

## “Following and Reflecting the Light”

Introduction: Just to get our bearings once again, remember that we’ve been traveling through the gospel of John in order to gaze, as that shepherd, songwriter, and king named David put it in Psalm 27, “on the beauty of the LORD” (Ps. 27:4). We want to see how God has revealed his beauty, his glory, in Jesus, God’s one and only Son, the Word made flesh. As a part of helping us to see this, John is in the process of showing us, in chapters 6, 7, and 8, how Jesus took three great images from the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites—bread, water, and light—and applied these images to himself to reveal something of his glory. He is the new manna, the bread of life that has come down from heaven to bring nourishment to the world. He is the rock from which the living water of the refreshment of the Holy Spirit flows. And now today we will hear Jesus declare that he is the light of the world. If we follow him, he will lead us out of the darkness and into the light of real life.

As we will explore today, we want to take in this glory, this beautiful light of Jesus, not only for our own sake—because it is the source of the life that is truly life—but also for the sake of others, because we want others to experience this life too. Let’s begin with understanding a bit of the context in which Jesus makes this incredible statement, and then think about what it means to follow and reflect his light.

### I. The Illumination of the Temple Ceremony

A. We’re still at the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, and where we hear Jesus speaking now is at the splendid evening ceremony at that feast of the illumination of the Temple. In one of the outer courts of the Temple four large stands were placed, each of which held four golden bowls. The bowls were filled with oil and when night fell and the wicks were lit (one source I read says that the wicks were actually made from the worn underwear of the priests...good stewardship, I guess!), it was said that all of Jerusalem was illuminated and that the yellow limestone walls of the temple shined in spectacular fashion. I can only imagine the lighting of the Olympic torch as something remotely similar. Think of how that light must have shined in Jerusalem in a world where there was no public, electric lighting after dark. To accompany this great light, one Jewish source tells us the each evening during this feast the people danced before these giant candelabras, singing and praising long into the night!

B. What was this light ceremony all about? Well, like the other ceremonies associated with these Jewish feasts, it was to help worshippers look backward and forward, to help them both remember and hope. This light ceremony looked back to the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire with which God led his people through the wilderness and toward the Promised Land. It protected them by day and led them by night. And the ceremony was to look forward to the prophetic voices that promised a day when the Lord would return to put things right in the world. As, for instance, Zechariah expresses it:

It will be a unique day—a day known only to the LORD—with no distinction between day and night. When evening comes, there will be light (14:7).

This anticipates the way in which the New Jerusalem is described in Revelation. When that day comes, when the river of life flows from the throne of God down the middle of God’s new creation,

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light (22:1-5).

And all of this just draws together the numerous light images we read throughout not only the Bible, but also throughout the ancient world. In the midst of all of this, Jesus, perhaps just as the bowls had been lit, declares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

## II. An Invitation to Follow

A. It’s an incredible claim. Jesus is not claiming to announce or point to the light but to actually *be* the light. Ultimately, as he speaks it, it is an invitation to follow him out of the darkness of brokenness and sin. It is an invitation to see things as they really are. It is an invitation to live as God has designed us to live. It is an invitation to break out of the moral confusion and fear and decay we see around us and begin to live the life that is truly life. That, if we’re honest, can be a hard thing to do. We can be living in the dark for so long that we may not be sure we can ever escape it. Maybe you have made choices that have resulted in deep scars, decisions whose consequences you seem unable to overcome. Hearing that Jesus can enter your darkness and do something about it seems unbelievable . . . but it’s true. Light and dark may be opposites, but they are not of equal power. Darkness disappears when light enters. And, as Psalm 139 describes it, when trying to put God’s great power and presence into words,

even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (v. 12).

B. The real place we can struggle, I think, with this invitation to follow Jesus and come out of the darkness is that we’d rather still be leading! Certainly, as the conversation goes on, that’s where the religious leaders would rather be. But let’s not be so hard on them .It takes real humility to be a follower. Just think about it. All over the place we hear or read about leadership institutes, leadership seminars, leadership journals, and leadership degrees. When do you ever hear about an institute or seminar or journal or degree that is meant to make you a follower?

Illustration: In her chapter on following in her book, *Invitations from God*, Adele Calhoun makes the case that following has fallen on hard times for it is leadership that sells and leadership that gets the air time. Yet Jesus, she notes, doesn’t use the word *leader* at all. Rather, his first, and last, invitation is to follow him (Mk. 1:167; Jn. 21:22). She observes:

Jesus focused on what it means to follow. He modeled following. He taught following. And he looked everywhere for followers. Following is a huge deal to Jesus, because following builds character, sands away the ego and shapes the heart.

Jesus followers take up the challenge of turning where he turns, stopping when he stops, detouring where he detours, loving whom he loves and serving whom he serves. Followers risk doing things Jesus’ way. In a world in which people want to do things their own way, following has fallen on hard times. [p. 39]

C. But following Jesus is what leads to life, the life that is really life. Compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, humility, love (Col. 3:12-14) . . . this is the stuff of life, the fruit of following Jesus. And so it’s not for nothing that Jesus, when he taught us to pray, taught us every day to begin this way, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Not doing our will but doing God’s is what leads us into life.

### III. A Call to Shine

A. But just like we noted when pondering the living water of the Spirit that Jesus offers when we come to him and drink, following Jesus and living in the light of God's will is not just for our own refreshment and enjoyment; it is for the sake of others. And so very quickly after Paul encourages the Philippians to "work out" the new life that Christ brings, he reminds them that it is not only for their sake but for the sake of: others. He puts it this way:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. [2:14-16a]

This is both an important and a fascinating description of what the church is to be. It's important because it highlights our missional purpose, to shine with the light of Christ in our lives in the midst of a "warped and crooked generation." What is fascinating is that Paul takes this phrase from Deuteronomy, the OT book which describes, among other things, how God had given, and was forming Israel for, a missional purpose. He had not simply rescued them from slavery in Egypt so they could cool their heels in a Red Sea resort for the rest of their lives but so that they could attract the nations around them to the living God, beginning with the way that they lived. They were to be, in the words of Isaiah, a "light to the Gentiles" (42:6). But they would fail to do this. Instead, they would become corrupt and unjust. As Moses prophetically anticipates in Deut. 32:5, they would become no longer children of God but a warped and crooked generation..

B. So, did God give up on his project to restore the world? Not in the least. He sent his Son who came to be the light of the world when Israel had grown dim and dark. And then he called us, the church, to follow him, to live in the light, to enjoy the light, and then also to share in his ongoing mission. At the beginning of his famous Sermon on the Mount, where he outlines what it looks like to live in his light, he says this:

You are the light of the world. [In the same way you would put a lamp on a stand instead of under a bowl] let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. [Matt. 5:14-16]

C. Can you follow and connect the dots? Jesus came as the light of the world. If we follow him we will not live in darkness but have the light of life. We will live and enjoy the life that is truly life. But not only that. Because we are an "open book," visible to the world, our call is to be a part of God's plan to restore the world as we reflect the light and life of his Son in the way that we live. Mission and ethics are inseparable. To put it in the language of spiritual formation, God is in the process, by his Spirit, of forming our hearts into the heart of Christ, for our sake, for the sake of others, and ultimately for his glory. May we follow Jesus closely so that we can enjoy the life that is truly life, and reveal that life faithfully and fruitfully to others.