

“The World Did Not Know Him”

(The Gospel of John, Part 3)

John 1.9-13

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Jesus Christ, Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing: this is the subject of the opening verses of John’s gospel. In the event that might be someone here who has missed what I have said so far or who is not familiar with the majestic, soaring grandeur of these verses, let me go back to verse 1. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The fullness of reason, the totality of wisdom, the divine *Logos*, uniquely with God in a special relationship before the dawn of time, *and indeed also God* – this is who we’re talking about. “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” The earth, the cosmos, the plants and animals and rock formations and coral reefs, every creature on the face of this planet, you and me – *all of us, all of this majestic creation*, came into being through Jesus Christ, *without exception*. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” Jesus, *only Jesus*, truly offers *Life*. Jesus, *only Jesus*, truly is Light. This Life and Light are available to *all people, everywhere*, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or any other human barrier. With that foundation, we turn to verse 9: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

Here is the miracle of Christmas. Jesus existed before his birth, yea, even before his embryo took shape in the womb of his mother Mary. He existed, in the eternal realm, in that uniquely special relationship in which he was both *with* God and *was* God at the same time, but he was not yet known to anyone on earth. “Word of the Father,” we may call him. “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,” as the Nicene Creed refers to him. This Word, this Light, this *God*, was coming into the world, arriving in the realm of time and space as we understand them, through the will of the Father: the mystery of the incarnation. This world already had a sun, *s-u-n*, shining brightly in the sky, a light which illumines everyone; but what happened in the incarnation was that the world gained a Son, *s-o-n*, shining brightly in the lives of people who know him, a Light – *the* Light, the *true* Light, to enlighten *all* people. That little word “true” makes it abundantly clear that all other lights pale in comparison to *this* light, the Light of the World. Even the light of the *s-u-n* is not, and never will be, enough. There is a Light which is truer and richer and brighter than even that, and his name is Jesus Christ: Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing – O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know

him.” Here we come to the *saddest* moment in these opening verses of John’s gospel. John has just told us the amazingly good news that God loved us so much that he *chose to come here*, in the flesh, to this world filled with too much darkness and despair, so that we might all be enlightened by the true Light of the World. But the world did not know him; “did not *recognize* him,” would be another way to translate that. It is a great and sad irony that all of us on the face of this planet were created by God in the image of God and through God incarnate, Christ himself, and yet when God himself appeared on this orb, *many* of us did not recognize him for who he truly was. Matthew tells us that those wise men knew; Luke tells us that those shepherds knew; but the vast multitude of people did not. “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” The Word incarnate came to the Jewish people, God’s chosen people. Of all people anywhere on the planet, *these* people should have recognized him! William Barclay writes: “Jesus came to a land which was peculiarly God’s land and a people who were peculiarly God’s people. He ought, therefore, to have been coming to a nation that would welcome him with open arms; the door should have been wide open for him; he should have been welcomed like a traveler coming home; or, even more, like a king coming to his own – but *he was rejected*. He was received with hate and not with adoration.” You know the story; you know how the gospels unfold; *some* of the Jews choose to follow Jesus, but many do not; many of the religious leaders are especially hard-hearted and resistant to the gospel message; ultimately, one of Jesus’ own hand-picked disciples delivers Jesus into the hands of his opponents, who try him and condemn him and crucify him. “He came to what was his own” – *God’s chosen people!* – “and his own people did not accept him.” That’s an understatement: they didn’t just *not accept* him – they *executed* him!

That was the *saddest* moment in these opening verses in John’s gospel: the true Light had come into the world, shining in the darkness – and people simply didn’t *recognize* Jesus for what he was; others outright opposed him. But here is the *gladdest* moment in these opening verses in John’s gospel: there were some, a few, who *did* recognize him for what he truly was, Light of the World, Word made flesh, God incarnate. We’ll meet some of those people as we make our way through the pages of John’s gospel, people who truly *received* Jesus. Some of them get it right away (like Andrew and Philip, right here in John 1) while for other people there is a gradual process of illumination (like the blind man in John 9). Whether people quickly realize who and what Jesus truly is, or whether it takes them some period of time, the *hope* that Jesus offers is the same: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” This is a crucial sentence, and John is not just talking about the people we will read about in his gospel. He’s talking about *anybody, anywhere*. People can receive Jesus, and the precious gift that he offers, *today*. These verses have a couple *huge* implications for us:

First: *receiving Jesus* means *believing in his name*. These are equivalent and interchangeable. If you *receive Jesus* then you *believe in his name*; if you *believe in his name*, then you *receive Jesus*. What does it mean to “believe in his *name*”? Frederick Dale Bruner suggests that we might render that, “believe in his *reality*.” That he existed; that he really was *and is* the eternal Word of the Father, Light of the World, true God from true God, Lord, Christ, Messiah, and all the other names the New Testament writers ascribe to him. When we are confronted with the New Testament claims about Jesus, we have a choice to make. C. S. Lewis (in *Mere Christianity*) laid this out better than anyone else I know: “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.” It’s not enough to just know things *about* Jesus. You can *know* all sorts of things *about* Jesus and still not *know* Jesus, not *recognize* him for who he truly is. He wants to be *more* than that in your life, more than just an assortment of factual statements that you can give intellectual assent to. This isn’t about our *heads*. It’s about our *hearts*. It’s not *who Jesus is up here* (head) that matters – it’s *who Jesus is down here* (heart). Do you believe he is who he says he is? The Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the Door; the True Vine; the Good Shepherd; the Resurrection and the Life; the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Messiah, Lord, *God*. Either he is or he isn’t. Is he or isn’t he, *for you*?

Second: To all people, everywhere, who receive him, who believe in his name, he gave power to become children of God. Christianity is a religion that truly knows no boundaries. I don’t care where you come from, what language you speak, what sins you have committed in your past, or what secrets you keep buried in a closet: if you’re willing to place your wholehearted trust in Jesus Christ, to accept that he truly is what the New Testament says he is, to truly *believe in his name*, then he is willing to offer you the most incredible gift: you get to become a child of God. “Wait,” someone says, “aren’t I a child of God already?” To an extent, yes, in that you were created by God in the image of God – but John and Paul make it clear that there is a different kind of relationship you can have with God, a deeper and *familial* relationship, that comes through faith and faith alone. You can’t *make* that happen; you can’t *force* your way into that family. There’s nothing you can do to *earn* this. It’s a *gift*, a “heavenly gift,” as John Calvin called it long ago. “For by grace you have been saved by faith,” wrote Paul (Eph. 2:8-9), “and this is not your own doing; this is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” “See what love the Father has given us,” wrote John (1 John 3.1), “that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.” We’re not *born* that kind of children. We don’t become children of God “of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” – that is to say, in Calvin’s words, “not on account of our own nature, nor from our initiative, but because the Lord begat us voluntarily, that is, from spontaneous love.” It is *God* and *God alone* who makes us his children, but he does so through the *power* that Jesus himself gives us when we receive him, when we believe in his name.

Do you see how this works? We hear the truth of the gospel. We get to decide how to respond. Now there may be some forces at work that make it easier for some people and harder for others. Some people’s hearts have truly been hardened. But when enough light shines in a person’s life, when they recognize that he truly *is* the Light of the World and that he comes to offer us Life in all its glorious fullness, when they place their trust in him, believe in his name, truly *receive* him as Lord and God, Jesus gives them power to enter into a beautiful new relationship: sons and daughters of the living God.

There’s a simpler way to put this. You know these words. “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in. O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in; be born to us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!”

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