
Jesus is the Light of Life

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes, famous phrases take on a life of their own. We print them on greeting cards, hang them on our walls and counted cross-stitch, quote them to each other. Over time, we forget what the original context of the saying was. Take Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world," in John 8. It is such a lovely saying; but as we will see today on *Groundwork*, the original setting of those words was anything but lovely; and in recalling that, we might find new meaning to Jesus as the light of the world. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are, in this program, kicking off a short, three-part series, where we are going to think a little bit about how the image of light gets used in the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Right; and light actually...light imagery...doesn't just occur in the New Testament, but it has been important in the history of the Church, especially in different seasons of the year. So, you think, for example, of Advent, even, leading up to Christmas, when we light candles and talk a lot about light; or immediately after Christmas, there is another season called Epiphany, which is traditionally associated with light.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; technically, the day of Epiphany is January 6th, which is twelve days after Christmas—the twelve days of Christmas. That song actually has some meaning on that; and right, we associate Epiphany...now, the word *epiphany* kind of means a revelation; something that gets revealed or unveiled to you; and in Epiphany we think of two revelations: The appearance of the star to the Magi...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then the appearance of Jesus at the Jordan River to be baptized; and both have a little association with light—the star clearly, but sort of the light of heaven shines upon Jesus, as it were, and the dove descends on Jesus at his baptism; but both are an unveiling...both are a revelation of the new thing God is doing in Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Right; and then, you just think about the life of Jesus, and his earthly ministry—those three years that he spent—the whole kind of content of the early part of the Gospels—his preaching and his teaching and his miracles—just all the wonderful things that he did; how that was a sort of light, too, that was coming into the world; and people...not just Christians...have looked to Jesus as a source of light. So, all of that is involved in Jesus as the light of the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are going to spend this program in John's Gospel, as we said a moment ago, in Jesus' well-known saying: I am the light of the world, in John 8. A very interesting story, and a very interesting context for that well-known saying; but John introduces this theme of light, Dave, right off the bat, in John 1, starting at verse 4:

In him was life, and that life was the light of all people; ⁵the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John (this is John the Baptist). ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning the Light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸Now John himself was not the Light; he came only as a witness to the Light. ⁹But the true Light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

And that, of course, is Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Jesus, exactly, yes; so, one of the interesting things about the Gospel of John, if you are at all familiar with it, is that John has no parables, really. He has several of the miracles that are also told in the other gospels, and some that aren't—seven of them, to be exact, because he loves the number seven...symbolic; but he also has seven sayings of Jesus that begin with the great phrase: I am; so, the I am's of John, in a sense, take the place of the parables from the other gospels.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the more famous ones is in 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."

Now, Dave, I don't know about you, but I think most of us, when we have a famous saying of Jesus like: I am the Good Shepherd; or: I am the light of the world, here, we sort of picture in our imaginations that this is all sort of a stained glass window in a church or the Sunday school illustrations we used to see. People are sitting around Jesus and their eyes are fixed on him, and they are smiling; maybe some people are dabbing tears from their eyes: Oh, I am the light...isn't that beautiful?! We think, boy, that must have been just wonderful; but, particularly in this case, not quite.

DAVE BAST

Well, in fact, in many of the I am sayings, the crowd reaction was anything but reverent and adoring and complimentary to Jesus. Often they were kind of bewildered: What does he mean? Where does he get off saying that? Sometimes they became angry; and in this case, almost immediately his opponents challenged him and said: Where do you get off saying that? What is your evidence for that? You need witnesses; you need testimony in order to make that claim.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is immediately. So, what we just read a minute ago, Dave, was verse 12: I am the light of the world—beautiful; verse 13: The Pharisees challenged him: Here you are appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.

Not exactly an amen or a hallelujah in response to this famous I am saying. Jesus says: I am the light of the world, and the Pharisees stick their tongues out at him, like: You are not.

DAVE BAST

What they challenged him on immediately was the fact that he didn't have enough witnesses to back him up...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Now that...they were appealing to one of the rulings in the Old Testament law, which was actually intended to help a person who was accused of a crime. The law said you have to have at least two or more witnesses who affirm that somebody did something, or was something in order to convict them; so that, you know, a person couldn't just be the victim of the ill will of another individual; but the Pharisees apply this to Jesus' claim to be the light of the world, and they say to him: Well, you need at least two witnesses in order to back that up. Where are your witnesses? Come on, produce them. It is not enough for you to just say this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Along about now, Jesus could use John the Baptist, since he was sent as a witness to the Light, but he has already been taken out of the picture by King Herod; but again, if we had any illusions that people responded to this wonderfully lyric idea that: I am the light of the world, and if you believe in me you won't walk in darkness; you will have the light of life. If we thought that people just kind of got teary-eyed about that...maybe some people did, but the Pharisees sure didn't...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They rolled their eyes; they cannot believe Jesus is saying this about him; and furthermore, they are absolutely quite certain that he is not the light of the world.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, this claim of Jesus actually leads to one of the nastiest confrontations in the whole Gospel story, and John 8 will end with people picking up stones in order to try to kill Jesus. So, we are going to dig into that; and you might think: Wow, you are spoiling this beautiful saying for me, but I think if we really wrestle with all the issues that are raised here, we will come to an even deeper appreciation of what it means for Jesus to be the light of the world. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we just mentioned that our practice usually is to lift this beautiful saying out of its context: I am the light of the world. In fact, we have literally done that in our house. We have it in calligraphy on our dining room wall, framed; that wonderful John 8:12: I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life; but we have already seen that those who first heard it, many of them reacted strongly. They kind of raised their hackles and they resisted it...they opposed it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and their first opposition, as we saw, was that: Well, look; if you are going to make a big claim like that, you need a corroborating witness; you need somebody to back you up; you need two witnesses. So, Jesus then replies to that in verse 17 of John 8: "Well, in your own law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true; ¹⁸so, I am the one who testifies for myself, and my other witness is the Father who sent me." ¹⁹paraphrased And they said, "Well, where is your father? We don't know... and Jesus... Well, of course you don't know me or my Father. If you knew me you would know my Father.

So, Jesus brings in a real ringer here. In other words, he is saying: Well, I do have a second witness to back up what I said. It is God...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is God the Father—my Father; and they say: Your father isn't here; and Jesus says: Well, I know you don't think so; but believe me, the Father is with me. He sent me, and that is my backup. That should be all I need.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, you wonder...are they intentionally misunderstanding him? He says: My Father is my other witness; and they say: What do you mean? We don't see your dad anywhere. No, no, no; I am not talking about *that* father; I am talking about my Father with a capital F, which we can see when we read it on the page, but they didn't quite catch on at first. So, once more Jesus said to them:

²¹"I am going away and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." ²²

This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come'?" ²³But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴I told you that you would die in your sins. If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins." ²⁵

"Who are you?" they asked. "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning," Jesus replied. ²⁶"I have much to say in judgment of you, but he who sent me is trustworthy; and what I have heard from him I tell the world."

So, it actually just gets more confusing and more bewildering here. This conversation is not going well at all...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it went very badly.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Jesus says to them: Look, you don't know God; you don't know me; you are of this world; you are from below, I am from above; you are going to die in judgment. I am just saying the things that God has told me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, let's just admit...and we will be talking about this later, as well...but let's just admit that if you don't believe Jesus is the Son of God, then the things he says here would sound kind of odd. If you heard somebody talking this way at the shopping mall, you might just sort of decide to cross over to the other side, because: I am not of this world; you are from below, I am from above; it is sort of like: Whoa, that is sort of odd talk...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the Pharisees don't get it because they don't believe anything extra about him. Next up, they have an argument about who Jesus' followers were; and then some of the Pharisees say: We are children of Abraham, who are you? Again, Jesus tries to connect the dots that he is the fulfillment of everything God started to promise to Abraham. They are not buying it; then they go for a real doozy. Now we are all the way down to verse 48. This is sort of how this is more or less going to end up.

⁴⁸The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon possessed?" ⁴⁹"I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father; and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰I am not seeking glory for myself, but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death." ⁵²At this, they exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon possessed."

DAVE BAST

So, it has descended into the name calling; and actually, they hurl a racial slur at Jesus, because that is what to them Samaritan meant...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It was just...I mean, we are not going to say in this program, but think of the worst racial slurs in our society, and this was one of them for them. This was the equivalent of calling Jesus that; and then they top that by saying he is filled with the devil! I mean, you cannot imagine...this is Jesus, the best person who ever lived; the Son of God, we believe, who was filled with the fullness of God, and who was the exact image of God, and they say: No, you are the devil; that's what you are!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and again, I think, for all of us or any of us who sort of always picture a somewhat serene, reverent tone around Jesus as people soak in his wonderful teachings, to see this as the original setting of...and actually, not just the setting of...to see all of this as the *response* to what we regard as a beautiful saying: I am the light of the world, and if you come to me you won't ever walk in the darkness again...we've got songs. Lots of songs have come out of John 8 about light and darkness, and some of our favorite hymns probably play with the light-and-darkness image. So, it is hard for us to imagine that Jesus saying such a lovely thing made these people so mad...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so hostile; and then, in the end, made them call him the devil, or possessed by it anyway; that is terrible.

DAVE BAST

You kind of want to just say wow to all this. Where did all of this come from? Why such hostility? As we noted earlier, Scott, we have skipped some of the stuff in this chapter that are just...you know, they brag about Abraham being their father, and Jesus says: Look, don't put your confidence in that...in your ethnicity or your race or your nationality. This is really all about your reaction to me. This is the kind of thing that we see running through this Gospel in particular, but really, all the Gospels; how people respond to Jesus directly is essentially determinative for them; and it is eternally determinative for what happens to them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is, as we know...and readers of John's Gospel know...that the Father/Son imagery is hugely important for John. Now, you get it in all the Gospels, but it is particularly rich in John. We will get it later in John's Gospel, in Jesus' high priestly prayer...all those I am in you and you are in me, and Father, Son, and you know, it goes on and on and on, because Jesus cannot view himself as separate from the Father. Now, we have the doctrine of the Trinity in the Church, and it is like, well, of course he cannot. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have eternally been one God in three persons. They can never think of themselves in isolation from the other two, because that is who God is. So, of course Jesus cannot see himself as separate from the Father. He says: Everything I say, the Father told me to say it; everything I do, the Father told me to do it; that is why he sent me. So, for Jesus, rejection of him is rejection of Israel's very God. And if that is true, these Pharisees are in all the trouble Jesus says...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If it is not true, then Jesus is guilty of blasphemy.

DAVE BAST

Oh, absolutely; which is what they thought; and this is really re-echoing things that have been appearing earlier in this fourth Gospel. So, in Chapter 5, Jesus talks about only doing the works of the Father, that is what I do; and in Chapter 6, he talks about: I have a better witness, even than John the Baptist; the Father is my witness, and the works that I am doing are my witness; I've got those two or three witnesses you quibble about...you know, on the basis of the law. I've got that, but you refuse to see it...you refuse to recognize me; and if you don't recognize me, whoa, you're in trouble. You are going to die in your sins.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And nobody likes to hear that in particular, which is why, as you alluded to earlier, Dave, John 8 ends with people picking up stones. They are going to murder Jesus on the spot. By sort of a miracle...and this has happened a couple of other times in the Gospels...Jesus just kind of slips through their fingers...he just kind of disappears and walks away unharmed, but for his trouble of saying: I am the light of the world, that is what he got; and so...the light of the world...that saying turned out to have a very dark original setting; but as we close the program, in a minute, Dave, we will see that might actually make this more beautiful for us also today; and we will see how that goes. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are focused on this wonderful statement from John Chapter 8 verse 12, where Jesus says: I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

That is what Jesus said, but it kicked off rather a hostile response, and we could call it a vigorous debate, but that would be understating it; it got to the point where there was a lot of hatred and name calling...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then they tried to kill him!

DAVE BAST

Yes; in response to this wonderful statement.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have been reminding ourselves of the original setting of what is such a beautiful statement; does it ruin it? Does it taint this saying for us? I think no; and I think we can see that seeing this context and being reminded of this context deepens the meaning of this for us in three ways that we will be talking about.

DAVE BAST

So, the first way is just to observe that this world is a pretty dark place, and human beings can live in some pretty dark places, and that is why we need the light to come into the world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, exactly.

DAVE BAST

It makes me think, you know, Scott, this whole discussion that we have been kind of following in John 8 of a statement back in John 3, where John says that this is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. It really kind of confronts us, not just the Pharisees back then, but us today. What do we say to Jesus? Do we respond and turn to the light, or do we turn back to darkness because we don't want him to expose the darkness in our own lives? Some of that is what was going on there, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but of course, even if we do embrace Jesus as the light, as you said, Dave, we also still live in a dark world, and that is why we need the light; and you know, there are so many ways in which darkness descends, even on those of us who are faithful followers of Jesus. Our life darkens when dementia starts to rob somebody from us...someone we have loved for so long, and they are kind of fading away; or our lives grow darker when we lose our job just before retirement; we work for thirty years, and then we get fired. Our lives darken in retirement sometimes; we look back and we say: Ach, I worked so hard for them...*forty years*. It doesn't mean a thing to anybody anymore. Marriages fall apart; children and grandchildren struggle; we feel darkness in this world, that is why we need Jesus to be the Light. So, if John 8 was a bit of a dark context, sometimes our lives are, too, and that is exactly when we most need to hear Jesus say: I am your light...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you are still in it.

DAVE BAST

And you won't walk in darkness if you follow me. In him was life, and the life was the light of the world. Light and life go together; so yes, we need that light, we need that life in our own lives, especially in times of darkness. So, that is one great point that we can make from this; and another is, I think, looking at this whole controversy, it is not easy to believe in Jesus, is it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I mean, there are mystifying things here. He says things that they just don't get, or they don't compute; and all this stuff about he and the Father; this is complex stuff, and faith isn't always easy. It is not always easy to understand Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is easy for us to be hard on the Pharisees and the religious leaders in John 8 and say: Ach, why didn't they just see it...believe in him?! But faith is a gift, and if we today do believe Jesus is the light of the world, then use that as another reason to give thanks to God. That means God gave you the gift of grace, that then gave you the gift of faith, and so you can see what others cannot see...another cause for rejoicing. The hardness of heart of the Pharisees shows us what we would be like were it not for God's grace.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there but for the grace of God, as the old saying says. So, just give thanks. I have said this many times and for many years: If you believe in Jesus, don't puff yourself up or take credit. Be thankful; because God has opened your eyes to the light. That is a wonderful thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think weaving in and through Jesus' words here is something else. It doesn't pop right out at you, but when you see this picture of Jesus and the Father working in tandem, and we know the Holy Spirit is there, we are reminded: God has had a plan all along to save us. Jesus didn't appear from out of nowhere. This wasn't just luck or happenstance. The Father and the Son and the Spirit had a plan; and the Father sent the Son into the world and told him what to say and told him what to do and gave him a mission; and the Spirit would then later bring that mission to the world. Salvation is a gift, and Jesus in John 8 is basically saying: The Father and I...and by the way, the Spirit, too...we've got this thing. There is salvation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; as he will say again later in John 14, actually in connection with another one of his I am sayings: I am the way, the truth, and the life. He who has seen me has seen the Father. This is who God is. God is most fully revealed to us in the Person of Jesus Christ—that loving, gracious, wonderful person—and as you said, Scott, this connection between the Father and the Son with the Spirit, in John, that runs through the Gospel, one of the caricatures of the Christian faith that is absolutely false is the idea that Jesus is the nice one who somehow gets in the way and keeps the angry Father from hurting us or judging us...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Whereas, the whole emphasis of the fourth Gospel is that it is the Father who sent the Son. This is what Jesus himself claims: Look, I didn't come to do my own will; I came to do the Father's will. It is *his* will to be gracious; it is *his* will to save; it is *his* will to embrace you; and I am just the agent carrying out that plan.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Jesus is the light of the world, and if we have been given the gift of faith to follow this Jesus, then that means we walk in his light; and there will be no ultimate darkness that can ever put that light out. The light shines in the darkness, John wrote, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue our study of light in the Christian faith by examining scripture passages that teach us what it means for *us* to be people of light. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com and share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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