

Believe: Why Jesus Came

Rejecting the True Light

John 1:9-11

Mark Vroegop

“The true light, which gives light to 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” (John 1:9–11).

One of my least favorite questions—one that I’m asked regularly—is “Are you guys ready to order, yet?” No matter how politely the waiter or waitress asks, it stresses me out. The reason is very simple. I like food, but I don’t like deciding which food to eat.

That’s why I normally order the exact same dish at a restaurant every single time. Once I find something I like, I don’t deviate very easily. You see, I’ve ventured out before in the “land of other dishes,” only to be disappointed. And I hate it when I order something that I don’t like. I find myself saying, “Why didn’t I just stick with what I know?”

The problem is that in order for me to make an informed decision, I need time to consider the options, weigh the choices, and seek advice. That’s how I make decisions—at least how I like to make decisions.

Another example: This summer I was trying to figure out which cars I should send with my sons to college, which one to keep at home, and which one to sell. But I couldn’t decide. I kept asking Sarah what she thought: “Any new thought about the car situation?” Nothing was clear—at least not until the day before my son’s wedding.

On the morning before the rehearsal, my dad and I were on our way to golf together. But as I made my way through a busy intersection, I was hit head-on. We were fine. It wasn’t my fault. But the car was totaled. I called Sarah to let her know that she needed to come pick me up. When she arrived on the scene, and after she had checked on me to be sure I was okay and help me move all my belongings out of the car, she said: “Well, I think the decision about the car just got a bit easier.” It did.

To live in the world means that we have to make decisions all the time. And there are times when not making a decision is actually making a decision.

It’s one thing when we are talking about what to eat at a restaurant and which car to keep. When the decision relates to your spiritual life or your eternal life, that’s a different story.

“That You May Not Reject Jesus”

Today, we are in week four of a nine-week study of the first eighteen verses of the gospel of John. The purpose of this gospel is to convince people to believe in Jesus. Here’s how John described his purpose in John 20:30-31.

“Now 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” (John 20:30–31).

“Believe” is a major theme in John’s gospel. But there is another side—a darker side. You see, John also wants us to decide what our stance is on Jesus. The opposite of belief is rejection. John’s gospel is not only filled with amazing stories of what Jesus said and did, but it also contains examples where people walked away from Jesus, opposed him, and even killed him.

This gospel is not only about belief; it sets forth a warning and a diagnosis of what it looks like to reject Jesus. This is extremely important to understand. Every person has to decide who Jesus is. You have to choose.

Our text highlights the need to decide what you will do with Jesus. It shows us both the posture of Jesus’ ministry and the problem with the world. Jesus comes to save. But he is rejected. Let’s look at each of these.

The Posture of Jesus

John has spent the first eight verses helping us understand who Jesus is. He was identified as the Word, as the Creator, and as being one with God. We also learned last week about the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ.

This text is still talking about Jesus in general, but with a particular focus on the ministry of Jesus to the world. And it helps us to see the connection between what Jesus is like and what he does. That’s why I’m using the word “posture.” It is a word that connects attitude, essence, and action. What do we learn about Jesus and his ministry?

1. Ultimate. Jesus is the genuine, real, and central disclosure of God to mankind. That’s what it means for him to be called the “true light.” This metaphor of light has some layers to it.

It could very simply mean that which is true and not false. There are other places in John’s gospel where true is used in this sense (see John 19:35). This is important because there are other places in the Bible where the devil disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). In other words, what he says or what he invites us to believe seems to be true but isn’t. The devil did this in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3) and he tried it with Jesus in the temptation (Matt. 4). Jesus not only says what is right; he is what is right.

While that is part of the meaning here, it is not the full picture. Throughout this gospel, John describes Jesus as the one thing among other things that is ultimate. John uses the word to describe “true worshippers” among all worshipers (John 4:23). Jesus talks about manna from heaven in John 6 and how the Father gives “true bread from heaven,” which is “he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32-33). Further, Jesus calls himself the “true vine” in John 15. Israel thought of itself as God’s vine. By calling himself the true vine, Jesus is saying that he is the ultimate expression of Israel.

Jesus is the true manna and the true vine. He is the light of the world, and he is the true light. He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Jesus is the genuine and ultimate revelation of God.¹

Do you remember the WWJD craze in the 1990s? Somehow there was a connection to a youth worker in Holland, Michigan. It was a call for students to consider “What would Jesus do?” And while the movement went a little crazy, the question is not a bad one. As we read and study the gospel of John, we are regularly given a portrait of what Jesus did and said so that we can know what God is like. We need to know the person of Jesus.

Do you know Jesus personally? Do you read the Bible through the lens of his story and his heart? Do you pray in such a way that reflects your personal engagement with him? He is the true light. It is who he is.

2. Unavoidable. The second statement in verse 9 describes Jesus this way: “which gives light to everyone.” At first, you might think that John is saying that Jesus shines on every person such that they believe or maybe know something about God. You could take “gives light” as if it is referring to general revelation of creation like Paul talked about in Romans 1:18-24, proving that God exists. But that is not the point.

John is talking about the way that Jesus must be dealt with. He shines on mankind, and it requires a response. You cannot avoid deciding who Jesus is. Here is how John 3:19-21 describes the effect:

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God” (John 3:19–21).

John is saying that you have to deal with Jesus. He cannot be ignored because to ignore him is to reject him. Every person must decide who Jesus is. This is, in fact, a good question to ask someone when you are talking about the gospel.

Here is how C.S. Lewis famously explained this in his book *Mere Christianity*:

¹ D. A. Carson, [*The Gospel according to John*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 122.

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God . . ." ²

We will see this play out in the gospel of John, but some of you have seen it play out in your family. Perhaps you've experienced the great divide between relatives regarding who Jesus is. While I want you to continue being kind and considerate, I think it's important for you to know that deciding who Jesus is, has always created this tension. So be sad and pray for your friends or family, but you need to know that it is part of what happens when the true light shines.

Others of you listening to this message may think you can be on the fence with Jesus. Maybe you don't want to side with him so that you can do what you want in other areas of your life. Maybe you don't like his teaching or what it means to be a Christian. I hope you'll continue your journey, but I also want you to know that there is no middle ground. If you are not "for" Jesus, then you are against him. If you don't believe, you are rejecting him. You cannot avoid Jesus.

3. On a mission. The third reality about Jesus's posture that we see in this text is the statement "he was coming into the world." John wants you to see the way in which Jesus is invading and coming to the world. The phrase denotes intention and intervention.

Now the word "world" is critical. This is the first time it appears in John's gospel. We'll see it again in verse 10. And, of course, you know John 3:16—"God so loved the world . . ." So, what does the word "world" mean?

The word has a broader meaning than simply the created order. John is talking about more than just the creation. Jesus didn't just come to earth. There's more here. It's meant to be more all-encompassing. "World" means the environment or the culture that is broken and which marks our human existence. The word "world" is more like the word "system." If I was talking about a computer and said, "The system is broken," that would mean one thing. But if I talk about something like politics, government, or economics, there is much bigger meaning if I say, "The system is broken."

This is fresh on my mind from my tour of various Civil Rights spots last week. Jim Crow Laws were not the only problem as they related to racism in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century. Jim Crow Laws were developed and passed into law because of the brokenness of the culture. Jim Crow Laws only legalized what was already there. They justified one sinful expression of our broken humanity.

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6979-i-am-trying-here-to-prevent-anyone-saying-the-really>

They created a system, an environment, and a culture that was awful and one that still affects our culture today.

So, don't look at "world" as a neutral word. Think of it as whatever symbol or system that represents the brokenness of our humanity. John's point is that Jesus comes into that! He comes into a system that is in rebellion against God. Jesus invades the mess.

The posture of Jesus is to enter the mess of our humanity with the true light and shine in such a way that people will have to decide if they want him or not.

Just think what that tells you about Jesus. He not only enters the mess; he becomes part of the mess. He becomes human. Jesus doesn't stay aloof. He doesn't stay removed. He comes. He weeps. He groans. He speaks. He rebukes. He heals. He weeps. He dies.

Take note of the posture of Jesus. Take note of who he is, what he is willing to do, and how far he's willing to go. Take note of this because it shows you everything about him. And it gives us hope that Jesus is still willing to enter the mess of our brokenness. Take note because this posture of Jesus is the backdrop for a problematic world.

The Problem of the World

There is a second series of truths that we learn about in verses 10-11. In these verses, John turns his attention and focus away from Jesus to the response of the world to Jesus. John wants us to see the tragic contrast between who Jesus is, what he does, and how he is treated. Notice two problematic responses:

1. Ignoring the Creator

John's point is that even though Jesus was in the world and created the world, he was not known. Jesus was ignored. The world didn't know who he was. And it should have.

We've already talked about the word "world." John is referring to the entire created order, especially humanity. Jesus not only came into the world; he was in the world. He became a man. He lived in the mess of our humanity.

But John also reminds us that Jesus was the creator of this world. He hearkens back to what we heard in John 1:3. Jesus is the creator. Everything owes its life to Jesus. Therefore, everything owes its allegiance to him as well. And yet the world does not "know" him.

I don't think that John is merely stating a fact. The NIV translates the word "know" as recognize. That translation implies that the world merely made a mistake. To not recognize someone is accidental. There is not much of a more judgment if you do not recognize another person. But in this case, I think there's more intended here.

The word "know" has a range of meaning that includes intimacy and relationship. Let me give you a few examples:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Do you see the connection? To know Jesus is to relate to him as he really is—as the Son of God. But the people refused to acknowledge or recognize his place as the Son of God. They ignored his claims and his teaching. They dismissed him.

In John 8, Jesus got into an argument with the Pharisees about his relationship with the Father. And when he connected his relationship to the Father in contrast to theirs, the conversation became heated. The religious leaders refused to acknowledge him for who he really was.

“Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (John 8:53–59).

They refused to “know” him as the Son of God. Despite what he said and what he did, they dismissed him. They treated him as if he were just another prophet.

Do you know that people do the same thing today? There are some who live as if they can dismiss the fact that Jesus really is the Son of God. They don’t outright reject him; they just dismiss what should be obvious and true. They fill their lives with all kinds of other things. They are grateful, but never thank him. They are happy but do not see him as the fountain-head of all blessings. They take his name in vain as if he isn’t real. They know better, but they don’t want to know him. They refuse to acknowledge who Jesus really is.

Does that describe you? Do you know Jesus as Lord and as Savior? I plead with you not to dismiss him.

2. Rejecting the Savior

The second and final tragedy is the way in which the long-promised Messiah is rejected by his own people. John intends verse 11 to be an intensification of the argument. Jesus not only came to the world in which he created, but he also came to his own people. He ministered to the chosen people of Israel. And yet they didn’t receive him. They rejected him. They killed him.

This final verse says that he came “to his own.” Some of your translations may have a footnote which says “his own domain” or “to his own people.” The idea seems to be related to a realm that belongs to him or to his home. John intensifies it again by saying “his own people” did not receive him.

The point is that the people who seemed most likely to embrace his teaching and ministry are the very people who ended up killing him. The people who were looking for the Messiah crucified their own king. The tragedy of the death of Jesus is not just the killing of the Son of God, but it is also that the people of God did it.

The most religious people were the ones who rejected Jesus. They refused to believe that they were sinners. They could not accept that he was the Son of God. They could not accept his teaching. They would not accept his claim to be the Messiah.

The problem with the world is either ignoring what should be obvious about Jesus or outright rejecting him.

Three Implications

As it relates to the posture of Jesus and the problem in the world, allow me to give you three implications:

1. Believers in Jesus should rejoice that God enters our mess. We should be eternally grateful that Jesus came to our broken world, took on the limitations of our humanity, and suffered a death that he didn't deserve. Jesus went the distance for every single person who comes to him. And we should keep rejoicing that Jesus can enter every mess of our lives.

2. Rejecting Jesus can take on many forms, and it should make us tremble. The devil is constantly scheming, and the world is creatively offering alternatives for our allegiance. Jesus can be ignored, dismissed, and rejected. You'll find people in the Bible who walked away from him for money, power, immorality, and the fear of man. Some people didn't like what he did. Others didn't like what he said. Some were religious. Other were pagans. There are many convenient ways to reject Jesus. And that should make us tremble.

3. Every person must decide who Jesus is. The aim of John's gospel is for you to believe. Every story and every line of teaching is recorded, and every miracle is written so that you would cross over from unbelief into belief. And I must caution you: by thinking you don't need to decide, you are deciding.

You see, Jesus has come into the world to save you from the mess of your own making. And John wrote this gospel so that you can know about Jesus.

This gospel has been written so that you will no longer reject Jesus. It calls you to believe.

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