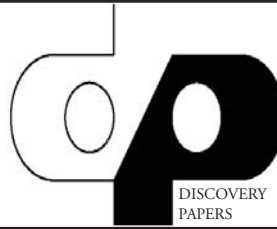




## THE NEXT STEP



Catalog No. 20140105  
John 8:12-30  
20th Message  
Scott Grant  
January 5, 2014

Al Andrews, who now directs a ministry to recording artists, writes of meeting a woman on a blind date in his mid-thirties:

*I was captivated with this woman. As hard as I tried, I couldn't find something wrong with her, something that would give me an excuse to run away. One evening during that first visit (which lasted several days), I awoke suddenly in the middle of the night. My heart was racing and I was covered in sweat. With the panic came a familiar feeling of dread. "I'm making a big mistake," I thought. "What if she's not the right one? I need to get out of here." I'd had these kinds of thoughts before, and eventually felt this panic in every other relationship I'd had with a woman. Each time, the feeling led to my withdrawal. I had assumed that they were an indication that something was wrong with the relationship. They were warning signs to be heeded. But the feeling had never appeared only two days into a relationship. This was too soon! If I'd had access to a car that night, I might have tried to escape to the airport. Without one, I decided instead to pray.<sup>1</sup>*

Like Al Andrews, have you ever felt paralyzed with fear? Do you now feel paralyzed by fear? Is there something that you feel you should do, something you want to do? Is something holding you back? Can something—or can someone—get us off the dime?

In John 8:12, Jesus speaks to a crowd in Jerusalem. He also speaks to us.

### Israel is the light

John 8:12—

**Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."**

Who is the light of the world? Go back to the prophet Isaiah, who says that the Servant of the Lord is "a light for the nations" (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). But who is the Servant of the Lord? Isaiah tells us: the Servant of the Lord is Israel,

God's people (Isaiah 41:8, 43:10).

What did it mean for Israel to be the light of the world? Again, go back to Isaiah. It's as if the whole world can't see the truth that the God of Israel is the Creator God who redeems what he has created. Thus, so to speak, the nations are blind; thus they dwell in a dungeon of darkness, imprisoned by sin, locked away from the saving love of God. There was hope for the nations, though, and that hope was Israel. The Lord made a covenant, or partnership, with Israel in order to bring his love to the world. As the light of the world, Israel was to "open the eyes that are blind" and "bring out from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:7). Another way of putting it is that the Lord made Israel, as the light of the world, for the purpose of bringing his "salvation . . . to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

What happened? Isaiah could see what had happened, and what was happening. The Lord, speaking of Israel through Isaiah, said, "Who is blind but my servant . . . ?" (Isaiah 42:19). Israel, commissioned to open blind eyes, had itself become blind. The apostle Paul accused hypocritical Jews who deemed themselves "a guide to the blind" and a "light to those who are in darkness" of forsaking both the Lord and their vocation. Therefore, God's name, instead of being exalted because of the Jews, was "blasphemed among the Gentiles" because of them (Romans 2:17-24). The light became part of the darkness. The solution to the problem became part of the problem.

Proud of their possession of God's law, proud of their status as God's people, the Israelites turned inward. Think of Israel as a lighthouse, with mirrors positioned to flood the world with light. Instead, Israel repositioned the mirrors, so to speak, turning the them inward, keeping the light to themselves.

### Jesus is the light

Now Jesus comes along and claims to be the light of the world. What Israel was supposed to be, Jesus is. Jesus, all by himself, is the new Israel. He takes onto himself the vocation of Israel to be the light of the world. Thus, Isaiah, realizing Israel's failure, could anticipate the day when "the

people who walked in darkness” would see “a great light” (Isaiah 9:2), and Matthew, with the advent of Jesus, could say that that day had arrived (Matthew 4:16).

What, then, does Jesus do as the light of the world? What does light do? Light is revelatory. Light, quite simply, enables you to see. That’s what Jesus does: he enables you to see. Because of his light, you can see reality: the reality of who God is, the reality of the world as it really is—not, of course, with your eyes, but with your mind, with your heart. Jesus, as John has already noted, “gives light to everyone” in that he enables everyone who is exposed to his light to see—as long as they want to see, that is (John 1:9).

Jesus is the light of the world by virtue of what he says, speaking the truth, and by virtue what he does, for if you say one thing and do another, you cast doubt on the words you speak. Paul said that Israelites’ hypocrisy invalidated their claim to be “a guide to the blind” and a “light to those who are in darkness.”

What does Jesus do? Supremely, he goes to the cross, showing us the reality of the world as it really is (desperately needy) and the reality of God as he really is (desperately loving). On the cross, Jesus “emptied himself”: he “poured out his soul to death” (Philippians 2:7, Isaiah 53:12). Jesus pours himself out for us until the last drop of blood. Jesus is the light of the world: he speaks the truth and embodies the truth. What is the truth? The truth is that we are desperately needy: we need God’s Son to be crucified. The truth is that God is desperately loving: God’s Son is crucified.

### Can you see?

Many of us don’t like being told we’re needy, for to be needy is to be dependent on someone to meet that need. We don’t like being dependent; we prize being independent. For if you acknowledge that you are dependent on someone to meet your need, you’re granting that person some say in what you do with your life. Billy Joel depicts our resistance to granting others such access in his song “My Life”:

*I don't need you to worry for me cause I'm all right  
I don't want you to tell me it's time to come home  
I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life  
Go ahead with your own life and leave me alone.*

Our preference for independence is understandable. After all, not everyone can be trusted. Is there anyone who can be trusted all the time in every circumstance to know the truth, speak the truth, and act with our best intentions

in mind? Well, yes, there is. His name is Jesus, and he is the light of the world. The truth is that we are needy. At the very least, even the most independent among us can’t keep ourselves from dying. After we die, then what? Then, for sure, we will need Jesus. Jesus tells us the truth, even if it hurts us, and in case we question his motives, he goes to the cross, even if it hurts him.

Can you see? Can you see that you’re desperately needy? Can you see that God is desperately loving? Can you see that Jesus loves you enough to tell you of your need, that he loves you enough to meet your need? If so, do you think you can trust him as you take the next step, whatever it is?

### What we need, when we need it

We walk—we live—in a dark world. You don’t know what’s ahead. We do not see how things will turn out. That doesn’t prevent many of us from hoping that we can guarantee a positive outcome if we just think and plan enough. Forethought, though, rarely mitigates against the possibility of disaster. This we know instinctively, and this is why many of us are anxious much of the time. Remember Al Andrews? He awoke suddenly in the middle of the night, heart racing, covered in sweat, over the prospect of moving forward with a woman he enjoyed:

*I asked God to remove the anxiety. He didn't. I asked him to give me a sign. He remained silent. The panic continued into the night. It was an anguishing and frightening time. After a time of waiting and wrestling, something very new came out of me. "These feelings are inaccurate!" I yelled. "I'm thirty-four years old and sick of running from women. I'm lonely, because my panic always wins. I like her, and I'm not leaving this time! I was in a battle and I knew it. I also knew that the fight I was having was bigger than this relationship. It involved something more. It involved my stubbornness, my fear to move, my lack of willingness to take a risk, my tendency to flee from passion."<sup>2</sup>*

No matter what we do, we can’t dispel the darkness off in the distance. Yet Jesus says if we follow him, we will “not walk in darkness.” How can that be? If he is the light, and if we who follow him “have the light,” then the light will be with us wherever we go in this dark world. We can’t see ahead, but we have the light with us as we move ahead. If we have the light with us as we walk, we see what we need to see (not more than we need to see) when we need to see it (not before we need to see it).

Therefore, instead of trusting in a specific outcome, we

have to—we get to!—trust in Jesus. We're on a journey of discovery. Who knows what we'll see next? Who knows where we'll end up? Thrilling? Absolutely. Terrifying? Perhaps. In any event, we get to trust Jesus each step of the way, which means we get to be with Jesus each step of the way. We "have the light" with us. If we have Jesus, we have what we need. We have who we need.

The answer to Billy Joel's "My Life" is Louisa M.R. Stead's "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus":

*'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,  
Just to take Him at His Word;  
Just to rest upon His promise,  
And to know, "Thus saith the Lord!"*

*Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him!  
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er;  
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!  
Oh, for grace to trust Him more!*

## Unpredictably great

If you follow Jesus, you will not only have the light, you will also have "the light of life"—that is, the light that produces life. As the light, Jesus leads us into life: into everything that the Father has for us. We don't know the future. It's unpredictable. But if Jesus leads us into life, that means the future will be great. For those who follow Jesus and therefore have the light of life, the future is unpredictably great.

That doesn't mean that it won't be hard. That doesn't mean that you won't get cancer. That doesn't mean that the one you love the most won't suffer horribly. That doesn't mean that your most cherished hopes won't go up in flames. It does mean that wherever your path takes you, you will experience "life"; and remember how Jesus defines life: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). You'll experience something of Jesus, something of the Father. And, having Jesus, you'll have the light you need for the next step. He may not tell you what that next step is, but you'll have light enough to take it.

Yes, Jesus is the light of the world, but some people prefer the darkness. It was true in Jesus' day; it's also true in our day.

## In the dark

John 8:13-30—

**So the Pharisees said to him, "You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true." <sup>14</sup>Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. <sup>15</sup>You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. <sup>16</sup>Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. <sup>17</sup>In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. <sup>18</sup>I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me." <sup>19</sup>They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." <sup>20</sup>These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.**

**<sup>21</sup>So he said to them again, "I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." <sup>22</sup>So the Jews said, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come?'" <sup>23</sup>He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. <sup>24</sup>I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins." <sup>25</sup>So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. <sup>26</sup>I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." <sup>27</sup>They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. <sup>28</sup>So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. <sup>29</sup>And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him." <sup>30</sup>As he was saying these things, many believed in him.**

Not surprisingly, the Pharisees, who constituted a Jewish religious-political party, challenge Jesus' claim to be the light of the world. Jesus responds not only that his testimony is true but also that it is to be believed on the basis of his relationship with the Father. His opponents, therefore, have every reason to believe that he is the light of the world. However, their response to him in John



8:12-30 demonstrates that they are in the dark.

Jesus' opponents can't see that his testimony is true (verse 13). They don't know where Jesus came from or where he is going (verse 14). When Jesus claims that the Father bears witness about him, his opponents don't understand that he's talking about God (verse 19). They neither know Jesus nor Jesus' Father (verse 19). When Jesus says, "Where I am going, you cannot come," his opponents question whether Jesus intends on killing himself (verse 22). On the contrary, he will not kill himself; they will kill him, lifting up the Son of Man on a cross (verse 28). Jesus has been speaking to them about himself, but they still ask him, "Who are you?" (verse 25). Jesus says that "he who sent me is true," but his opponents don't understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father (verse 27).

Jesus' opponents are in the dark. The light is right in front of them, speaking to them, prodding them, helping them, but they can't see. They are too entrenched, too set in their ways, too resistant to anything that doesn't fit into their worldview. They can't see the light because they're blinded by their own agenda. They don't have the light of life. They will not follow Jesus to the Father. They will not take the next step, which for them would be the first step.

What of the many who are said to believe in Jesus? Whatever it is they believe will be put to the test when Jesus speaks directly to them in John 8:31-59.

## Too entrenched

Many in our world are like the Pharisees: they're too entrenched, too set in their ways, too resistant to anything that doesn't fit into their worldview. They're blinded by their own agendas, their own ambitions, their own visions for their lives and for the world. They have questions, but they assume that the answers discredit faith in Jesus: How can Jesus be the only way? How can a good God send people to hell? What about all the suffering in the world? What about people who have never heard of Jesus? What about gay people? What about all the hypocrites in the church?

What about giving Jesus a hearing? Like the Pharisees, many today ask questions, but they do so to push back against faith in Jesus. They're walking in darkness, without the light. They cannot see that Jesus is the light of the world. They will not take the next step, which for them would be the first step.

Without the light, our world is morally adrift. How do you know what's right and wrong? Increasingly, people

in our part of the world rely almost solely on what they feel to determine right from wrong (as if there are such things as right and wrong apart from a divine being who is above all!).

We who endeavor to follow Jesus have no reason to be smug, however, for we too can crowd out the light with our own agendas. There have been times when I thought I was completely right about something only to discover, sometime later, that I was completely wrong. Moreover, who among us hasn't allowed the "if-it-feels-right-do-it" ethos to crowd out the light? When we become smug, we become part of the darkness.

We need to hear—all of us!—the words of Jesus again: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Can we see the light, even those of us who are lost in the darkness?

Consider the story of Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee. After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Saul persecuted followers of Jesus. The light appeared to the Pharisees in John 8, but they could not see it; the light appeared, quite literally, to Saul, and he was blinded: "Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'" Like the Pharisees in John 6, Saul asked about the identity of the speaker: "Who are you, Lord?" The voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." By the time Saul rose from the ground, he could no longer see. He was blinded by the light. His blindness mirrored his spiritual condition: he had been walking in darkness, "breathing threats and murder against disciples of the Lord." By the time Ananias laid hands on him three days later, however, Saul believed in the one he had been persecuting. Something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight, though after his blinding encounter with the light, everything would look different. Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle. He took the next step, which for him was the first step. He followed Jesus. He had the light of life (Acts 9:1-19).

## Thrilling and frightening

What happened to Al Andrews? Instead of running, he prayed. He also confessed. He also moved toward the relationship that both thrilled and frightened him:

*My panic, though significant and strong, was never my final reality. The fears were a convenient excuse I used in order to keep me from moving. I was attracted to Nita, and I had enjoyed the weekend. I*

*was intrigued with her and wanted to pursue her. I didn't want to retreat because of an unexplained fear that was more useful than true. That night I prayed a different prayer. I confessed my own cowardice and the harm I had done to others because of it. I prayed that I would fight well against my desire to retreat and that I would love. I went to sleep, awaking the next morning with a new commitment. Six months later Nita and I were engaged, and in a year we were married. . . . The choice was to move in spite of fear, proceeding into the chaotic, thrilling, risky darkness of relationships.<sup>3</sup>*

Andrews' story, when I first came upon it, encouraged me when I too found myself in a relationship that both thrilled and frightened me, some fourteen years ago. Like Andrews, and inspired by Andrews, I determined not to run. Instead, I prayed, and I prayed a lot. The Lord did not take away the fear, but he showed me, with each step, what I needed to see when I needed to see it. Six months after our first date, Karen and I were engaged, and in a year, we were married.

It's dark out there, but we have the light of life. Is there a step you need to take into the darkness, trusting that Jesus will give you the light you need? Is there something to be done that frightens you but also thrills you? You don't know what will happen if you take this step. The outcome is not guaranteed. Is it relational, as it was for Al Andrews, having to do with moving toward someone or some group? Is it vocational, having to do with work or school? Is it missional, having to do with sharing the love of Jesus in word or deed? Don't concern yourself with the next ten steps; that won't get you anywhere. There's almost always a step to take. We walk with Jesus, and walking requires steps: one step at a time. What is that step for you?

For some, the next step is the same one that Saul of Tarsus took so many years ago. It's the step of faith, believing that Jesus is the light of the world; it's the first step in a walk with him. Is that the step you need to take?

Yes, it's dark out there, but Jesus is the light of the world. Step into the darkness; trusting Jesus will show you what you need to see when you need to see it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 178-79.

<sup>2</sup>Crabb, 178-79.

<sup>3</sup>Crabb, 178-79.