

Believe: Why Jesus Came

The Life and Light

John 1:4-5

Mark Vroegop

“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.” (John 1:4–5)

I was on a conference call with a group of pastors recently, and Ravi Zacharias was giving us some words of encouragement in how to navigate our culture. He gave us a number of important insights and thoughts, but there was one statement that stuck with me. Here’s what he said:

“Jesus did not come to make bad people good; he came to make dead people live.”

Ravi’s summary of the ministry of Jesus stayed with me all week because it makes a helpful distinction. It gets below the surface of our lives. It also addresses a core issue in Christianity – one that relates to the Gospel of John. Let me explain.

If I were to ask you “Why should a person become a Christian?” how would you answer that question? Most of us, I assume, would say something like, “Because we are sinners, and we are guilty.” That’s true. Every human being has brokenness built into the fabric of his or her being. Doing and desiring wrong things is just a part of who we are. I would imagine that most Christians come to Jesus because of the bad things that they’ve done. Guilt can lead us to grace.

But too often we are only focused on how to change behavior – how to make bad people good. Don’t get me wrong, the gospel certainly accomplishes this. It is beautiful when sinful actions are replaced with the fruit of the Spirit.

However, bad actions are not the only problem. There’s something more foundational to our brokenness. That’s behind the statement: “Jesus did not come to make bad people good; he came to make dead people live.”

And it is also the theme of John’s gospel.

Our problem, you see, is not just the bad things that we do. The foundational problem in our lives is our spiritual deadness. The sinful condition of our hearts puts us in a position where we don’t just need renovation; we need resurrection.

We don’t just need Jesus to move us from bad things to good things; we need Jesus to give us life.

Last Week: Three Foundational Truths About Jesus

Last week, we learned that the single most important word in the Gospel of John is believe. And we read in John 20 why John wrote this gospel:

“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).

Believing and life are linked together in this gospel.

We also discovered that John begins this glorious gospel by helping us to see that (1) Jesus is the self-disclosure of God, (2) he is God, and (3) he is the creator. Each of these is essential to the foundation of Christianity.

Next week, Ben Parker, Lead Pastor of our newest church plant in Greenwood (which had 270 people on their first Sunday!), will be walking us through John 1:6-8. I will be leading a trip of fifty leaders on a Civil Rights Vision Trip/Pilgrimage visiting some historic sites in Birmingham, Montgomery, and Memphis; and I'll be speaking at Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in Greenwood, Mississippi.

Today, we are looking at John 1:4-5, and we'll see two more truths about Jesus and two things that Jesus does. Verses 4 and 5 move us outside of philosophical categories and toward the transforming power of Jesus. Or, to say it succinctly: Jesus comes to give life.

Let me show you what I mean by this and also what a difference it makes.

Two More Truths About Jesus

As John introduces his gospel with the intention of introducing us to Jesus, he continues with some foundational truths that we need to know: (1) Jesus gives life and (2) Jesus is light.

1) Jesus is life

In verse four, we find the phrase “in him was life.” What does this mean? You might assume that John is talking about eternal life. Perhaps you would think of John 3:16 where John connects believing in Jesus with eternal life (“not perish but have eternal life”). Or maybe you would think about it as being related to meaning or purpose in life as in John 10:10 when Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Those definitions wouldn't be entirely wrong. The word “life” has that kind of application and range of meaning. But that is not quite the focus in verse 4. John has something in mind that is even more foundational.

When John says that Jesus is life, he is pulling from the creation-motif that we heard in the first three verses. In Genesis 1, God creates through speaking – his word. On day one, the darkness is penetrated by the light, by God merely saying it. On day two, he separates the sky, the waters, and the land. On day

three, God speaks vegetation and plants into existence. Day five features the creation of creatures in the sea and animals on the land. What a scene it must have been!

In *The Magician's Nephew*, C.S. Lewis tries to capture the essence when he tells us about Digory and Polly entering a world of nothingness as they hear the singing of Aslan. And this song creates the world:

The lion was pacing to and fro about that empty land and singing his new song. It was softer and more lilting than the song by which he had called up the stars and the sun; a gentle rippling music. And as he walked and sang the valley grew green with grass. It spread out from the Lion like a pool. It ran up the sides of the little hills like a wave...

Polly was finding the song more and more interesting because she thought she was beginning to see the connection between the music and the things that were happening. When a line of dark firs sprang up on a ridge about a hundred yards away she felt that they were connected with a series of deep, prolonged notes which the Lion had sung a second before. And when he burst into a rapid series of lighter notes she was not surprised to see primroses suddenly appearing in every direction. Thus, with an unspeakable thrill, she felt quite certain that all the things were coming (as she said) "out of the Lion's head." When you listened to his song you heard the things he was making up: when you looked round you, you saw them. This was so exciting that she had no time to be afraid...

The Lion opened his mouth, but no sound came from it; he was breathing out, a long, warm breath; it seemed to sway all the beasts as the wind sways a line of trees. Far overhead from beyond the veil of blue sky which hid them the stars sang again; a pure, cold, difficult music. Then there came a swift flash like fire (but it burnt nobody) either from the sky or from the Lion itself, and every drop of blood tingled in the children's bodies, and the deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying:

"Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."¹

Now, with that narrative rendition in your mind, listen to Genesis 2:7 - "then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7).

The scene in creation is the stunning entrance of life into what is life-less. It is the creation of something out of nothing. It is the image of a human being created from the dust who suddenly starts breathing because God put life in his lungs.

The closest I can come to this is the experience of the first time I felt my children move when Sarah was pregnant. Or perhaps when they were born, and they bellowed their first cry. These are little glimpses of the miracle of life.

¹ <http://www.letterstotheexiles.com/aslans-song-stewardship/>

John connects the previous verse about Jesus being the creator of all things to this concept. He was the revelation of God. Not only was he in the beginning with God, he was God, and was the creator of all things; Jesus is the source of all life – both physical and spiritual life.

Now, if you want to see this elsewhere in John, most New Testament scholars point to John 5:26.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:25–26).

This text connects the life that Jesus possesses in himself as God with the life that he gives to those who hear his voice. He has the power to give life because he not only possesses that kind of life; he is that life.

Throughout John’s gospel, you will see Jesus doing amazing things – miracles. John records these so that you can see the connection between who Jesus is and what he can do. He wants you to see the connection between what Jesus did for others and what he can do for you.

John’s purpose is for you to look to Jesus for life – to take what is dead and make it alive. Starting with your heart. You see, Jesus is not only able to give life (“in him was life”), but he is actively seeking those who would receive him. He’s life, but he’s also the light.

2) Jesus is the Light

The second truth that we find in this text is John’s description of Jesus as “the light.” This will become a familiar theme or metaphor in our journey. A few examples:

“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46).

Jesus calls himself the light, and he connects belief to that light. Without light, there is not belief. There is no life.

Verse four starts to make a transition from words in the prologue that merely describe Jesus (“was God, with God, etc.”) toward identifying what this means for mankind. It says: “the life was the light of men.” In other words, John isn’t saying Jesus is life just to make a point about what is true about him. John wants us to understand Jesus’s purpose. He’s not just the life or the light. The life is the light of men.

But what does John mean by “light of men”? John uses the word in reference to a number of spiritual conditions and needs:

1. **It exposes** – *“For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed”* (John 3:20).

2. **It separates** - *“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.”* (John 3:19)
3. **It leads to belief** - *“While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”* *When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them”* (John 12:36).
4. **It delivers** - *“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”* (John 12:46). We’ll talk more about this darkness later. For now, just recognize the connection between light and deliverance.
5. **It transforms** – *“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life’”* (John 8:12).

This is what the “light” does. And these texts are just from John’s gospel. If we journeyed to other passages, we’d find even more references to what light is and what it does. Notice how all of those references are somehow connected to action or activity.

You see, John is not simply writing an account of Jesus’s life so that you can know more about Jesus. He is writing so that you can believe and be transformed by Jesus. John’s aim is for you to see who Jesus is so that by believing, Jesus can create life in you.

Some of you need the life of Jesus in you at the most basic level of who you are. Perhaps a friend brought you to church today because she cares for you. Maybe you find yourself searching for answers because you coming to the conclusion that something is wrong inside of you. Let me tell you what Jesus – as the life of God and light of men – can do for you.

Jesus can show you who you really are. Maybe that’s happening even now. You’re coming to realize how big the problems of your brokenness and your choices really are. But the reason Jesus exposes us is so that we can face the reality of our need. And once we realize our sinfulness and our need for transformation, Jesus is ready to start that work in us. Perhaps that could start today.

Those of us who are Christians would tell you that when Jesus comes, he lights everything up. He gives life to everything. He transforms our thinking, our affections, our desires, our actions, and our words. He makes dead people alive by resurrecting the individual parts of our lives. The life of Jesus in us affects how we think about our identity, our sexuality, our money, our careers, our families, and even our pains or sorrows.

Jesus not only saves you from your sins, he transforms your life! Here is how the apostle Paul described this transformation in 2 Corinthians 4:6-11.

“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every

way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:6–11).

The light of Jesus comes in order for the life of Jesus to transform us.

So, can you think of any areas where you need the light and life of Jesus to transform you? Does the life of Jesus shine forth in your life? Where, right now, do you want more of the life in Jesus? The same Jesus – the one who is life and who has life – is ready to bring new levels of growth in our lives.

Jesus is life. Jesus is the light of men.

Two Things Jesus Does

The second set of truths that we can see in this text are related to what Jesus does. We've touched on this a little bit already, but verse five makes it plain and poignant. John wants us to see more in this verse about the context in which Jesus entered. The first four verses were about who Jesus is. This verse takes that concept but puts a backdrop to it.

1. Shines in the Darkness – As much as light is a theme in John's Gospel, so too is the theme of darkness. The creation narrative starts with a world "without form and void, and darkness covered the deep" (Gen. 1:2). John starts this way as well. Jesus, as the light, shines into the darkness.

What is this darkness? The term describes the spiritual condition of all mankind where we fail to see who God is, who we are, and what that means for our lives now and in the future. The apostle Paul says that our godless orientation led to futile thinking and darkened hearts. It means the inability to comprehend, appreciate, or even see.

Another term for this in Scriptures is dead. The Bible says that we were dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1). Now, this doesn't mean that we aren't doing anything. On the contrary, our "deadness" expresses itself in all kind of wrong actions. We willfully sin, thinking that we'll like it and convincing ourselves that we deserve it. We allow self-centeredness to rule our lives. And, tragically, we are completely confident that we are right.

It's like talking to a friend who has an addiction. You talk and talk. You try and try. But there may be times when you feel like you are "talking to a wall." They are zombie-like in their decision-making.

John says that Jesus shines in that darkness. This means that Jesus enters or invades the darkness in order to rescue people from their spiritual blindness. And how does he do this? Well, we will learn more about this when we study John 3 and the new birth. But for now, it simply means that Jesus, by the Spirit, opens our eyes, woos us to himself, and calls us to believe. Jesus shines into the darkness and delivers people by showing them who he is, empowering them to believe.

In the same way that he called Lazarus out the grave in John 11, he still calls people – walking dead people – to new life. He might be calling you! The amazing work of Jesus is the way he still raises the spiritually dead to life.

Jesus pursues people. He calls individual people. He invades the darkness and invites us to believe.

2. Victorious Even in Rejection – Verse 5 concludes with “and darkness has not overcome it.” Now, there is a challenging word here. The word “overcome” is translated as “understood” in multiple translations (NIV, NASB, and KJV). It is a word that has different nuances of meaning. You could think of it like the English phrase “got it.” You could say, “Got it” when you beat your friend for the bill at McAlister’s. Or you could say “Got it” when someone tells you something that you understand. That’s the kind of word we have here.

Which is it? It’s probably a bit of both, and John may have intended a level of literary subtlety here. We’ll hear him talk about the rejection of Jesus in 1:10. And we’ll also hear that those who “got him” became children. So, I suppose that John is probably highlighting the superiority and the misunderstanding of Jesus as he enters the world. He comes to his own and he is rejected. But his mission continues.

What I want you to notice about this section is the posture of John’s message about Jesus. The idea is of a person who was, is, and always will be God entering the world seeking to save people. The light is shining in the darkness. And even in its rejection, the message and transformation continue.

Jesus is **still** seeking and saving the lost. He **still** pursues people. He **still** conquers hearts – one person at a time. If you are a follower of Jesus, can you reflect on the way God pursued you? Can you stand in awe of the question “Why me?” And out of the overflow of that wonder, can you allow the life of Jesus to infiltrate to overcome specific areas of your life? Why not tell the Lord right now: “Jesus fill my _____ with your life!”

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, do you sense God pursuing you? Are you ready to have Jesus change you from the inside out? Do you want to be raised from the dead today? Then why not believe today? Why not say: “I believe! Jesus is Lord!”

You see the goal of the gospel, my friend, is not to make you a little better. Jesus wants to give you life!

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