

# LET THERE BE LIGHT

by Steve Zeisler

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I had an opportunity this year to attend a Giant's spring training baseball game, something I had long wanted to do-watch major-league players in the intimate setting of a small ballpark. We were sitting in the front row, down the left field line, and late in the game one of the California Angels hit a high fly ball over our heads and above the stadium. Then as I watched the ball, the wind caught it and blew it back toward the field. I realized-this was also a first-that a foul ball hit by a major-league player was coming to me. I stood there and managed to get hit in the chest by the ball, which then fell through my hands. It landed on the ground and the quick-fingered kid next to me grabbed it.

I've recounted that story a couple of times, and I've realized that in my mind's eye things have changed. It wasn't just a high fly ball, it was a towering fly ball. It wasn't ordinary wind that blew it back, it was a tricky, swirling wind that made the ball dance as it came down. I didn't get hit in the chest because I couldn't get out of the way, I made a heroic effort to make the play. My memory has been doing everything it could to put me in the best light rather than admit my lack of baseball skill. The desire to manipulate the appearance of things so that we look better than we are, so that we don't have to be revealed for what we are by the awful searchlight of truth, is one that beats in every human heart.

The Greek philosopher Diogenes is sometimes depicted in artwork, where he is shown as an old man carrying a lantern throughout the world, looking for an honest person. Diogenes spent his whole life searching without success.

We're studying an account by another old man who lived centuries ago, John son of Zebedee, the last surviving apostle of Christ. First John is the longest and best-known of three letters he wrote. We began last week with the introduction to the book. Now in 1:5-10, instead of carrying a lamp searching for an honest person, John is carrying a megaphone calling on any who will hear to follow him to the place where honesty can be discovered. He is not a searcher but a guide and a witness. He has found life itself, as he said in the opening verses of the book, and now he wants others to find the life that he has found. Verse 5 says this:

This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

There are two important statements about the nature of God that will gather up almost all of what John wants to say in this letter. The first is this one we just read. The second is, "God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God..." (4:16). These two statements: God is light and God is love, have profound implications. And the order in which they are declared is important. The first announcement is that God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.

John began this letter by saying that he had seen and heard and touched someone. He was a witness to events that had happened decades before. He went from being a witness to being a teacher and a proclaimer, telling others what he had seen and heard, persuading them as to the truth he had learned. And now we hear in verse 5 that he has a message that has been given him from Christ whom he saw and heard and touched. He refers to the responsibility to tell faithfully the things that Jesus taught him about God. He is a "sent one," an apostle, calling to people to go where life can be found.

## Truth and Purity

What then is the authoritative message? God is light. As if to make the statement as emphatic as possible, he

says God is light, and in him is no darkness, no darkness at all.

The metaphor of light and darkness is found in all religions. It is, of course, a biblical metaphor found throughout the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. It is a particularly important metaphor for John, both in his gospel and in his letters. Two things are declared when we say God is light. First, we are saying that God is truth. We discover things to be exactly as they are when the light shines. Distortion and fantasy can thrive in the dark. But when in the light, everything is made plain.

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

The statement that God is light is also a word about purity. The metaphor is used this way by Jesus as well in John 3:19: "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

The Lord God who is at the center of the universe, the creator and the lover of what he has created, the redeemer, the awesome personality from which every other personality has come, is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. But that leaves us with a terrible dilemma: All of us in our sinful humanity can champion either purity or truth, but we cannot hold them together. We cannot stand before the light that is driving out all the darkness without ourselves being driven away.

There are some who will say, "I am committed to telling the truth. I will not cover up what I am. I am a stiff-necked sinner." History attempts at times to make champions of people like Hell's Angels and buccaneers on the high seas who refuse to live by the rules, who never attempt to appear different from what they are—violent and rapacious and drug-addicted, breaking the law and taking the consequences. But the closer we get to them, the more we find that they are not heroes at all but people whose lives are degraded in their own experience and ruinous of others' lives. They can be honest about themselves, "glorying in their shame" (Philippians 3:19), but purity is nowhere to be found.

Ivan Boesky was a businessman in the 1980s who bragged of his love of money and his enthusiasm for greed. Gay parades in modern cities are called 'Gay Freedom Day' parades and very often consist of participants publicly humiliating themselves and championing their sin. Paranoid isolationists who have crawled out from under rocks into the glare most recently because of events in Oklahoma speak boldly of their race hatred and love of violence, glorying in their shame. It is possible to have some commitment to truth, as long as you are also committed to degradation.

The other possibility is to lie and appear righteous. Many of us are good at that. We pretend in church or in other similar settings to be committed to right living with an appearance that is everything it ought to be. But what we are really doing is sacrificing truth in order to appear righteous. We are hiding things that we are ashamed of and attempting to deny things that we don't like about ourselves. So we sacrifice truth in order to appear righteous.

But the problem with John's announcement is that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. His followers must be both completely truthful and genuinely righteous, must be, in fact, like Jesus.

That was the thing that was so fascinating about Jesus to those who met him, and is so fascinating about him still. There was never a freer man than Jesus. He travelled in the company of harlots, moneychangers and Pharisees and tax-gatherers, in the company of fishermen and priests. He didn't adjust himself to their expectations or cover up and pretend. He didn't have various personae that he adopted for the setting he was in. He never lied about anything. And he never sinned either, in order to be free and open and honest and completely himself. All anyone ever saw was love for his Father and integrity in his relationships.

Mature Christians who resemble their Lord in being neither phony nor worldly are attractive, too. Freedom is beautiful.

Let's read on in verses 6-10:

If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Three times John says that we can claim what is not true. Verse 6: If we claim to have fellowship with God yet walk in the darkness, we lie. Verse 8: If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, not just lie to others. Verse 10: If we claim we have not sinned, we make God a liar. We are capable of what God is not capable of. (He is light and in him is no darkness at all.) We can embrace the darkness, fudge the truth, appear one way when we are something else, and manipulate. We can make claims for ourselves that have no basis in reality. But if we are dealing with a God who is both truth and righteousness, we must come back to his banishment of the darkness. We cannot have him if we lie. So John addresses with these three false claims this problem: How can people like we draw near to God as he is?

### **Darkness as a way of life**

In verse 6 the first thing we should note is that John is describing what he calls a walk. "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie...." John isn't saying here that if we occasionally commit a dark deed or think a dark thought, we fall into this category. All of us have sins we fall into daily that we recognize and confess. What he is talking about is a pattern or way of life. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet our life is characterized by and sold out to the darkness, then we are liars.

We have a picture of my wife-not one of her favorites-which was taken on a family vacation on a river raft trip. We were floating down the American River, and as we came to a rapid where professional photographers were set-up, we hit a rock. The picture caught her looking fairly aghast, four feet above the edge of the boat. It turned out that she ended up in the water, and we faced a very frightening few moments. But the snapshot leaves you with a question. The person up in the air could have ended up back in the boat or in the water. We don't know from the snapshot whether she is an in-the-boat person or an in-the-water person.

That is really the point that John is raising when he speaks of our walk. On many occasions in our lives, if you just took a snapshot, you couldn't tell if we were godly or ungodly-we're up in the air. You would have to watch the whole video, the whole course of someone's life to determine that they were defending sin instead of resisting it. Thus, if a person claims fellowship with God yet walks in darkness as a pattern of life he is lying.

The marvelous alternative that we will encounter twice in this section follows in verse 7: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." The only way that we can tell the truth as righteous people is to be cleansed people. The blood of Jesus, God's Son, genuinely cleanses us from the things about ourselves that we hate and would cover up, from efforts to manage our sin problem and to hide the lustful thoughts, the angry deeds, the self-serving way that we treat people. These things can be cleansed so that we can tell the truth and at the same time stand with our heads held high, with the righteousness of Christ. We then have fellowship not only with God but with each other.

You have probably been in Christian meetings or gatherings of friends that consisted mostly of people's manipulating the impression they were leaving with everyone else in the circle-saying the right things in a stilted way and avoiding certain subjects of conversation because those would be difficult, with a sort of unspoken agreement that nothing real would happen there and that they would do it again next week in just the same way. But in other groups people are able to say, "I'm hurting, I'm thrilled, I'm scared, I'm sick, or there are things about me that I've got to tell you that I hate to admit." Here real fellowship takes place between

people because real fellowship is taking place with God. Fellowship goes along with being cleansed-men and women unafraid to be who they are because the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses and purifies them from all unrighteousness.

### **Defining sin out of existence**

Verse 8 raises the second way in which we would manage sin, attempt to gain control over it, fix it ourselves, and lie in the process. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Here the claim is that we have no sin, that we have moved beyond the sin nature that entraps other people and perhaps used to entrap us; or on some level we disclaim the problem, defining it out of existence. John was writing to a church that was beset by an ancient heresy called gnosticism. It is a modern phenomenon as well. In this century and in our decade, groups like Christian Science and various forms of the New Age movement try to say that there are spiritual techniques that you can learn, spiritual depths that you can plumb, enlightenment that you can gain, or barriers that you can break; something that will move you out of the ordinary. Even though your body and your temporal self might still have problems, the essential you soars above it all, therefore you no longer sin.

But verse 8 says that is a great lie. It is foolish to deceive ourselves, to insist what everyone else can see is not true (like the emperor who wore no clothes). We hold ourselves back from experiencing real life in order to sustain self-deception.

It is not just spiritual language that attempts this. Arguments from biology will sometimes say, in effect, "I have no sin because no such category exists. We're all just animals, after all, and I'm a product of my chemicals, my genes and my environment. I just do what I'm programmed to do. We're all of us Darwinian survivalists, and everyone is just making choices that will improve their standing. There is no such thing as right and wrong, because we're not moral agents. Animals don't sin, they are not responsible." This thinking is another way to make the claim of verse 8, "I have no sin." Yet, we are moral agents; we are made in the image of God. Our choices have significance, and they are going to last forever.

Finally, the most common way we attempt to define sin out of existence is by claiming that we are not sinners but sufferers or victims. "My dysfunctional upbringing and my abusive relationships and the abandonment I suffered at a tender age have conspired together to ruin me, and it's not my fault. It's everybody else's fault and I'm a victim of their sin. I don't own responsibility for the choices I make."

It turns out that all three of these categories-the spiritual explanation that would move us to a higher plane, the biological explanation that would say everything is the result of physical determinism, and the psychological explanation that says it is someone else's fault, not ours-have a grain of truth in them. None of them are completely wrong. But any of them believed to the point of saying we have no sin is a lie. Each of us bears responsibilities for choices that have offended God and man and creation itself. We have to stop lying to ourselves.

John says again, marvelously so, that we can hold truth and righteousness together. How can it be done? We can be cleansed. Verse 9: "If we confess our sins, [God himself] is faithful and just [unchanging] and will forgive us our sins and purify [cleanse] us from all unrighteousness." We don't have to lie to ourselves any more than we have to lie to other people. We can be like Christ because the blood of Jesus truly cleanses us.

### **"I make the rules"**

The last statement attempting to make things go away by our efforts, to change what is true, is the worst. In this case blasphemy is the result. We would say God is a liar rather than receive in ourselves the awful truth that we are sinners. This person is the one who says in effect, "I don't care what God has written or said. I don't care what God thinks. He is only my equal if not my subordinate, and I'm going to run my life as I choose. I make the rules. I will do as I please, and because I please, it is right. If other people want to subordinate themselves to him, that's their right, but I don't. And what I like is what is true and ethical. God, pointing his finger at me and telling me I'm a sinner, is a liar. I'm running my universe, he can run his." That is blasphemy.

When our kids were little I remember once driving along and having a debate about the definition of litter. Sometime later I threw an apple core on the ground. Then the question came up: "Dad, what's going on here? You gave us a lecture about littering!" I replied, "That's actually not littering because it's biodegradable. Apple cores are different from plastic and other materials that don't degrade." But then they said, "Dad, there was a piece of napkin attached to the apple core." A long discussion ensued in which I attempted a sophisticated version of, "Do as I say, not as I do. Rules apply to you, not to me." The mentality that says, "Do as I say and not as I do" is very close to saying, "I'm God in my universe." But as we have just seen, we call God a liar in saying that. He has the right to tell us what to do. We don't have the right to run things ourselves. We are made by him and for him, and we have no business blaspheming our Maker this way.

### **The blood of Jesus cleanses us**

The possibility exists that we can have fellowship with God-real intimacy with him, not just formal relationship-and fellowship with each other of the best, most attractive, and most life-giving kind; and that we can walk in the light without having to cover up and lie, without having to champion our sin. We can be really forgiven and cleansed and truthful, stopping the self-deception and the deception of others and the blasphemy of God. Those possibilities all exist for us because the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from our sins.

Or in the face of all that possibility, we can choose to be liars. Every one of us are instinctively drawn to lies, aren't we? We would much rather cover something up than be free of it. We would much rather have people think what we want them to think of us than to have them know us well and see our need for the cleansing blood of Christ.

I want to leave you, and myself, with a challenge. If you let God bring it to mind, there is one thing about which you are most tempted to lie, some area of your life that you don't want to look at, or acknowledge in the presence of anyone else. I am the same. The challenge is, why not prefer freedom? Why not let the work that Jesus did on the cross for us honestly cleanse that thought, habit, or history, so that we discover the kind of enthusiasm for life that Jesus had? He was never afraid that anyone was going to find out anything about him. There was nothing to discover that would discredit him. There weren't people that he was unwilling to be around. There was nothing but vitality about him because there was nothing hidden and nothing stained about him. That is the option we have as well.

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