

HELLO DARKNESS

by Ray C. Stedman

In the prologue to the Gospel of John, the apostle is setting forth a summary of who Jesus really is. Last week we looked at who Jesus is eternally, and why the world cannot forget him. Here is a quotation from a very well known personality, who found he could not forget Jesus:

I know men, and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a mere man. Everything in Christ astonishes me. His spirit overawes me, and his will confounds me. Between him and whoever else in the world there is no possible term of comparison. He is truly a being by himself. One can absolutely find nowhere but in him alone the imitation or the example of his life. I search in vain in history to find a similar to Jesus Christ, or anything which can approach the gospel. Neither history, nor humanity, nor the ages, nor nature offer me anything with which I am able to compare it or to explain it. Here everything is extraordinary.

Those words were spoken by Napoleon Bonaparte during a conversation with one of his generals while he was in exile on St. Helena. There are on record other remarkable things that Napoleon said about Christ. It is almost certain that he became a Christian during his days of exile.

No, the world cannot forget Jesus, and John has shown us why in this prologue. The reason, of course, is that Jesus is the very expression of the mind and thought of God. Jesus is the Creator of the world in which we live and of we ourselves. From him there flows life to every creature, including ourselves, and that life becomes the light of knowledge among us. How could we forget him? Something within us cries out for the One who made us. Man has never been able to set aside the testimony of this amazing Person who dwelt among us once.

In Verses 5 through 13 of Chapter 1, John tells us not only who Jesus is eternally, but who he is effectively; what Jesus can do, what he came to accomplish on the earth.

Verse 5:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. {John 1:5 RSV}

Here is the first hint in this gospel of the struggle between belief and unbelief in the world. John has said that Jesus is the light of men; i.e., Jesus is the source of understanding of reality. He is the basis of the knowledge of truth. We live in a confused, and confusing, world that has little understanding of reality. John declares that it is only in the light of Jesus that men begin to see things the way they are -- to see life the way God sees it, which is the way life really is.

In contrast, we human beings are the darkness. The world, the race of mankind, is in darkness. We find that very hard to understand. We are proud of our achievements. We point to our impressive technology, our amazing and brilliant achievements in the realms of communication and of travel, and when we think of people who live in darkness we think of the savages who live in jungles, not civilized people like ourselves who live in the full light of human knowledge. We point to our great libraries and universities, and say, "How could we ever be thought of as people living in darkness?"

Yet, despite these impressive achievements, as we think about life and the struggle to find solutions to the problems that afflict us from generation to generation, we have to admit that these words are true. We do not know the answers. We are like children lost in a dark wood, feeling around, hoping to recognize something. We do not even know what we have run up against. We are like men in a dark room, bumping into furniture, not knowing what we are running into; we grope around, feeling things to see if we can understand where we are.

I read the other day in one of the news magazines that if anyone thinks that economists know what they are saying, such a one probably also believes in fairies and goblins! Nobody understands the immense complexity of problems in our world today.

The title of this message is *Hello Darkness*. Some of you will recognize that those words are taken from a song called *The Sounds of Silence*, written by Simon and Garfunkel in the '70's: "Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again." That is a vivid and accurate description of the way people feel today -- they are living in darkness.

One of the signs is that we do not even recognize what is wrong.

I actually heard a husband say to his wife recently, "Why are you getting so upset at me? All I did was have an affair. What's the big deal?" That is darkness! A man who thinks that sexual adultery does not create any serious problems in marriage, that it ought to be treated as something hardly worth mentioning, is living in darkness; he does not see what is happening to him.

The whole world is like that. We are watching our civilization fall apart. Easy divorce, permissive sex, etc., is destroying our homes, sabotaging a whole generation of young people and of children, removing the glue that holds civilization together. Thus anarchy and violence spread on every side, and we do not know what is wrong. That is darkness. These words are as relevant and apropos today as when John first wrote them in the darkened Roman world of the first century.

Verse 5 goes on to raise a problem: it says, "the darkness could not overcome [the light]." I must immediately disagree with that translation. The Greek word that is translated "overcome" is really a word that means "to lay hold of, to lay hands on, to seize." One can "lay hold" of something either for hostile purposes or to possess it. This translation takes the first of those meanings. It seems to say that the darkness is trying to lay hold of the light to overcome it. Other translations read, "The darkness could not put it out." That, of course, is true; darkness cannot put light out. But that is not really what John is saying here.

The other view ought to be taken. This word means that the darkness cannot get hold of the light, cannot appropriate it, cannot possess it, cannot apprehend it. The Apostle Paul asks, "What fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Cor 6:14). These are mutually exclusive: the moment you introduce one, the other has to flee. Darkness and light cannot exist together.

How, then, can darkness take hold of light? That is the question that is being asked here. What is needed?

According to John, what was needed was a witness to the light, someone to enable the darkness to take hold of the light, to appropriate it. So we read immediately in Verses 6 and on:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for a testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. {John 1:6-8 RSV}

That refers to John the Baptist, the one whom the prophet Isaiah had predicted was coming to "prepare the way of the Lord," {Isa 40:3}. John the Baptist's ministry was to step truth down so that it could be grasped by the darkness. Somebody has put this very beautifully in a poem:

To human eyes, too much of light
Is blinding as the blackest night.
And this is so, too, of the mind,
In total ignorance it's blind.
But more truth than it can absorb
Will overwhelm the mental orb.
So, lest our vision burn to ashes
God shows us truth in bits and flashes,
White revelations that the brain
Can comprehend and yet stay sane.

And we, poor fools, demand truth's noon
Who scarce can bear its crescent moon.
-- "White Revelations," by Georgia Starbuck Galbraith.

What is needed, then? Somebody who can step the truth down to our level, someone who can make it comprehensible -- even to the darkness.

The name John means, "God is gracious." The grace of God is exhibited in sending someone before the light who could stoop to our weakness, someone to put truth down at our level and make it available to us.

I have a couple of grandsons at home who are just learning to read. We did not hand them a volume of Shakespeare and ask them to start at that level. No, they started at the simplest level of the ABC's.

That is what John the Baptist did. He came and began with the ABC's:

A: Admit your need. Admit you are confused, bewildered, blinded, needy; that you cannot solve your own problems. That is summed up in the word that John preached: "Repent." Think again. Admit your need. That is where darkness has to start before it can ever apprehend light. Admit you are in trouble, that you cannot find your own way out, that all the vaunted solutions being shouted at you all day long have never worked and will not work in your life. Admit your need.

B: Believe. Believe in the One who gives life. Believe in the One who has come, who can meet you right where you are and give you life and light.

C: Correct your behavior. That is what John said. To soldiers, he said, "Stop harassing people." To the rich, he said, "Give freely and generously to the poor." He told others to correct their behavior on the basis of having received new life and new light from God.

The ABC's -- that was John's ministry. It was not much truth, but it was enough to start with, and that is where John began.

John the Apostle says that John identified the light; he told men who it was, because Jesus did not look like light. Jesus did not come into this world like a sunburst, or like some visitor from outer space. He did not wander among us as a little Extra Terrestrial with strange looks so that everybody could see he was not one of us. Jesus came looking like us: he became one of us. That is why people did not recognize him to be what he was. He needed a witness.

Isn't it interesting in the opening of the book of Acts, that Jesus, after all the demonstration of his marvelous life, after having conquered death, nevertheless stands before twelve men and says to them, "Wait here until you are given power from on high; then you will be witnesses to me throughout Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth"? {cf, Acts 1:8}. That is what a witness does: he makes clear who the light is, and encourages belief in him.

And, as in the case of John the Baptist, a witness denies his own importance. John "was not that light, but he came to bear witness to the light." The Apostle Paul says, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake," {cf, 2 Cor 4:5 RSV}. One of the things that alarms me about the television programs and radio broadcasts that are attempts to preach the gospel is how much of the focus is on the preacher -- his personality, his good looks, his clever way with words -- and so little upon the One about whom he preaches. But what a beautiful thing about John! He denied himself and preached Christ. As a result, people flocked out of the cities, the towns and the villages, out to the hot desert places (where there were no Kool-Aid stands to relieve the misery), to hear the wonderful word that there was a way out of the darkness of life!

In Verses 9-11, John the Apostle resumes his summary of who Jesus is:

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. {John 1:9-11 RSV}

Here is the first reference in this gospel to the incarnation of Jesus. He was "the true light that enlightens every man." What is that light? It is the light of creation; it is the witness that creation gives out of itself to the existence, the power, the might, and the majesty of God. Jesus is that light. Because he is the Creator behind all things, Jesus gathers up in himself the wisdom and the revelation of nature about God.

I have discovered that the question most often asked by non-Christians about the Christian faith is, "What about those who have never heard?" People say, "We can understand that we in the United States are perhaps to be condemned if we do not believe this message because we have heard about Jesus. We have Bibles; we can read for ourselves; we have the witness of Christ. But that is not fair, because what about those who have never heard, those who have had no opportunity to hear about Jesus? Is God going to condemn them too?"

The answer, of course, is very simple: there are no such people. There is no one who has not heard something about God. No one! Paul argues that very definitely in the tenth chapter of Romans. There he asks, "Have they not heard?" {Rom 10:18}. Then he quotes from the 19th Psalm: "Their voice has gone out to all the earth," {cf, Psa 19:4a RSV}. The word of nature, the marvelous testimony of the created universe around and our own nature within testify that there is a God of intelligence and wisdom and power behind the things that are made.

I confess to you that I never cease to be amazed at the strange phenomenon of scientists (we have so many of them in this community), who work all the time with the marvels of nature,

- The wonders of the invisible world of the atom and the molecule; at the astronomers who explore the strange revelations of the macro-universe,
- The tremendous galaxy in which we exist and beyond it the billions of galaxies that fill the whole of the starry heavens and yet maintain themselves in perfect order and arrangement;
- At those who work in the realm of biology, the study of plant life and geology,
- At those who are constantly exposed to the marvelous testimony of nature that behind all things is an intelligent Mind that blends all things together,

and yet how such men and women can come to the conclusion that nothing but blind chance has put it all together! To me, the greatest miracle of all time is to come up with that kind of conclusion! It is comparable, as someone has well said, to having a tornado blow through a junkyard and come up with a B-1 bomber! How could it happen? What is it that blinds men to this testimony? It is incredible, isn't it, to say that it all happened by the fumbings and bumbings of chance?

But, according to John, that light which nature gives us was personified. It came among us and stood in our midst in the person of Jesus, who demonstrated his nature by stilling the storm, by speaking to the winds and the waves and quieting them, by taking simple elements of bread and fish and feeding five thousand people on one occasion, four thousand on another, by taking broken, hurting bodies and delivering them from disease, by creating eyes in those who were sightless, and giving fresh strength to the limbs of those who were lame, by speaking even to the dead and raising them up to life again. The Creator, standing in our midst, as John records, that true light came into the world, he was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not." This strange blindness, this strange darkness of unbelief is still true today as it was then. We did not recognize the Creator himself when he came among us.

More than that, people did not recognize him as the Messiah, as the promised One: "He came to his own home and his own people received him not." That is an interesting construction in Greek grammar. It says, "He came to his own and his own received him not," but there are two different words, two different genders, employed. "He came to his own" is in the neuter gender, meaning, his own things, his own place ("his own home" is a

good translation). The second "his own," is masculine gender; his own associates, his own relatives, his own family "received him not." That is clearly a reference to the people and to the land of Israel. Jesus came to the place where God had put his name, to the land that had been promised to Abraham; he came to the temple that was dedicated to his own Father, and his own people in that place, the chosen ones who had been instructed for centuries that there was coming One who would be the suffering Servant of Jehovah, that there was coming One who would bear their transgressions upon himself, his own people received him not.

I mentioned last week that I had recently been in Los Angeles, where I met with eleven Reformed Jewish rabbis, and that we had discussed, in a very warm and loving time, the differences between the Christian and Jewish viewpoints. During the course of a discussion, one of the rabbis said, "You know, when the Messiah comes we believe that the Jews are going to say to him, 'Welcome,' and the Christians will say, 'Welcome back.' But the Messiah will say, 'No comment.'" That was rather humorous, but it was not true. He will not say that.

According to the prediction of the prophet Zechariah, the Jews will ask him, "What are these wounds in thy hands?" {cf, Zech 13:6a KJV}. Then he shall answer, "Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends," {Zech 13:6b KJV}. He came unto his own people and they received him not.

So we are confronted right away in John's gospel with the darkness of the world, the blindness of men -- both Jew and Gentile alike -- that cannot see the Creator when he demonstrates his power in their midst, and cannot see the Messiah when he fulfills all the prophecies of the Old Testament.

But, according to John, it was not a failure, and we must never read it as such. God did what he set out to do. Despite the world's rejection, despite the Jews' denying his Messiahship, some believed, some received, as John goes on to say:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power 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. {John 1:12-13 RSV}

Here is one of the strange paradoxes of Scripture which we run into again and again. Somehow God seems to allow everything to look like all is totally lost; the whole thing seems to be a failure.

That may happen in your own life as well, so you had better be ready for it. When it looks as though everything you had counted upon and hoped on to bring about what you longed for has already failed, then God starts to work.

That is what he did here. Though the Messiah was rejected and the Creator was unrecognized, nevertheless in the midst of that rejection God began to produce a whole new creation, a new humanity came into being.

It starts, as John tells us here, like the old creation -- with a birth. Every person in this room entered human life by means of birth. There is no other way in. This is how you got here -- by being born. And that is true in the new creation as well. There has to be a birth. (Jesus is going to point this out rather astonishingly to a leader and teacher of Israel in the third chapter of John -- he must be born again.) There is no other way into the new kingdom. It is like the old creation; it begins with a birth.

Like the old creation, it too is not a mass-production. Nowhere on this earth, with its vast population of almost four billion people, do you ever find any mass-producing of human beings. They all come one at a time, individually, personally. (The most you can ever get is five or six at once, and even they are very distinct individuals!) Now, that is the way the new creation is. You do not enter the kingdom in a crowd; you have to come one at a time, personally, individually.

John goes on to list the mistaken ways people think they can come to God. He says,

- First, that new birth is "not of blood." That means, not by inheritance, not by human ancestry. You cannot get into the kingdom of God, or be born into the family of God, by being raised in a Christian

family. You can be a member of a family, every one of whom is Christian except you, but that does not make you a Christian. You can grow up in a Christian home, attend a Christian school, spend all your life involved in Christian activities, but until you are born again you are not a Christian. You are not saved by Christian parents or Christian grandparents or by being born in a Christian country.

- Second, the new birth is "not of the will." It is not by determining to be a Christian that you become a Christian. You cannot make yourself one. You cannot talk yourself into being a Christian. You cannot study Christians, act like them, join their church and sing their hymns and go through all the Christian externals and become a Christian. You cannot do it. It is "not of the will." It is not by positive thinking or possibility thinking that you become a Christian. It is only, as we will see, by a new birth.
- Third, the new birth is "not of the will of man." It is not by the efforts of others. Nobody can make you a Christian; no bishop, no archbishop, no priest, no one can make you a Christian. You cannot come by a ceremony, by reading a creed, by standing up or sitting down, by going forward or by kneeling at a bench. That does not make you a Christian.

It is what has happened in your heart that makes you a Christian. It is a new birth. It is done by God: "but of God." It is all by God, so it is beyond any human effort, any cleverness or manipulation. "To all who received him." Not all who merely believe in him. Many people say, "I believe in Christ. I believe that he lived, that he died and rose again. I believe he was who he said he was." But that does not make you a Christian. It is when you receive him, when you yield to him, when you surrender to his Lordship that you become a Christian.

John put it very clearly in his first letter: "He who has the Son has eternal life; he who does not have the Son does not have life," {cf, 1 Jn 5:12}.

It is that simple. It is by receiving him, by inviting him to be your Lord, by asking him to take over in your life, to enter your heart; that is the only way into the kingdom of God.

That begins deep in the human spirit. If you receive him, something happens to you. Deep in your spirit a transformation occurs. God does it. You cannot do it. You do not even feel it. It is not something that happens by feeling.

When a baby starts to form in the womb the mother does not know it, neither does the father. Cells join and multiply and a new life forms, but there is no feeling connected with it; you cannot tell when it happens. So also with the new life. When faith meets the Word of God, and the Son of God is invited as Lord into the life, a new life begins in the human spirit. A change of government has set in. New life has come, and with it will come light as well, for "the life is the light of men."

That is when the Bible becomes a different book. Once you receive new life and read the Book you will have new light. It will make sense where it never made sense before. Where once it was dull and uninviting, now it seems to glow with a radiance of information that you never saw before. That is the mark of a new birth. A new creation has begun which will grow into the image of Christ.

That growth takes a long time. It is a process. It does not happen overnight. You do not suddenly, by magic, become a new creature. It takes place gradually, like a baby grows. God has designed it so. But the promise is that to those who have begun they will stand at last like him, sons of God, "to them gave he power to become the sons of God."

Are you not encouraged by the fact that John puts it that way, "the power to become"? That is what God gives. He does not wave magic wands over us and suddenly make us all new. Sometimes it is a difficult struggle. We resist, like babies resist growing up. Babies are not very nice creatures either when they start out.

Somebody has well said, "A baby is a digestive apparatus with a loud noise at one end and no responsibility at the other!"

But babies are humans, and they will grow until at last they become fully mature, well-developed humans. So

it is with the new creation.

It may well be that most of us here have become new creatures in Christ already. I suspect that that is true of almost everyone, otherwise you would not keep coming here week after week in order that you might be fed and grow. But there may be some among us who have never opened their hearts. There may be some who have never made this transaction, never come to Jesus, never received him as Lord, never surrendered the keys of the kingdom within to him and said, "Lord, I need you," never admitted their need and believed in him, and on that basis determined to correct their behavior. If so, now is the moment to do that. This is an hour when a new birth can occur.

We are going to close this service by singing together a hymn that is in its essence a prayer. It is a prayer to Jesus, and, if this is the first time you have had opportunity to surrender your life, we ask you to sing these words with meaning, not to us, but to him. He will hear and act, and God will do the work. We will not do it. We cannot do it. We will welcome you into the family of God.

Prayer:

And now to you, Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature, Lord of the universe, Lord of history, Creator of all things, God of gods, Man of men, we thank you. May your grace sustain and strengthen those who have come. May the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit now be the experience of all in Christ. In his name we pray, Amen.

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