

THE LIGHT OF THE STABLE

On Tuesday, we will celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But, the King of Kings was not born in the warm comfort of a royal palace in a silk covered bed attended by a host of servants. Rather, he was born in a very different setting. It was a cold and dirty stable where His bed was a cattle trough, and His only attendants were the teenage Mary who gave Him birth and her husband, Joseph, who was anything but experienced when it came to delivering new-born babies. And, from this modest beginning, Jesus' early life continued on its humble journey. He was raised in the less than stellar town of Nazareth where he learned the trade of a carpenter. He was never noted as a worldwide traveler. In fact, Jesus never traveled more than 200 miles from the place where He was born. He never had any political power, or stood at the head of a mighty army or achieved any military conquests. Rather, the only army that He led was a small group of twelve disciples and a smattering of other followers, many of whom would flee in fear when Jesus was one day seized by the local authorities and executed on a Roman cross.¹ So, judging by the world's standards, one wouldn't think that such a resume would have made even the tiniest of waves on the ocean of world history.

And yet today, that Roman Empire that enabled His crucifixion is no more, but the power of Jesus Christ has affected millions of people for centuries. More books have been written about Jesus Christ than about any other historical figure. The development of our western democratic governments is credited to the philosophic principals and morality that sprang from the teachings of Christ.² Schools and hospitals throughout the world bear His name. Hundreds of the world's great centers of learning were formed by His followers, including, in this country alone, places like Harvard, Yale and Princeton, and in Great Britain, Oxford University.³ Although they were considered inferior and unworthy in Jesus's day, His ready acceptance of women among His trusted followers has served to elevate the role of women in today's world to a point that would have otherwise been impossible.

This hasn't gone unnoticed even by secular historians. For example, Yale historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, speaks for many when he says: "***Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries... It is from His birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by His name that millions curse and in His name that millions pray.***"⁴

But, what if Jesus had never come into this world? What if He was just like us—and didn't always do what God wanted Him to do and didn't follow through on God's Plan? What if He had refused to lie in that cold manger and later suffer all the disappointments that His disciples would cause when

they were so very slow to learn His ways? What if Jesus had never died as a sacrifice for us? Where would we be then? Well, I think that the answer is quite clear—***we'd be in the dark.***

And yet during the Christmas Season, we can sense people's desire to scatter the darkness. In downtown areas, big events are set where people come to see huge light displays—and the lights on the tall office buildings all flash on at one time. Most people—many of whom are non-Christians—light Christmas trees or have electric candles in their windows at night. Light seems to be a major theme during Christmas—but, today those lights seem to have lost their symbolism. Forgotten is the fact that those lights are supposed to remind us of the Light that Jesus brought into this world. But, for the most part, the world shuns His Light. It has been true from the time Adam bit into that forbidden apple. When he chomped down, it was as if an evil light switch was flicked off by Satan's hand and threw the world into darkness. As it now stands, that darkness remains today and will continue on until Jesus comes again. But next time, it won't be a manger scene. Rather, He will be coming again in the dazzling brightness of His royal white robe, and no one will fail to see His great power and glory. Until then, we will continue see artificial lights shining at Christmas. But, the reality is, if they are shining with anything but the power of Jesus Christ, then they are wholly ineffective in chasing away the darkness.

So, how do we go about defeating this "***darkness***"? Well, you can't defeat something unless you know what it is, so let's define what we are talking about here. What is this "***darkness***"? In the New Testament, the Greek word for darkness is ***skotos***. It means "shadiness" or "obscurity," as where one's vision is hopelessly clouded—so much so that they cannot see properly.⁵ This Greek word is further derived from the word ***skia***. It refers to the kind of darkness found in the hearts of men. More specifically, it refers to the ***darkness of error***.⁶ In other words, if you are in the dark, then you are erroneously pursuing the wrong path. And it isn't merely a wrong path, it is worse than that. It is the deliberate pursuit of humanity in following an evil path. Tim Keller in his book, *Hidden Christmas*, describes it as the path that leads to a world of "untold suffering"—one filled with "violence, injustice, abuse of power, homelessness, refugees fleeing oppression, families ripped apart, and bottomless grief." It is the world that we live in today.⁷

Many people, of course, realize this. They understand that we cannot continue to live in darkness, but they have no idea where to look for the light in order to escape that darkness. And because of that they look for the wrong things to provide the Light. This has been part of the human condition for a very long time. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, was keenly aware of this when he spoke about such people and said: ²¹ They will pass through the land hard-pressed and famished, and it will turn out that when they are hungry, they will be enraged and curse their king and their God as they

face upward.²² Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be driven away into darkness. Isaiah 8:21-22 (NASB) Notice where he says the people are looking to find light. He says that they are “**looking to the earth**” for their source of light, but all they will find is gloom and darkness because the world hates the true light. Jesus knew this all too well when He said: “¹⁹ Men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” John 3:19-20 (NASB)

People’s love of darkness and hatred of the light have not changed one bit, since Isaiah’s time 26 centuries in the past, or since Jesus uttered His words 2,000 years ago. As proof of this, listen to the following comment from the New York Times. It says: “***The meaning of Christmas is that love will triumph and that we will be able to put together a world of unity and peace.***”⁸ Now, on the surface, that might sound good, but there is a serious flaw in that statement. Notice who it says can make things better. Despites Man’s utter failure to bring any lasting “**world unity and peace**” since the beginning of human existence, this New Times article insists that “**WE**” are the ones who can make things better. Supposedly, “**WE**”, acting alone, are the source of the light that will conquer the world’s darkness. What a terribly naïve understanding of what is needed to remedy our darkened state. People holding such views can only remain in darkness because their spiritual eyes remain blind. The reality is that “**WE**”, working alone, cannot achieve anything that provides any lasting good. We—working without Christ in us—are powerless, **lightless** and left totally in the dark. The blind leading the blind will never lead us into the light, but will eventually lead us all over the cliff.

When I was a teenager, there was a young hippy songwriter and performer named Melanie Safka, but she simply went by the stage name of “*Melanie*.” And being an old, latent hippy myself, I still have some of her songs on my flash drive that I occasionally play while driving down the road. One of her hits from way back in 1971 was entitled, “*Ring the Living Bell, Shine the Living Light.*” And it was a song from the heart because its sentiments seemed to be pointed in the right direction. It seemed she understood that something needed to be done about all the darkness that plagues this world. One of the lines from her song simply said: “***I want to sing to help the light descend on the earth today, because it’s gonna get dark tonight—Sing the light, Sing the living light.***” Now, I don’t know anything about Melanie’s personal life or beliefs, but I do know that she was certainly a child of the Woodstock generation. And that generation apparently understood the “*light*” to be mostly comprised of sex, alcohol and drugs. That was the light that her generation cherished. And those people of her and my generation, and all generations since then, who have willingly bathed in these false lights. The reality is

that they have remained firmly lost in the darkness: The darkness of broken families, addictions, alcoholism, unwed mothers, child and spousal abuse and abortions (to name just a few of the products of their darkness). Jesus spoke about such generations. He could see that their eyes never beheld the true *Light*. Jesus commented on their faulty eye sight when He said: “Your eye is a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is good, your whole body is filled with light. ²³ But when your eye is bad, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!” Matthew 6:22-23 (NLT2)

So, what is our attitude as Christians supposed to be toward such overwhelming darkness? Well, we need to remember that—while the darkness of this world certainly puts us in a dangerous place—the darkness isn’t ***overwhelming*** at all. Why?—because it cannot extinguish the ***Light of Jesus Christ***. This has always been true since the very beginning. John’s Gospel teaches us exactly that when it proclaims: ¹ In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He [referring to Christ] existed in the beginning with God. ³ God created everything through Him, and nothing was created except through Him. ⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created, and His life brought ***light to everyone***. ⁵ ***The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.*** John 1:1-5 (NLT2) Who is this *Light* that John speaks of here?

Well, there is another song that I really love this time of year that gives the answer. Only this song isn’t song by Melanie; rather, it’s performed by another latent, old country hippy named Emmylou Harris. And, it only has two short verses that reveal the *True Light*. She sings: ***“Hail, hail to the newborn King, let our voices sing Him our praises. Hail, hail to the guiding Light that brought us tonight to our Savior. / Come now, there it shines so bright to the knowing light of the stable. Lean close to the child so dear, cast aside your fear and the thankful.”***⁹ Now for those of you who might object to calling Emmylou an old hippy—it’s fair because most people don’t realize her backup vocalists on this song were Neil Young and Linda Ronstadt, with a little Dolly Parton mixed in to keep it country. In any event, what a wonderful song this is. It reminds us that Jesus’ birth was the dawning of a ***Great Light***—because His is the only ***Light*** that can truly deliver us from darkness. For Jesus assures us: “I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.” John 12:46 (NASB) You see, the New York Times got it all wrong. ***“We”*** cannot overcome the darkness—century upon century of human history proves that. ***But, Jesus can.*** Like the song says, we need to come to the ***Light of the Stable***—cast away your fears and be thankful for the birth of our Savior—because with Jesus in your heart, the darkness will be lifted and His Light will begin to flood your life with goodness and joy.

And once you have Jesus in your heart, you won't be like those who continue to stumble in darkness any longer. Listen to the words of the Apostle Peter: ⁸ "They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them." ⁹ But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for He called you out of the darkness into His wonderful light." ¹ Peter 2:8-9 (NLT2) Those are reassuring words. But, notice that they are also words that inform us of an obligation on our part. We are called to show others the way out of the darkness.

So, how can we shine the **Light of Christ** in a world that's so dark? How can we begin to enlighten those whose hearts are so hardened against God? One way is this: We can shine the **Light of Christ** by the way that we live our lives. Isaiah understood that with God by our side, we can take on that obligation. He tells us what God Himself declared: "I will lead the blind by a way they do not know, in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will make darkness into light before them and rugged places into plains. These are the things I will do, and I will not leave them undone." Isaiah 42:16 (NASB) God wants us to do the same thing in leading people out of their darkness. Jesus addressed this as well when He explained our roles as light-bearers: ¹⁴ You are the world's light—a city on a hill, glowing in the night for all to see. ¹⁵ Don't hide your light! ¹⁶ Let it shine for all; let your good deeds glow for all to see, so that they will praise your heavenly Father." Matthew 5:14-16 (TLB) Now, let me be clear. Jesus isn't just speaking to missionaries here. He isn't limiting this to seminary professors, or theologians or preachers. This He says to all His followers—every one of us here today is called to be a **light** for Christ.

And you might think that you can't do that. You might think that you wouldn't be able to say all the right things that are required to effectively shine a light for Jesus. But that just isn't the case because sometimes your light shines the brightest when you say nothing at all—when you just let it shine by the way that you live your life in Christ.

For example, take the case of Lee Strobel. You've probably heard about him—maybe you've even read some of His Christian books like the *Case for Christ*, or even the *Case for Christmas*. Lee Strobel is a wonderful speaker and writer for Jesus Christ. But, that was not always the case. As you may know, back in the 1970's Strobel was an award-winning reporter for The Chicago Tribune. Back then, he was anything but a Christian. In fact, he was a hard-core atheist. And you might wonder how you could ever shine God's Light in a way to affect someone like that? As it turns out, a grandmother named Perfecta Delgado shined that Light about as brightly as anyone could have done it. She lived in the ghetto of Chicago's inner city in a small two-bedroom apartment where she was raising her two granddaughters. Lee Strobel was doing a feature story during Christmas about the plight of the inner

city poor and in the course of doing his research, he interviewed Perfecta. And while talking to her, he noticed something different about her. This is how he described it in his news story: ***“But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced He had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.”*** After Strobel’s story appeared in the newspaper, Christmas gifts came pouring into Perfecta and her family from people all over Chicago. It was amazing. And so, Strobel did a follow up interview to see what her reaction was to all of those gifts. And for Strobel, the truly amazing part of the story was what he then found when he spoke to Perfecta again. She explained to him that she just didn’t feel comfortable with the fact that so many had showed kindness to her, but so many of her neighbors really had nothing for Christmas at all. So this is what she did—she gave most of her presents away to those poor in her neighborhood. This was the way that she shined her light. It wasn’t that Lee Strobel converted right after witnessing all this—there would be a while before that occurred. Yet, he never forgot that. It helped him to see the darkness in his own life—compared to the light in Perfecta’s. In time, he became a devoted follower of Christ. And in his 1981 book, *“A Case for Christmas,”* this is what he had to say about Perfecta Delgado and her two granddaughters: ***“They had peace despite poverty, while I had anxiety despite plenty. They knew the joy of generosity, while I only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while I only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual while I was shackled to the shallowness of the material—and something made me long for what they had.”*** They had the ***Light of Christ***, and seeing it, he wanted it as well—that joy, peace and calm that radiates from Jesus’ Light in you. And, that’s one of the most effective ways to shine your light for Jesus—in the way that you treat other people.¹⁰ Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.¹¹

Let me close with the words of the Prophet Isaiah—words that are directed to the Church today. For us, it is a call to continue shining that Light that came down to the stable in Bethlehem, for Isaiah calls us to: ¹ “Arise, my people! Let your light shine for all the nations to see! For the glory of the Lord is streaming from you.” ² Darkness as black as night shall cover all the peoples of the earth, but the glory of the Lord will shine from you. ³ All nations will come to your light; mighty kings will come to see the glory of the Lord upon you.” Isaiah 60:1-3 (TLB) This Christmas carry that light and let it shine from the hilltops in everything that you do. The Christmas carol reminds us that the world is living in a dark and ***silent night***. We need to break the silence and tell the world that a new day is coming soon—the day of His return when Jesus, our Lord and Savior, will scatter the darkness forever.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
December 23, 2018
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¹ <https://www.drivethruhistory.com>.

² Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket, 1961), 428.

³ Quoted in Bill Bright, *Believing God for the Impossible* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1979), 177-8.

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 1. See also: "What Impact Has Jesus Had on the World?" <https://y-jesus.com>.

⁵ σκότος (skotos): James Strong, *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*, (Austin, TX: WORDsearch Corp., 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "4655".

⁶ James Strong, *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*, (Austin, TX: WORDsearch Corp., 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "4639".

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, Viking Press/New York (2016), p. 6.

⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

⁹ *Light of the Stable*, by Emmylou Harris, originally released in 1979 by Warner Bros. Records.

¹⁰ Peter Kennedy, *Preaching Illustrations Vol 1.*, WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 777-778.

¹¹ Matthew 7:12 (NET1) In everything, treat others as you would want them to treat you, for this fulfills the law and the prophets.