

THE LIGHT OF CHRISTMAS - PEACE

It was a dark night during the winter of 1864. At Petersburg, Virginia, the Confederate army of Robert E. Lee faced off against the Union divisions of General Ulysses S. Grant. The Civil war had now lasted three and a half years and hope had been replaced by despair in the muck and mud of trench warfare. Late one evening one of Lee's generals, Major General George Pickett, received word that his wife had given birth to a beautiful baby boy. Up and down the line the Southerners began building huge bonfires in celebration of the event. Seeing the lights, the Northern soldiers got nervous and sent out a reconnaissance patrol to see what was going on. The scouts returned with the message that Pickett had had a son and these were celebratory fires. It so happened that Grant and Pickett had been classmates at West Point and knew one another well. To honour the occasion, Grant ordered that bonfires should be built. For miles on both sides of the line fires burned. No shots fired. No yelling back and forth. No war. As long as the lights burnt there was peace, celebrating the birth of a child. Unfortunately, it didn't last forever. Soon the fires burned out and once again the darkness of night and war took over.

The good news of Christmas is that in the midst of a great darkness there came a light, not just a temporary flicker but an eternal flame that burns to this day. There may be times in life when we see the events of the world and the challenges in our own lives, we experience darkness but Christmas reminds us that whatever happens in life, the light still shines.

Today we are continuing in our series looking at Christmas through the eyes of the prophet Isaiah. Today I want us to look at another scripture that is often used at Christmas time;

Isaiah 9:2-6 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. 4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. 5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

December 21st is the winter solstice which in the Northern Hemisphere is the longest night of the year and the shortest time of daylight in the year. It is interesting that this is when we celebrate Christmas. During the darkest days of the year, Christmas pierces the darkness with light. One of my favourite parts of Christmas is all the lights. It seems that Christmas lights up the world. Even when we lived in Kuwait you would go to the malls and the stores had put up their lights.

Light was important in the first Christmas. The angels appeared in light and sent the shepherds to Bethlehem to see Jesus. The wise men saw a bright star in the sky and they followed it to where the Saviour was born. It was that light that led the way.

Light and darkness is a major theme in the Bible. In his letters, the Apostle John frequently used the analogy of light and darkness.

He starts his gospel saying;

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

John 8:12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 12:46 "Jesus said, 'I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in me will no longer wander in darkness.'"

Both of these verses talk about walking in darkness. Have you experienced complete darkness? It can be very scary. It makes walking dangerous and you can quickly lose your way and become lost.

1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

The very first command that God gave in creation was, "Let there be light." Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." This morning I want us to think about darkness and light.

1. Seeking the Light – people walking in darkness

The captain of an aircraft carrier was in enemy waters and ordered a total blackout on the ship. He was ensuring the safety of the ship and crew. A patrol plane was returning to the ship and radioed asking for the lights to be turned on, so it could land safely. No answer was given. The pilot radioed again begging for just a single light to be lit so he could find the plane. The radio dispatcher said, "No light will be given" and turned off the radio. The plane went down.

We all need light. While most of us like a few hours of darkness to sleep in we need light to live in. Growing up here in Canada we know that the winters are very long and dark. During the winter months, lots of people suffer from light deprivation, which results in mood swings and depression. We used to call it the February Blahs. The clinical name is Seasonal Affective Disorder or S.A.D. There is only one cure for people suffering from S.A.D. and that is light. They have to set up special light panels in their homes and get heavy doses of light in order to start feeling better. We all need light. We can't survive without it.

All of us know what darkness is like, both physically and spiritually. At one time we were separated from God. Through sin our eyes were blinded to the truth of the Gospel and we walked in darkness. Most of us did not recognize it as darkness because we had nothing else to compare it too. We were used to it. E.g. wearing glasses in the car. That was fine during the day but as the sun set, I could not figure out why I was having such a tough time seeing. It wasn't until I removed my glasses that I understood what had happened. I did not realize how dark it was until I took the "blindness" off my eyes.

2 Cor. 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

John 12:40 He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts

Most of us here understand what darkness is like. Even after coming to Christ, we can have dark days. As Christians we go through dark days of depression, doubt and fear. These are the times we especially need to spend time in the light.

1 John 2:9-11 Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. 10 Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. 11 But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

The problem with darkness is that, if left in it long enough, you go blind and lose the ability to see. A man driving through a mining region noticed a large number of mules in an open field. When he inquired about this unusual sight, he was told that the work animals had been brought up from the dark passages below to preserve their eyesight. Unless they were regularly exposed to the sunlight, they would eventually go blind. E.g. cave fish. Christians also need similar experiences to keep them from losing their spiritual vision. Spending time in worship and prayer helps us keep our eyes focused clearly on the true light. Seeking the light...

2. Seeing the Light – have seen a great light

Seeing the light is not always a pleasant thing. Light is not always well received by those who live in darkness. Have you ever been driving in the dark and had a car come up over a hill with its high beams on? After a long time in darkness, it hurts to come back into light.

John 3:19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Light is also not pleasant in that it makes things visible that had before been hidden. e.g. going into the bathroom in the morning. When the light of Jesus begins to shine on us, it begins to reveal our sin and our dependence on Him. This makes us very uncomfortable.

Have you ever cleaned your living room and thought that it was clean only to have the sun shine in through the window and reveal all the dust that was left behind? Ruth Graham tells of the time that the TV news wanted to interview her and her husband Billy at their home. They got the house all spic and span clean. That is until the TV lights were turned on in their living room. All that Ruth could see was the dust and cobwebs that had been missed.

Light will always expose the dirt. The closer we get to Jesus the more we will have to deal with "hidden sin" in our lives. Little things that we had never noticed before will become a big deal when exposed by the light.

Luke 15:8 Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?

When this woman had lost one of her coins, she formed a plan to get it back. First, she needed light so she lit a lamp. With the illumination of the light, she saw the dirt. When she saw the dirt, she was able to deal with it. It was in dealing with the dirt that she found her coin. Seeking and seeing the light...

3. Sending the Light – a light has dawned

On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. That light is Jesus. He is the Saviour that was born.

Isaiah 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The same light that pierced the skies over Bethlehem with the message of salvation is shining today. Those of us who have experienced that light have a job to do. Like the Shepherds who were told the glorious message of joy and hope, we need to take the Good News into dark places. Jesus has given to us the job of carrying His light into the shadows. We are to reflect the light of the Gospel into every dark corner of this earth.

Rom 10:14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

We are called to be light givers, to shine the light of Jesus to all the world. A young boy about nine years old went with his parents to Europe one summer and visited some great old cathedrals of the past. In each cathedral he saw the massive stained-glass portraits of the disciples and of other saints. Upon return, his Sunday School teacher asked what is a saint?" His mind went back to those massive beautiful stained-glass windows, he said, "A saint is a man the light shines through." Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Matt. 5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Charles Swindoll wrote: When you live in darkness, you not only have no ray of light, you don't even know where home is. That is the way it is for the majority in the world. Some folks are born, raised, and die in cultures that have never seen their first flashlight of hope. Imagine it! When the truth of that hits me, I find myself a little impatient with Christians who do nothing but shine lights for themselves. They even have what we might call flashlight parties where they just shine the light on each other. Lots of light! Too much light to be hoarded! Jesus says to shine for the world. Shine your light into the darkness; that's where it is really needed. Spend less time in your own little well-lighted all Christian world and more time there in the darkness!

A visitor to an electric generating station once asked the chief engineer, 'Where do you store the electricity?' 'We don't store it,' the engineer replied. 'We just make it.' When a light switch is flipped on in a city one hundred miles away, it places a demand on the system; it registers at the generating plant and prompts greater output." Likewise, God has given us the gospel to proclaim. We dare not hide the light of the Gospel under a basket. We cannot keep God's good news and grace in a jar. It cannot be stored; it was not meant to be. It can only be used as it is given and lived out in the world which desperately needs it.

You may be thinking "how can I be a light". All it takes is a willing heart and a desire to reflect the goodness of God in your life.

Bible teacher Keith Brooks had just finished speaking to a large class of businessmen on the Christian's responsibility to be a "light" in the world. After the class, one of the members related to him an experience he had in his home which had impressed upon this same truth. He said that when he went into his basement, he made an interesting discovery. Some potatoes had sprouted in the darkest corner of the room. At first, he couldn't figure out how they had gotten enough light to grow. Then he noticed that the cook had hung a copper kettle from the ceiling near a cellar window. She kept it so brightly polished that it reflected the rays of the sun onto the potatoes. The businessman said to Brooks, "When I saw that, I thought, I may not be a preacher or a teacher with ability to expound Scripture, but at least I can be a copper kettle catching the rays of the Son and reflecting His light to someone in a dark corner."

God can use each one of us to shine his love into a searching heart. All of us are surrounded by people walking in darkness. You can reflect the light of love that changes their lives forever.

A little boy forgot his lines in a Sunday School presentation. His mother was in the front row to prompt him. She gestured and formed the words silently with her lips, but it did not help. Her son's memory was blank. Finally, she leaned forward and whispered the cue, "I am the light of the world." The child beamed and with great feeling and a loud clear voice said, "My mother is the light of the world!" Jesus is the "Light of the world," but He uses us let His light shine in this world so that others may see him.

Let's shine the light by proclaiming the message the angels sang so many years ago. The light of the word is still shining today. The Prince of Peace stands ready to replace darkness with light. There cannot be peace on earth until we have peace within. We cannot have inner peace until we have peace with God. Isaiah understood this truth.

Isaiah 60:1 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. 3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

We live in the day when we are seeing this prophecy come to completion. The Gospel is going out. People all around the earth are coming to salvation. Seeking, seeing and sending the light.

Hab 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.