

We are Christ's Light

DAVE BAST

Jesus famously said: I am the light of the world, but he also said to his followers: *You* are the light of the world. That sounds good, but what exactly does it mean? What do people lights look like? How do they work? Let's talk about that today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and today now we have come to the second in a brief, three-part series of programs that all have to do in one way or another with this image of light. So, in the season of Epiphany of the Church year, it is maybe not as familiar as Advent or Lent, but Epiphany comes between those two things, and it is all about the light of Jesus' appearing in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, in our first program, we spent the program in John Chapter 8, where Jesus said that...the line that you said in the introduction of this program, Dave: I am the light of the world. We took note there that the initial reaction to that wonderful saying was not wonderful. It met with resistance and unbelief, and by the time the conversation was over, people tried to snuff out the light—they literally tried to stone Jesus to death because of the argument that ensued after he said: I am the light of the world. That reminded us that we need Jesus to be the light because the world is so dark; but now, on this program, we are going to say that, well, in part, because once Jesus left this world, he deputized us...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He lit us up to be the light of the world reflecting his light.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is a lesson some of us learned very young. If you ever went to Sunday school, I am sure...I don't know if they still do it nowadays, Scott. I haven't been to Sunday school for kids in a long, long time...but we used to learn how to sing *This Little Light of Mine*...I'm going to let it shine...and so, it is just an idea that should be more than familiar to us; but we want to explore exactly what that might mean, and some of the implications for grownups; and to begin, maybe we should recall a verse very early in the scriptures...all the way back to Genesis Chapter 12...and God's call of Abraham, where he says to him in verse 3:

I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

So, this is really a foundational statement...almost a principle, isn't it, for the people of God, going all the way back to Abraham.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; sometimes we paraphrase that Genesis 12 call of Abram: Blessed to be a blessing—God blesses you, and then you in turn are to be a blessing to the world; but that is where it begins in the Old Testament. The initiative always comes from God’s side. God chooses Abram and Sarai out of a clear blue sky. They frankly don’t look like very promising candidates to do what God says he is going to do, which is build a mighty nation, since they are old senior citizens who couldn’t have kids, even when they were young and vibrant; but that is what he does. It is all from grace, ultimately; and this was the vocation—the calling—of Israel, which they would forget in history. We have seen that in other *Groundwork* series from the Old Testament. They *were* blessed to be a blessing. God says: Look, I’m going to start with you, but eventually the target is the whole world. So, don’t ever just sort of think this salvation thing is going to stop in Israel, it is going to spread—it’s supposed to spread.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and the light imagery also comes in in the Old Testament. You think of a very important verse like Isaiah 49:6, where God has said to his servant: It is too small a thing that you should be my servant just to save Jacob and Israel. I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth. So, in a sense, this is Israel’s vocation—to be a light to the nations—pointing them toward God; but it is also the Messiah’s vocation to be a light to the nations; and it is our vocation, because Paul quotes that later in Acts Chapter 13 when he says to us we are the light of the nations. So, it is a theme that runs throughout scripture, from beginning to end, and it is significant, I think, that we should stop for a moment before we dive totally into this and think about what kind of light we are, and to do that, we might look back at a passage we considered in our first program.

SCOTT HOEZEE

John 1, where John has already told us the light of life is coming into the world, but then, there is good evidence...and I think we have noted this before...there is good evidence that early, early in the early Church there was some confusion, even after Pentecost, there were still groups of people who kind of thought maybe John the Baptist was the Messiah; and the apostles even bumped into people who said: Who is Jesus? We are followers of John. We are the first church of the Messiah—John the Baptist.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, John, by the time he wrote his Gospel, had to kind of interrupt his opening song to say: Oh, by the way; this Light I am singing about...not John the Baptist:

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a *witness* to testify concerning the Light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸John himself was not the Light; he came only as a witness to the Light.

So, that was John the Baptist’s job, to point to Jesus; or we could almost say to *reflect* the light of Jesus, but the source of the light was Jesus.

DAVE BAST

I think that is made clear in another passage later in John, in John 5. Now John the Baptist has been taken off the scene, and it has happened forcibly. Herod, one of the local kings, has imprisoned John; and then he is sort of tricked into executing John, and that is a whole sordid tale for another program, maybe; but people come to Jesus and they are telling him this news, and Jesus, of course, is upset with it; but he responds to them in an interesting way:

³³“You sent messengers to John and he testified to the truth,” Jesus says. ³⁵“He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.”

So, John the evangelist...the Gospel writer...says John was not the Light; he was a witness to the Light. Jesus says: Well, he was kind of a light: He was a burning and shining lamp, because he testified to the truth.

We might say, you know, John wasn't *the Light*. He was *a light*. He wasn't the sun, he was a moon who reflected light and shone it back on Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and you know, that is a nice image, Dave. What is interesting about the ancient world is, of course, nobody in the ancient world, or in Jesus' day, understood where the light of the moon came from, right? Nobody realized that is just the sun that has now dipped below the horizon, but it is still shining on the moon. When the moon shines on you, that is sunlight. It is just bouncing off the moon, and it so bright...the moon, which, since we have been to the moon now, we know now it is just all this gray dust, but it shines bright, bright white, that is how powerful the sun is; and so, John reflected that light, and that is setting up a wider theme in the New Testament about how it is that we are to be the light.

DAVE BAST

Right; this is addressed, I think, beautifully and comprehensibly, by Jesus himself in his Sermon on the Mount. So, if you think about being light...being the light of the world...you inevitably will want to turn to Matthew Chapter 5, and that is exactly what we will do in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second of a short, three-part series thinking about sort of Epiphany, or that is, the appearing or the revelation of Jesus as the light of the world, and the implications that has for us; and Dave, you just mentioned at the close of the last segment, the Sermon on the Mount. So, we have been in John; now we are going to go to Matthew...Matthew Chapter 5, where Jesus uses two images, and we will want to talk a little bit about both: ¹³“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. (And then this): ¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

DAVE BAST

So, what Jesus is really talking about here is how we are to be a blessing in the world. We talked about blessed to be a blessing; that fundamental phrase goes all the way back to Abraham's story, and it is true for us, too. God has done something for us. God has been gracious to us; God has given us this wonderful gift of himself in Jesus Christ. How do we respond to that? Well, we respond by shining—by reflecting the light of Christ—by reflecting his life; and here, Jesus uses two very powerful metaphors or analogies in order to explain what he is getting at: Salt and light. You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. So, let's dig into each of those in turn. Even though this is mostly a program about light, and a series about light, salt has something to say to us, too, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Both images point to the effect we are supposed to have on the world. You cannot be passively following Jesus; you cannot just claim to know Jesus, and then it will make no difference on your surroundings or on your work environment or on your home life. It has got to have an effect; and salt is the first one; and by saying that we are the salt of the earth, Jesus did not mean it the way we do. Sometimes we refer to just sort of good, old, ordinary people...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, good old Joe, he's the salt of the earth...

Dave Bast; He's the salt of the earth...it's an example of how many things have come to us in popular speech from the Bible.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but whatever it means to call old Joe the salt of the earth, that is probably not what Jesus meant. In Jesus' day, salt had a lot...today we only think of salt as just making your food taste better or making your hamburger perk up a little bit, or your French fries; but there were lots and lots of ways...salt was sometimes used ritually in worship services. It could purify; it was almost like an antiseptic agent. It preserved meat. They didn't have refrigerators. The only way to keep meat from spoiling was to salt it down—you get salt pork or you get, you know, whatever it is. You salt it down, it won't go rotten. It was a preserving agent, in other words. Sometimes it was even used as fertilizer to help other things grow.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there were compounds in the earth, we are told, near the Dead Sea; sort of salt compounds that could be used as fertilizer, so probably that might have been in Jesus' mind, I am guessing, since he said "salt of the earth"...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Salt dug out of the earth. The other kinds of salt they get from the sea, you know, as they evaporate sea water.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But all the uses are positive.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and it doesn't take a lot of profound application to kind of put that into terms that we could understand. You know, Scott, every time I go to get my annual physical at the doctors, some time, a few years ago...and I am not quite sure when...this got translated into a wellness exam—that is what they call it now. Maybe it was Medicare...when I started Medicare, but I get an annual wellness exam. All right, well, okay; let's use that word: Wellness agents, that is what we are supposed to be in our lives, in our impact. Like you said, there has got to be some kind of impact. It has got to somehow transform us, otherwise, faith is meaningless. So, there is a warning here, too, that Jesus says: If salt has lost its saltiness...its identity...its effectiveness...then it is good for nothing; then you might as well throw it out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that sounds strange to us today, because if you have a box of kosher salt or iodized salt from Morton or something in your cupboard, well, it cannot lose...salt is salt is salt. How is it going to lose...? But in the ancient world, they didn't have granular salt, they had crystals that they would sometimes grind or whatever, and it was possible, if it got wet or if it just sat on the windowsill too long, that the compounds would leak out, then you would just have some flavorless little stones; and that is what Jesus means: If you don't use the salt, it will go bad. Again, that sounds weird to us, but it is possible; and then, in the Greek, Jesus says: Then it is *morainos* [sic] (m?ranth?) which is foolish—we get our English word *moron* from this, but it means foolish. You don't have to keep it in the house, you just throw it out in the street. May as well get rid of it. Well, don't become foolish, Jesus says. You are supposed to have an effect on the world, and if you don't then you are going to lose your effectiveness, and that is not good for anything. So, you have to have an effect on the world, which leads also then, Dave, to the second image: Light.

DAVE BAST

So, what is the difference between being salt and light? Well, in a sense, Christians aren't supposed to just be active like salt, but visible like light. That is the big thing about light, isn't it? Jesus says you don't light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket, which seems kind of odd to us. Maybe we would say in our

terms: You don't throw the light switch and then somehow put a blanket over the bulb. The whole thing about light is you have to be able to see it. It is like a city set on a hill, Jesus says. Actually, there is a third analogy that he uses for us: We have to be seen; and in fact, there is a bit of an encouragement here, because if you put those two things together, I think the implication is, if we are salt, we will be light. In fact, our friend, Dale Bruner, in his wonderful commentary on Matthew says something like that, doesn't he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Dale Bruner writes in his commentary: If we will be serious Christians (he says), then Jesus promises to take care of our effectiveness. So, in other words, whether we are salt or light, Jesus is...as long as we make ourselves available to God, Jesus will make sure that we are effective.

You know, on this light image, too, Dave, I am reminded of a quote, which I am going to apply in a slightly different way than what C. S. Lewis originally did, but Lewis at one point said: You know, I believe in God for the same reason I believe in the sun that shines up in the sky; not just because I can see the sun, but because by it I can see everything else. God helps me make sense of everything in our lives; and that, I think, we can turn toward us as Christians. We shine, not to call attention to ourselves...we don't want people just to stare at us...we want people to see their lives in the light of Jesus that we are providing. Now they can see the truth—they can see the truth about their sin, but also the greater truth that God is here to forgive your sin. So, we want to illuminate the world so people can see what is what, so they can avoid tripping over things that could hurt them; they won't bump into walls. By our light, people can see their lives better, and hopefully, you know, see the light of Jesus through us and want that in their lives, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, it is a call to action, really; it is a call to influence, and if we don't do it...if we are not salt and light...then what use are we—what good are we? I mean, you think of useless things like snow skis in the desert or a flat spare tire, that is what unsalty Christians are; that is what Christians who hide their light, who throw a blanket over the lamp are; and that is not what Jesus calls us to be. I wonder, can we say anything more about this, other than in these general terms? Can we ask exactly what it is about our lives that we ought to be pursuing? I think we can. We will turn to that next.

Segment 3

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 are focusing now in this final segment on practical ways in which we can be salt and light as followers of Jesus, which he has called us to be...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we said in the first program that one of the things about Jesus as the light of the world is that the world is a dark place...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And it needs that light; and equally, it needs our light. I think of a verse from Paul's letter to the Philippians—Philippians 2:15—where he tells us to shine like stars in the middle of a dark and crooked world. So, in this dark world, so often the darkness is people-caused, we are supposed to be different, aren't we? That is one thing it means. We have to live distinctive lives that shine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, not just to call attention to ourselves, like: Oh, I love being in the spotlight. Look at me. No! We shine for the sake of others, same as Jesus, right? We shine to light up other people's lives. To make their life better, more illuminated, to keep them from tripping over trip hazards that they might miss in the dark. We want to make people's path through life better, and of course, ultimately, we want to lead them to Jesus; and so, you know, the question is, when I think about my life...when I think about how I interact with my coworkers or if I am a student, when I think about how I interact with my fellow students, do I brighten up people's lives with the light of Christ? Do I help them to appreciate life and see things more clearly, or do I darken other people's worlds? You know, there is a very interesting phrase that just started going around recently, Dave. I had never heard it before, but just recently, there is this phrase about throwing shade on someone. If you throw shade on someone, it is usually that you are criticizing them; like, you know, this singer sang a song, but the song critic in the New York Times threw some shade on her by saying her voice was terrible. So, Christians aren't supposed to throw shade; we are supposed to throw light. We aren't supposed to make people feel worse; we are supposed to make them feel better, to come to see their lives in the light of Christ.

DAVE BAST

You know, these verses about salt and light that we quoted and talked about come right after the Beatitudes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And if you want to ask: In what way should we be different from the world around us? In what way should we be throwing light instead of shade, just look at the Beatitudes, you know. Jesus says: Blessed are the merciful...blessed are the peacemakers...I mean, if there is anything in our culture that is distinct about it, it is the hate that flows back and forth, especially on social media. People throw Twitter bombs at each other. People dis one another; and Jesus says: Blessed are the peacemakers. You need to be different. You need to be light in the midst of this crookedness and darkness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But not just different. Secondly, Dave, I think we can point out that as the light of the world, we are not just different...now the bar goes higher...we are supposed to be exemplary...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Set an example, Paul wrote to Timothy. Set an example in speech and life and love, in faith and in purity. So, now we are not just supposed to be different...that is good...but exemplary. We are supposed to be an example of what all people are called by God to be, and they are supposed to look at our lives and say: Well, I want to be like that. And then the question is: Boy, am I such a good example all the time? And my answer, unfortunately, is: Well, alas; no, not always.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I know; I mean, this can be convicting, too, this business of really asking what it means to be the light of the world; but you know that phrase isn't used as much, maybe, in some contexts, *exemplary*, but you think of an exemplary school, for example. Boy, that is the kind of place where you want your kids to be able to go; and there is something of that, too...this attractiveness about our lives. I am wondering how attractive we really are, because we can sometimes muck about, you know, in the mud, with the best of them; and we can throw bombs ourselves. How attractive are our lives, really? Are we judgmental? Are we off-putting? Are we

ensorious toward others; or are we genuinely open and attractive?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It's interesting, the New York Times writer and columnist, Nicholas Kristof, wrote recently something he has noted many, many times. He was at Calvin University last year, as well, speaking at their January series, and I had to a chance to interact with him a bit; but Kristof is sort of a somewhat open-minded seeker. He doesn't claim to be a Christian, but he has said several times: You know, when I look at Christians in North America, a lot of them are just kind of mean; and they are throwing shade on each other, and they are criticizing each other, and they are criticizing non-Christians; but he said: When I leave America and go to Africa, and I go to India, he says: Almost all of the doctors and nurses I run into, working in some of the worst conditions, are Christians, and they are doing it because they are Christians. Their lives are exemplary. They are examples; and if all Christians acted like *those* people, who are just letting their light shine in the darkness of leper colonies, or an Ebola crisis, or in genocide settings, oh, everybody would want to be a Christian.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, you make me think of a Christian I never met, although I did meet his children...but a man named Mehdi Dibaj, who was a pastor in Iran; he was arrested because he converted to Jesus from Islam. He was held in prison for eight years. Eventually, there was an international outcry about the injustice, so the government released him; and shortly thereafter, he was murdered...the crime never solved...undoubtedly by agents of the government...but I heard his testimony on a recording, and this is what he said: Jesus says you are the light of the world. Sometimes the lamp is in the house, and next time in the park; sometimes in the university, and at other times in jail. Wherever they put the lamp, it must shine. So, don't hide your light. Let it shine for all. Let your good gifts glow for all to see, so that they will praise your heavenly Father. What a word, eh? That is what I want to be like.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and what a wonderful word from somebody who *did* get put in jail and was mistreated, and still let his light shine there. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our study of light in the Christian faith by discussing scriptures that teach us how to live in the light in the epiphany of God's grace. Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com. Share what *Groundwork* means to you; suggest topics for future *Groundwork* programs.

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