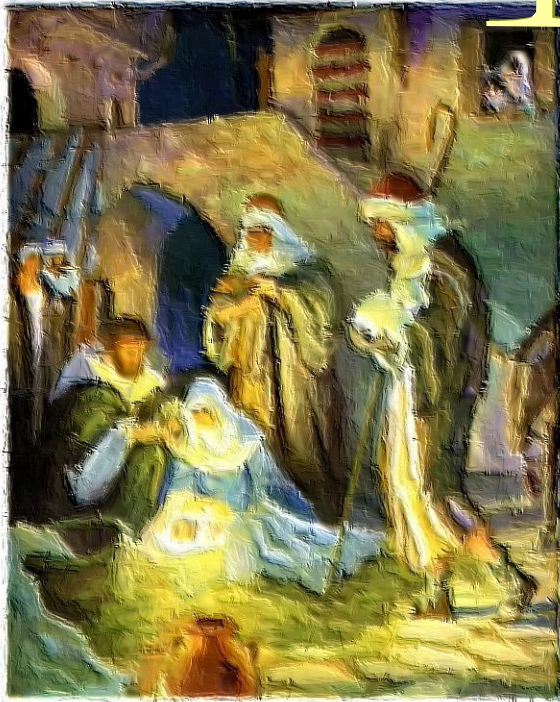


Therefore justice is far from us,
And righteousness does not overtake us;
We hope for light, but behold, darkness,
For brightness, but we walk in gloom.
We grope along the wall like blind men,
We grope like those who have no eyes;
We stumble at midday as in the twilight,
Among those who are vigorous
we are like dead men.

Isaiah 59:9-10

Light



The world had always had its prophets and seers. It had always had its teachers and preachers, those who cared to instruct the ones who knew less. It had long had its priests and holy men, those set apart as knowing more of their gods than mere common man.

Since the time of Hammurabi of Babylon, the world had always had its rules and regulations, its codes of civic behavior to keep its citizens in line. There had always been policemen and soldiers, judges and bailiffs to dole out punishments and rewards. Man had never lacked for structure and laws, and reasons to behave.

Then the one God, Yahweh, sent down from heaven His own code of behavior. So that man would always know His standard of righteousness, God gave His law for them to learn, to carry around with them, to write upon their hands and foreheads, and to seal within their hearts. And He said, "When you sin against me—because you will—you are to come before me with the shed blood of an innocent beast. Then I will forgive, and turn away from your sin."

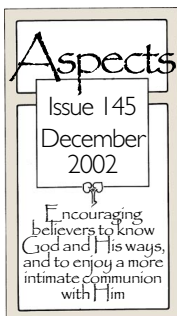
But it wasn't enough. None of it was enough.

Man still went astray, rejecting righteousness for corruption, choosing mammon over God. Man played out his evil because it was easier: it was his way, his bent; it came from within. Even those who tried—the ones called "righteous" by their neighbors—even they stumbled and tripped on their way to goodness and salvation. They still fell short of a standard set far above their heads.

And those who cared to, despaired.

for a

Darkened
World



In the Beginning

INTO THE OVERWHELMING DARKNESS OF A WORLD GONE MAD, God sent His Light. Into a world heavy with evil, political cruelty, and religious oppression God sent the One who would become the brilliant path to salvation, and righteousness.

Long, long before, nearer the beginning of all things, God had answered a similar darkness with destruction. He had saved a tiny remnant, but wiped out all the rest by His watery wrath. Now He would answer the vile turns of man not with destruction, but with a new hope, a way out for all who would believe.

The Light was expected. The scholars had studied the prophets, reading about Messiah's power and majesty, but they had missed the part about His being a "lamb led to slaughter." They had looked to the stars to explain His delay, but they didn't imagine that a star would lead them to a hovel in Bethlehem. They thought He might descend from heaven in a cloud, landing with both feet on the necks of their oppressors. It didn't occur to them that He would come by way of woman, and land in a rude manger.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in

the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. Colossians 1:15-16

That coarse and filthy feeding trough, mounded with the grass food for livestock, cradled in earthly form the Creator of all things. As such, it had been His nature to illumine the darkness with His light. When, in the very beginning, the Godhead created light for the new universe, it was His light that first pierced the dark void. When God called Moses to the bush, He did it with the light of fire, and later, when God led the people of Israel through the wilderness, He did so with a burning pillar of light.

Later, much later, when Christ wanted the attention of Saul of Tarsus, He got it by blinding the man with His own light. And when He came in flesh, to be born of a woman in the dust and muck of the Bethlehem village, His arrival was announced by a piercing light from the heavens, so that all might know the way.

*Break forth, O beauteous heav'nly light,
And usher in the morning;
Ye shepherds, shrink not with affright,
But hear the angel's warning.
This child now weak in infancy,
Our confidence and joy shall be.
The pow'r of Satan breaking,
Our peace eternal making.*

*He comes, a Child, from realms on high,
He comes the heav'ns adoring;
He comes to earth to live and die,
A broken race restoring.
Although the King of kings is He,
He comes in deep humility;
His people to deliver,
And reign in us forever.*
(Johann Rist/Joseph Barlowe)

The Dim Brilliance of Our Own Illumination

JUST AS OUR EYESIGHT WILL EVENTUALLY ADJUST to the dark surroundings in which we find ourselves, so man has gradually become accustomed to the darkness in which he lives. Step from the brilliance of noonday sun into a small darkened room, and the new enclosure seems utterly black. But remain a few moments and, as the eyes adjust, the details of the room emerge. Soon the black has been replaced by a dim light previously unnoticed.

Step from the illuminated interior of a house into the exterior black of night. At first glance there are few stars salting the night sky. But remain a while, standing in the darkness while the eyes adjust to the dim surroundings, and soon the arch overhead is populated by myriad bright lights.

Man has lived so long in the tepid gloom of his habitation that he imagines it to be normal. He imagines the dim, gray light to which he is accustomed to be the pinnacle of brilliance, the best it can be.

And so he is satisfied. He is as satisfied as the complacent frog swimming in a beaker of gradually warmed water, who doesn't notice when his bath becomes sufficiently hot to cook, rather than cleanse, his flesh. He is as satisfied as the blind fish swimming so deep that light does not penetrate the gloom, so eyes are unnecessary. So man has become blinded by his own mediocrity.

...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

2 Corinthians 4:4

Jesus came to replace the false brilliance of man's mediocrity with the true brilliance of His saving light. He came to show the people of His own creation that they needn't settle for the dim tawdriness of

their self-imposed destiny, but could, instead, rise into the light of His salvation. He came to be a shining light to those trapped in darkness.

Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." John 8:12

The darkness of man's surroundings represents the full brilliance of his own light. Jesus came as a blinding white light to a people

Loving Darkness

A TYPICAL YOUNG CHILD WOULD HAPPILY LET his or her diet consist solely of ice cream, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, candy, cookies, and the odd piece of cake or pie. This same child would while away the long hours of each day content with the entertainment of video games, comic books, and garbage television, soaking up the numbing, pedestrian concoction until it leaked out the ears, spilling useless onto the floor.

The typical parents of this typical child would meanwhile be set on convincing the dull-witted offspring otherwise. They would place before the child more substantial, more healthy sustenance, and would point out the benefit of alternate sources of entertainment. The downcast child (staring vacantly into a plate of vegetables) would be convinced that the parent was only out to rob him or her of any joy in life, while the parent would know that their purpose was entirely the opposite.

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them. Isaiah 42:16 niv

The songs of the Christmas season speak glowingly of God sending His "love" in the person of the baby Jesus. But just what does that mean? What sort of love was this, sent down by the Father?

It was the love of a concerned parent whose children were wasting their time in unhealthy pursuits. It was the love of a parent whose children were on the path to ruin, consuming lies of their own invention. The children claimed to be looking for the truth, claimed to be eagerly awaiting the one who would bring with Him their salvation. But really they were perfectly content to wallow in their own constructions of truth, to remain happily ignorant of anything higher than themselves.

God the Father loved them enough to send the truth in the person of His Son. He knew that His children would grumble and complain, that they would even violently reject the truth He sent—but God sent it anyway. He said, "You may turn away from My Son. You may reject My salvation. But I'm sending Him anyway, for those who will see who He is." Jesus explained it this way to Nicodemus:

more accustomed to the dim glow of their own faint illumination. His arrival hurt their eyes. And when man is suddenly confronted with painful brilliance, he covers his eyes and turns away.

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil." John 3:16-19

Man has always loved darkness more than the light. God knew this well; He prefaced the incarnation of His redemptive love by sending first His commandments and laws to show man the inadequacies of obedience outside of grace. He let man stew in his own efforts until the precise moment—when everything was in place.

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Galatians 4:3-5 nkjv

*Light of the world, we hail Thee, flushing the eastern skies;
Never shall darkness veil Thee again from human eyes;
Too long, alas, with-holden, now spread from shore to shore;
Thy light, so glad and golden, shall set on earth no more.*

*Light of the world, illumine this darkened earth of Thine,
Till everything that's human be filled with what's divine;
Till every tongue and nation, from sin's dominion free,
Rise in the new creation which springs from love for Thee.
(John S.B. Monsell)*

The Simplicity of His Coming

SO THERE HE WAS. A BABY. Perhaps the simplicity of His coming was meant to point us toward the simplicity of His proffered salvation. There were no grand processions, no queues of dignitaries waiting to pay homage. There were no brass bands and long-winded speeches proclaiming the importance of the moment. There were no ranks of soldiers arrayed outside, standing guard over this most valuable personage.

There was only a newborn child, suckling from His mother's breast.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:8-11 kjv

Born... Saviour... Christ... Lord...

What an odd combination of words. Saviors are to come riding in on a white stallion, or come crashing through the ranks brandishing blazing lightning bolts. Everyone thought that the Christ—the Messiah—was to arrive with sword flashing, demanding obeisance.

I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,

the ends of the earth your possession.
You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery."
Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear
and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry
and you be destroyed in your way,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.
Psalm 2:7-12

The shepherds may rightly have asked, "Will we find Him in the best house, draped in robes of royal purple? Will we locate His dwelling by the brilliance of His holy fire?"

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.
Luke 2:12 kjv

How utterly odd to a people blinded by their ideas of what a Savior would be. For centuries man had struggled in vain to supply his own mean salvation, and if, he thought, there was to be something or someone external supplying it instead, then surely it would be an event or a person on the grandest scale. But, as it turned out, the Light was carried into a darkened, lost world in the flesh of a small baby, born into humble means to, of all things, a virgin.

The Source

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:45

AS THE GOLDEN DAWN GENTLY ENTERS THE GRAY, fading night of a new day, so Jesus gently entered the dark, fading glories of the world. He came without a shout, without force, and without the trappings of deity. He came as the least among them, a small child, born of a woman, to move without fanfare into the world of His own creation.

Jesus came not as a tyrant, but as an opportunity; He came not to dictate a new way, but to offer it with a loving, outstretched hand.

Jesus didn't come to change everything. He didn't come so that His light would remove all the world's darkness. The world and its people would, for the most part, remain swimming in its emptiness and dark futility. Many would refuse His truth, favoring a truth of

their own; many would refuse His healing light, holding fast to their more familiar darkness.

Light is both a presence and a guide; it is both an illuminated goal, and a help lighting the path. Jesus stands as a strong, piercing beacon on a hill, offering Himself as the ultimate destination for a world gone mad. "Come unto Me," He cries, standing there in all His terrible holiness.

One day Jesus invited John, with his brother, James, and Peter, to accompany Him on a trek up the steeps of Mount Hermon. He offered no explanation for the journey, but, of course, they followed.

Suddenly, the three men were bathed in a blinding, crystalline wash of light. They instinctively shielded their eyes, expecting the moment to pass, thinking it to be a flash of lightning atop the often-stormy summit. But the white light persisted. As their eyes slowly

grew accustomed to it, the disciples peered through the light toward the spot where they had last seen Jesus.

He stood before them, the *source* of the light. John had never seen anything like it before. He sought to explain the phenomenon, but failed. There was no light near Jesus; it was not a reflected light from another source—Jesus' face *was* the light. And His clothing was as white as the light that emanated from his face.

John was struck dumb—as were his companions, Peter and James. They looked at each other, as if to confirm that they weren't asleep and all sharing the same dream. And, somehow, John knew that before them stood Jesus as He truly was: the very Son of God, in all His heavenly splendor. Jesus was giving them the privilege of seeing what others would have to believe on faith alone.

A brilliant cloud enveloped them and out of the cloud a voice commanded: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!"

At this, the three disciples fell prostrate, shaking with fear, knowing that no one could be this close to God and live. John lost all track of time. He had no idea how long they remained with their faces to the ground, but the next thing he knew, Jesus was touching him and the others, kindly telling them to shed their fear and get up.

Jesus also came to illuminate the way. He not only is our best objective, but our helpmeet along the way. It is *His* life we follow, His example we use as our template for living. It is His life that brightens our path, giving us encouragement and hope. His salvation is not just an ultimate destination, but a daily reality. It is the light of His salvation that daily brightens our way, giving the sure and constant hope that we need no longer dwell in this earth's darkness.

Walking in His Light

THERE IS A MOMENT: QUIET, UTTERLY ORDINARY. I walk down the gravel driveway on my way to empty the mailbox of the day's delivery. I may have just left a depressing news report, or images of the day's most recent tragedy. I may have been wallowing in anger or self pity, or have just slammed down the phone on an obnoxious salesman. I may have stepped away from my desk fit to put my fist through the nearest solid object.

But as I walk outside the fresh air stings my face; I look up into a blue sky puffed here and there by white clouds. A slight breeze carries to my senses the aromas of the season—either the fresh life of spring or summer, the musky dryness of autumn, or the crisp cold bite of winter.

In that moment my heart fills to overflowing with the love and grace of God. My chest grows tight, bursting with adoration for my Lord. My mind is suddenly emptied of malice and dark thought, replaced by an overwhelming lightness of being.

You may ask what it means to walk in the light of Christ. It is that moment just described. You may ask how the light of an invisible Savior could possibly make any change in the ordinary life of an earth-bound human being. How? By lifting all of one's senses out of self, and beyond the ordinary: His light lifts our feet up away from the leaden gravity of earth, onto a plane of hope, of glorious anticipation and praise.

The light of Jesus Christ does not remove all the cares and trials that come from living upon this earth, but it recasts them into insignificance. They no longer hold sway over us; they no longer have dominion. Instead, we enjoy the safety and peace of His dominion.

Do you know that peace? Do you walk in the Light?

*I couldn't see the sunshine through the shadows;
I couldn't seem to find a soul to care;
Then in my darkest hour,
You touched me with Your pow'r,
And when I looked
Your light was everywhere.*

*I've never tried to understand a sunrise,
I only know it takes away the dawn;
I can't explain Your healing,
or all the joy I'm feeling;
I only know You've come into my heart.*



*The light of a million mornings filled my heart;
The sound of a million angels sang my song.
The warmth of a love so tender,
Touched my life and suddenly,
The light of a million mornings dawned in me.
(Claire Cloninger)*



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