why is life as it is?

Why do bad things happen in the world? Plenty of people in Connecticut asking that question today, aren't there? Why is there a world at all?

Why is the world like it is? And on, and on, and on, we ask these questions. From the beginning of time, human beings have asked the question why. That's what marks us out as different, isn't it, from the animals, from the dogs and the birds and the amoeba.

There is a difference, isn't there, between a man and a dog? C.S. Lewis, I think, puts it very well when he says, well, you can sum it up like this. If you point your finger like that to a dog, they'll come and sniff the end of your finger.

But if you point like that to a person, they'll turn around and look where you're pointing. There's a very great difference, isn't there? Dogs aren't asking the why question.

[25 : 03] Unless it's why, isn't it dinner time, I suppose, which they always seem to be asking, but that's different. Well, here is the answer to all the questions, says John. He is the beginning.

Now, that word beginning can mean the temporal beginning, or it can mean the root cause. And what John is saying is that the beginning and the root cause of everything in this world is what he calls the Word.

That might seem a strange phrase to us, the Word, until we just take a moment to think what that means for the Bible. In the Bible, the Word, the Word of God is the agent of creation.

So, Psalm 33 says, by the Word of the Lord, the heavens were made. And the Word is the personification of the wisdom of God. In Proverbs chapter 8, we read that the Word was appointed from eternity, from before the world began.

It is God's wisdom. And the Word is also God's deliverer and God's Savior. Psalm 107, he sent forth his Word and healed them.

[26 : 11] He rescued them from the grave. And so, John is saying that in the beginning as the source of all things, all creation, all wisdom, all salvation was the Word.

The One who at last became flesh and dwelt among us as the incarnation, the enfleshing of God in Jesus Christ. This Word who became flesh in Jesus is himself God.

Look at verse 1. He was with God and he was God. Now, at a stroke, that single verse banishes away all perversions and heresies of all kinds of sects that have grown up around Christianity but that deny the divinity of Jesus Christ.

If you've spoken to a Jehovah's Witness, they may well have shown you this verse. They have their own translation of the Bible that says something different here. It says the Word was a God.

I think the Mormon Bible does something very similar because it's very embarrassing to their whole view. But there's not a shred of evidence anywhere in the world for why you would translate it anything other than the way all the other Bibles in the world translate it.

[27 : 27] The Word was God. But it is an absolutely unique claim, isn't it? makes a head-on clash with our pluralistic culture today that tolerates everything it seems except the exclusive claim that Jesus Christ and He alone is the light of the world.

Even many folk who call themselves Christians today find because of that pressure of pluralism they find themselves perhaps playing down the uniqueness of Jesus trying to fit in and not seem to be offensive to others.

But John will not play that down. Neither will any of the other New Testament writers. Jesus is the unique and only God and He is the unique answer to all things.

He's the answer to the why question. Why is there anything at all? The answer is because He is the beginning and source of it all. He's the creator of it all.

The Apostle Paul says in Colossians 1 all things were created through Him and for Him. You can't get any more definite than that can you? By the way that's another verse that the Jehovah's Witnesses translate differently in their Bible because it's so embarrassing.

[28 : 50] But if we take John's words seriously it is a staggering thing. He is saying Jesus Christ is the reason for everything. He is God eternal.

He is the source of all things. He is the creator of all things. And that means that it follows that everything in our human world and all our experience of life also finds its answer in Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 4 in Him was life and that life was the light of men the light of humanity. He is answer to all the how questions if you like how mankind has learned so much and achieved so much and gained so much and experienced so much in life so much more than all the rest of creation.

The answer is that all the light that human beings have comes from the eternal Son of God. And that is true whether human beings see it and acknowledge it or whether they don't.

with you is the fountain of life says the psalmist in your light we see light. He understood that.

- [30 : 04] But many people refuse to understand that or refuse to accept that today. I find it ironic when you read somebody like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens or many of the other very intelligent and articulate members of what we might call the new atheists.
- evangelical atheists. They're so clever they're so gifted they're so intelligent but what they don't seem to accept or realize or understand that all that intelligence and skill that they have comes from God the very God they're trying to disprove exists.
- All the skill and artistry that Richard Dawkins used to write that book *The Delusional God* yet he's deluding himself because all of that giftedness all the light that he has comes from Jesus Christ.
- He is the light of all humanity. That's true of so many in our world isn't it? We live in the light of all that God has created and yet deny it.
- Light that we live by human reason and intelligence and science and sociology and psychology and all of these things all of these things come from God to us.
- [31 : 24] All the light that we have about our existence our own consciousness even it comes from him and yet so many refuse to see it.
- But whether we recognize it or not says John the Apostle it is true verse 4 in him was life and that life was the light of men.
- And therefore says verse 5 nothing in this world can ever displace Jesus Christ as the source and center of everything that matters in this whole world. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not well hard to translate that word the darkness has not mastered it.
- Don Carson says it's a masterpiece of planned ambiguity that word our version it's translated overcome the darkness has not overcome it. In some translations it's translated understood the darkness has not understood it.
- Now it's true many have failed to understand the light of Jesus Christ and have rejected him. Verses 9 to 12 are very plain about that aren't they? Some have refused to receive him.
- [32 : 41] John chapter 3 Jesus himself speaks about that and says men have loved darkness rather than light. Why? Because their deeds are evil. They don't want to be exposed by the light of Jesus Christ.
- But friends the truth is that darkness has never and will never overcome the light of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. It's not as if it's some equal battle between light and darkness the forces of light and the forces of dark like in *Star Wars* or some of these other films.
- No, John says light has shined and the darkness of this world's fog and confusion has been banished forever through Jesus Christ.
- And make no mistake the light of life in Jesus Christ will never ever be overcome never in the history of this world never in the whole of eternity.
- He is the beginning and he is the end he is the goal of all things all things were made by him and for him and through him.
- [33 : 48] And that's why we're here today and that's why there is a message a gospel. And that's why John the Baptist came right back then verse 6 you see he came to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.
- That is the point of Christmas. It's all about light shining in the darkness. It's all about the life of light eternal.
- And above all it's all about finding that life and having that life through Jesus Christ. So listen let me sum up everything in this world is here because of Jesus Christ and for Jesus Christ.

verse 3 all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. He is the reason why. And all the light and the understanding of life that you have or any other human being has and amassed and accumulated throughout their lives it all comes from him.

man. He is the one who alone even enables you to think and ask questions why and how and so on. In him was life and the life was the light of men.

[35 : 20] And that means that nothing nothing in this world can ever displace Jesus Christ as the center of all things. darkness. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

That is why John is saying to us in this gospel of his you better listen to him. You better learn from him from Jesus Christ the light of the world because he alone has the answers to the questions that really matter in your life and everybody's life.

Why is the life at all? He has the answers about how to find life, real life, satisfying life, eternal life, the life that you were made for.

I have come, said Jesus, that you might have life and have it abundantly. John 10 verse 10. So listen to him, says John.

That's why I've written this book, my gospel. That's why I'm preaching from this gospel this morning, this Christmas. Listen to him. He alone is the defining light of life.

[36 : 38] He is the light that defines this whole world. I am the light of the world, said Jesus. Whoever follows me, will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

That's a message that Christmas brings to the world. Light shining in the darkness and a darkness which will never overcome it.

Let's pray together. gracious God, our heavenly Father, I would thank you that you sent your Son to bring light to the darkness, to bring meaning to the confusion, to bring purpose to the hopelessness of this, our human world.

Would you turn our eyes and the eyes of our hearts to that light? light. And in doing so, may we find the life that you came to give, as we also trust in the testimony about him, find life in his name.

Amen. Well, our last song sings about this great mystery, this marvelous design, that God should come as one of us, a son in David's line.