

“The Light Shines in the Darkness” (John 1:1–18)

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Brian Watson

For the last few weeks, I’ve been going to physical therapy. My right knee has been making popping and clicking sounds, so I’m trying to see if we can fix that through stretching and exercises. (It’s still popping, but that’s another story.) When I go to physical therapy, I make my copay and then get on an exercise bike for five minutes to warm up. It’s not a long time, but riding on an exercise bike can be boring, so I spend time looking at what I can. But since the bike is in a corner of the room, facing a wall, there’s not much to look at. On the wall in front of the bike, there are a couple of posters that show all the bones in the body, including the joints. After studying those posters, I look to the wall on my left, and I see a motivational poster. You know the type: They feature a picture, a noun like “confidence,” or “success,” or “hope.” And then there’s a quote. This poster has a picture of a woman running up the steps of an empty stadium. Below the picture it says, “PERSEVERANCE.” And then below that word is a quote, attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the “Sage of Concord,” Massachusetts. It says, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are small compared to what lies within us.”¹

I suppose that can sound motivational: “Forget about whatever mistakes you’ve made in the past. Don’t be intimidated by the challenges that are before you. They’re nothing compared to what you have inside you, because you have inner strength and determination.” Or something like that. I wanted to learn more about this quote, so I started reading Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance.” As I was getting close to finishing, I realized the quote wasn’t in that essay, so I looked it up online. It turns out that the quote isn’t actually from Emerson. It was written by a man named Henry Haskins.² That is a lesson in itself: Don’t believe everything you read.

But since I thought it was a quote by Emerson, I finished that essay, “Self-Reliance.” And it’s full of similar thoughts. Emerson was a Unitarian minister who became something of a pantheist. He thought some divine spirit permeated everything, and we only had to look within to find the divine. He wrote statements like:

Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke

¹ The poster can be viewed here: <https://sweetsfeet.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/perseverance-poster.png>.

² Quote Investigator, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/01/11/what-lies-within>, accessed December 23, 2016.

not what men, but what *they* thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within.³

The soul is light.⁴

God is here within.⁵

Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Foreworld again.⁶

Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.⁷

Now, it may not seem particularly relevant to quote a man who wrote these statements over 170 years ago. But Emerson's sentiments are often heard today: "Follow your heart.⁸ Be yourself.⁹ Trust yourself.¹⁰ Do whatever makes you happy.¹¹" In fact, those kinds of ideas emerged a bit earlier. Perhaps much earlier. Emerson's thoughts tap into what we often call New Age spirituality, which is itself based on pantheistic eastern religions. These faiths teach us that we are divine, or that there's a spark of divinity, even a light within ourselves. And what we really need to do is get in touch with our true selves to become enlightened. If only we looked deep within, we would find truth, beauty, peace, and salvation.

But the message of Christianity is quite the opposite. The message of Christianity—and the message of Christmas—is that we can't find enlightenment from within. The message of Christmas is that we need to find that light outside of us. In fact, the message of Christmas is that light needs to come from God, and it has come, and it is still shining in a dark world.

To see this, we're going to read the beginning of the Gospel of John. We'll read what is called the prologue, the first eighteen verses. And as we're turning there, I want to point out a couple of things. In this passage, Jesus is called "the Word." And the John mentioned here is

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 175-176.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 191. In a similarly pantheistic vein: "For the sense of the being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed" (*ibid.*, 187).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸ "[O]bey thy heart" (*ibid.*, 199).

⁹ "I must be myself" (*ibid.*, 193).

¹⁰ "Trust thyself" (*ibid.*, 177).

¹¹ "I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me and the heart appoints" (*ibid.*, 193).

John the Baptist, who announced Jesus' coming. We won't spend time talking about him tonight. But I do want to read the whole passage and point out a few things we see in it.

Without further ado, here is John 1:1–18:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.¹²

The first thing I want to point out is that Jesus is called the Word. It's very clear that Jesus is God. John calls him God, he says he made everything, and he is "the only God." In many different ways, John's Gospel says that Jesus is God. But he's also the Word of God. What does that mean?

During the time when Jesus was born, one of the prominent Greek philosophies was called Stoicism. Stoics believed that the Logos, which is the Greek word for "word," was the reason or principle that gave order to the universe. We might think of it as an impersonal intelligence that orders the universe and the glue that holds it all together. John is telling us that Jesus is the intelligence behind the universe and the person who holds it all together (cf. Heb. 1:3).

But calling Jesus the Word means something else: He is the best and clearest expression of God. My words are an expression of me. You could even say that my words are an extension

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

of who I am. In the same way, Jesus is the best expression of God. If you want to know me, you have to listen to my words, and if I am going to know you, you need to listen to my words. If you want to know who God is, you need to know who Jesus is. If you want to hear from God, you need to hear from Jesus, whether it's the words he spoke on earth or the message he gave to his apostles, like John, Paul, and Peter. Jesus continually said things like this, "I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak" (John 12:49). To hear from God, we need an outside Word, a message outside of ourselves, to come to us. I can't find God by searching my own soul or my own mind. Emerson was wrong when he said that Moses wrote what he thought. Or, at the least, Moses didn't write what came to his mind apart from God's working in him. Moses wrote what he received from God. And so did John and other authors of the Bible. But we're not going to write Scripture. So what comes to our minds naturally might not be from God. We need to turn to Jesus, and specifically, to the Bible to hear from him.

The second thing I want to point out is that Jesus is called light. Why is he called light? We're giving away copies of a new book called *Hidden Christmas*, by Tim Keller. He says that light brings life, truth, and beauty.¹³ The sun's light gives us light; without it, life on Earth wouldn't last. And Jesus is the one who gives life. He's not only the Creator, but he's also the Savior. His perfect life and atoning death can give us eternal life with God.

The light of Jesus reveals the truth. It shows us how things really are. If this room were dark, you wouldn't know what it looked like. If a library were dark, you wouldn't know what was on the pages of all the books. If an operating room were dark, the surgeon wouldn't know how to operate. We need to light to see reality and to see the right course of action. Jesus provides that light. He came to tell us what our problem is. He says our works are evil (John 7:7). We do evil because our hearts aren't right (Mark 7:15, 21–23). We are enslaved to the power of sin (John 8:34). We tend to serve created things and not the Creator.

All of that may sound harsh, but I think it lines up with our experience. Emerson and others like him tell us to search within to find peace and light. When I search within, I don't find those things. I don't find peace. I see how my desires are out of joint. I see all the mistakes I've made. I see my failures. I find confusion. I find myself at odds with myself, as if some thoughts

¹³ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth behind the Birth of Christ* (New York: Viking, 2016), 10-12.

are opposed to others, and some feelings are opposed to others. I don't find truth in myself. I need a light outside of myself to illumine my life.

I also need a light outside of my circumstances, because when I look at my life, I don't always see light. I don't always see that things in my life are peaceful or harmonious. Sometimes things don't feel very resolved. There are situations that feel broken, things that I can't fix, let alone control. Sometimes I don't see hope right around the corner. And I realize that I can't fix everything in my life. And no other mere human being can. So I need outside help. I need outside light.

Light also is beautiful. Christmas lights are beautiful. Sunrises and sunsets are beautiful. And the light that is Jesus is beautiful. Because Jesus isn't just the Creator God. He's not just someone who reveals our condition. But he is someone who comes to our aid and fixes our condition. John tells us he is full of grace and truth. We've already talked about truth. But Jesus is full of grace. He is a gift from God. And he gave himself as a gift.

John tells us that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (v. 14). God became man. That's the miracle of Christmas. God became a human being (without ceasing to be God) so he could live the perfect life that we don't live, so that he could show us more clearly what the kingdom of God is like, and so that he could die for our sins, bearing the cost of our wayward hearts and all our evil deeds. And this is a beautiful thing. Jesus came at Christmas to give himself. God the Father gave us his most precious gift.

The question for us is, will we come to the light? Will we step out of the darkness we're hiding in and have Jesus reveal us as we truly are? Will we receive eternal life by coming to Jesus? Will we see his beauty? Will we follow the path that he has lit for us?

In Tim Keller's book on Christmas, he says that this holiday, rightly understood, "is the most unsentimental, realistic way of looking at life."¹⁴ It's not some cute little fairy tale. It's a cold, hard look at the human condition and what is necessary of fix it. And though Jesus is offered as a gift, it's not an easy gift to receive. Keller writes, "Some gifts by their very nature make you swallow your pride."¹⁵ If you receive a book on weight loss tomorrow, the giver of the gift thinks that you have a weight problem. You'll have to swallow your pride to receive it. But if you do, you might get help in losing extra, unwanted pounds. In the same way, to receive Jesus,

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

we must admit we have a problem that we can't fix, and we must humble ourselves to receive him. If we do, we will find light and life, hope and peace, and even joy. But if we are too proud to receive that gift, we will remain in the darkness.