

John 1:4-9 The Light of the World

Introduction

Have you ever tried driving a car outside of an area with street lights at night –without any lights on? This is of course not something to try on a public road! Or maybe you have been camping and found that the batteries in your torch or torches have gone flat –so you end up fumbling about in the dark trying to find things. Maybe you have experienced this sensation at home when a light bulb has blown and the trip switch has put the other lights off for ‘health and safety reasons’. It’s not difficult to put it back on, but it might mean a bit of a walk if you are in the dark in another part of the house and might include tripping over some things that someone has left lying around on the floor where they ought not to be! No-one disputes that light is essential, though we take it for granted most of the time. In more recent years power-cuts have been largely absent, but some of us can remember back to years when they were a more common experience and we had to fumble around to find the candles to get some light and to find alternative means of cooking or heating one’s home if they occurred in the winter. In our world we depend on the light of the Sun to provide the balance of heat and cold for life to exist as we know it on planet Earth and of course the ozone layer to filter out much of the harmful radiation that potentially reduces the quality of life we experience. Light brings energy into our environment and ensures that we can have a high quality existence in the years God grants to us. After the initial creation of the Universe and our local galaxy Genesis records some interesting words about our planet prior to the arrival of the light. Genesis 1:2 states: *Now the earth was **formless and empty**, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.* However, the focus of John chapter One was not the natural world and its need for physical light, but the spiritual world also requires illumination from God to enable the people He has created in His image to live the kind of lives He intends us to live. This light and life supremely came to us through Jesus as John 1:4 declares: *In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.* Have you come to His light? Have you put your faith and trust in the One who said of Himself 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.* Have you received it?

1.The Characteristics of the Light

(a)**Light is Pure** It is so pure that evil cannot stain it, nor impurity defile it. It can pass through various kinds of atmospheres without being tainted; under all reasonable circumstances it cannot be diverted from its course. Surely this is an appropriate description of the Lord Jesus Christ and His commitment to the calling entrusted to Him by the Father. He was totally pure; whatever challenges He faced he overcame. The opposition to His ministry did not divert Him from His course. When temptation sorely afflicted Him He resisted it firmly from God’s Word. He proved the words of I Corinthians 10:13, written to encourage us in our Christian discipleship, but modelled in His earthly life. *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* So perfect was His life, unique amongst humanity, that He was qualified to take the place of guilty sinners on the cross, as the spotless Lamb of God. The One born of a virgin was truly innocent of all sin and at His Ascension left the earth around thirty-three

years later equally sin-free. In church we sometimes sing these words: ‘Father’s pure radiance, perfect in innocence, yet learns obedience to death on a cross: suffering to give us life, conquering through sacrifice; and, as they crucify prays ‘Father, forgive.’ O what a mystery, meekness and majesty: bow down and worship for this is your God, this is your God!’ (C.M.P.465 Meekness and Majesty by Graham Kendrick).

(b) **Light is Gentle** We feel the presence of the wind even when it is a gentle breeze. It doesn’t have to be a howling gale to be noticed. By the time it becomes a tornado or hurricane we need to take drastic action to get out of its path. Yet on a hot summer’s day inland a gentle cooling breeze is so appreciated. Yet natural light is normally different. Of course we would strong discourage anyone from looking directly into the sun as its intensity could damage our eyes from a repeated direct observation of its rays. We would also want to exclude the dangerous portable laser beams that irresponsible people have used to shine in other people’s faces when they are driving cars or even flying aeroplanes, amongst the various accounts of incidents reported in the press. Yet leaving aside the exceptions and concentrating on the natural typical light we experience on a daily basis the transformation between light and darkness over the twenty-four hour period is so gentle and quiet; one fades into the other so smoothly that we can sometimes be unaware of how much the light has changed over a period of time as our eyes are so good at adapting to it. What is clear is that darkness cannot stand in the way of the light. As John puts it here in John 1:5: *The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome (NIV marginal reading) it;* Here is an appropriate illustration of the Lord Jesus. He is gentle and gracious, but never let that be misunderstood as weakness, it was the very opposite. Underneath His quiet disposition was an absolute determination to complete the work entrusted to Him by His Father in heaven. Jesus has never and will never impose Himself on anyone by force but that is by His choice. Isaiah prophesied of Jesus this message from God the Father: *Here is My Servant, whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom I delight; I will put My Spirit on Him and He will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break and a smouldering wick He will not snuff out. In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged till He establishes justice on earth.* (Isaiah 42:1-4a). James in his letter to the churches stated: *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate [or gentle], submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness* (James 3:17-18). Linked to these quotations from the Old Testament and the New Testament epistles are some words of Jesus to His followers, recorded in Matthew’s Gospel: *Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light* (Matthew 11:28-30). The Lord knows what is going on in our lives we don’t need to pretend with Him. There are times when other people ask us how we are and the last thing we want to do is admit that our world is falling apart or that a major crisis is scheduled to arrive in the next minute or two. So we declare with a smile, that has the strength of the winter sun, that we are fine to ensure our cover isn’t blown. Thank God for the family members or very close friends to whom we can admit that things are not fine and be honest when they ask us a personal question –something not appropriate to all and sundry who may cross our path in a given day. Yet even with these people there are things we may omit to declare for a whole variety of reasons. By contrast the Lord Jesus, who by His Spirit knows everything going on in your life and mine, invites us to come to Him as we are so that together with Him we can put back together the pieces of the mess we may be trying to resolve; to give purpose and meaning to a life that is getting by- but wondering if there isn’t any big or better reason for our existence that simply going through the motions of an

everyday existence. John says this of Jesus: *In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.* Is He the light of your life?

(c) **Light is Pervasive** There is no country on earth that the light doesn't reach. Even the most obscure recesses of North Korea or Saudi Arabia do not escape its beam; no race misses out on the benefits of its glorious rays. It does not distinguish between Buckingham Palace in London or a bed-sit in Sighthill in Glasgow, or any place in between –all are treated the same with His glorious light. Light is given to all people equally whether they are good or bad, rich or poor, theists or atheists. It is part of God's blessings in common grace to all. As Jesus puts it in Matthew 5:45: *He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* God's impartiality in natural blessings and the indiscriminate offer of His amazing grace to all humanity, guilty sinful humanity, entirely undeserving of His goodness, is truly wonderful. Jesus' ministry reflected that in terms of the people He associated with. It was not just the respectable working classes in the synagogue; He spoke clearly and without compromise to the people in authority like Pilate and Herod, but made a particular focus on reaching out to the people on the margins of society. They included the despised businessmen like Zacchaeus in Jericho who had made his 'millions' legally, but in breach of the Jewish ethical code of the day. The people murmured of Jesus: *He has gone to be the guest of a sinner* (Luke 19:7). What was significant for Jesus was that he could see the philanthropy Zacchaeus could carry out once he had come to faith in Jesus. Luke 19:8 recorded this man's extraordinary decision once he had been converted: *But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.* This was far beyond what the law required, but here was a man in whose heart the all-pervasive love of God had penetrated and his future life would be marked by God's grace. Yet Jesus also saw the potential in the lives of the people others had written off as hopeless cases. Take the example of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee in Luke chapter seven. This banquet is taking place outdoors in that Mediterranean climate so it is not difficult for a passer-by to interact with Simon or one of his guests. We must never imagine a dinner party behind closed doors, as we might find in a typical house in twenty-first century Scotland. Simon saw this woman make a bee-line for Jesus and had these thoughts which are recorded in Luke 7:39: *When the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is— that she is a sinner.* Simon's logic was –she is a sinner, therefore get rid of the hopeless case. Jesus' logic by contrast was – this woman is a sinner she needs salvation! Simon could only dwell on her past. Jesus whose gaze could see into this troubled heart focussed on the potential she possessed to be the woman God had created her to be and wanted to assist her on her journey of faith. What was the outcome? Luke 7:50 states: *Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'* Simon had intended to use the dinner to grill Jesus about His teaching and put Him on the spot. Jesus, the light of the world, intended to use that occasion to bring the light of God's love to shine in the darkened corners of various people's lives, including Simon's, not just this woman's. She would go away rejoicing; Simon by contrast would have been left perplexed or disturbed. When the light of the world entered his home neither he nor his other guests could be untouched by spending time with Jesus. How about you and me? Has Jesus been invited to be Lord of your life?

(d) **Light Reveals** Remember the old transparency slides families had for giving picture shows in their homes on winter evenings? Some of you may be too young to remember such occasions? My mum's dad used to do that in my childhood. Various trips to the north of Scotland with some memorable images –one in particular in a remote location, away from centres of population; The picture showed my newly married parents with my mum's parents about to eat lunch. Besides them a folding table and chairs had been erected and the table laid

for the meal with cutlery and other items just as naturally as if in the dining room at home. Sometimes though the pictures were out of order and one after another might be taken and held up to a light and a faint image observed and recognised. But what a difference when that same slide was put in the projector and its powerful light shone through the photographic film and portrayed a clear and bright visual image on the screen; When God's searchlight shines in our hearts it sometimes reveals things we would rather had stayed hidden; it can uncover some things we never intended to deal with; some people with God reason are unwilling to come to church or some other Christian event because they are well aware of changes that would need to be made if God came into their lives. Jesus in John 3:19-21 declared: *This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.* ²⁰ *Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.* ²¹ *But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.* In the darkness Laban could trick Jacob into marrying his elder daughter Leah, rather than his younger daughter Rachel (Genesis 29:22-25). Jacob probably ought to have been suspicious about a wedding ceremony conducted in near total darkness. However, to accuse your prospective father-in-law of planning to con you on your wedding day is a rather big step to take. Unfortunately in that case he would have been within his rights to do so. For some reason their relationship never recovered from that setback. In a more heroic and appropriate setting, Gideon with a force of merely 300 men caused such confusion and panic amongst the thousands of men in the Midianite army that they turned on each other and by morning light had lost convincingly (Judges 7). How embarrassing could it get! It is hard to see how it could have happened in the daylight! Civic officials tell us that the presence of working street lights deters criminals. How does it affect you and me in our behavioural choices to know that the One who is the Light of the World will one day ask us to give an account of our lives before Him?

2. The Ministry of the Light

(a) **In Paradise** Before the fall of Adam and Eve, God has fellowship with His first human creations. Sadly this blessing was lost when this couple chose to defy God and consciously engage in sin. Their choice of darkness over light led to the necessity of a work of redemption and the shedding of blood to pay for the cost of their transgressions.

(b) **In The Ancient World** The light of God's love and His wonderful gospel was at work in the world prior to the coming of Jesus. Paul in Acts 14:15-17 declared to a crowd of Gentile people in Lystra: *Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.* ¹⁶*In the past, He let all nations go their own way.* ¹⁷ *Yet He has not left Himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.* Paul argues that the natural blessings of this life should be sufficient in themselves to make people think of their Creator. This natural light should point beyond itself to our amazing God. He makes this same point even more clearly in Romans 1:20: *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities— His eternal power and divine nature— have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.* The spiritual light radiated by the natural world may have been dim compared to the fuller revelation in Christ, but the apostle was convinced that it was sufficient for people to see something of God. In Athens he returned to this theme before an audience of Philosophers on Marsh Hill, recorded in Acts 17. On that occasion he pointed to an altar with the inscription: 'To the Unknown God'. This altar had been erected six centuries earlier when a prophet called Epimenides told these people in a time of national crisis that they needed to pray to a God they did not know to take away their predicament. It worked. However, they didn't know which God had answered

their prayers, but did nothing to try and find out. The histories of many people groups over the centuries have recorded pointers to the light of God, preparing the way for Jesus.

(c) **In the Human Conscience** Paul in Romans 2: 15 stated that unbelievers who live in a right way *show that the requirements of the law [of God] are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.* It was this instinctive sense of right and wrong that started C.S. Lewis, very reluctantly, on the road to Christian faith from the atheistic standpoint he had been proclaiming. Everyone has a conscience in which are basic feelings of what is right and what is wrong; social conditioning does play a part, but is an inadequate explanation for the incredible fine tuning of our conscience guiding us in our moral choices. Some people through misuse have a conscience that is warped and damaged, but it is not an excuse for failing to see that the conscience is a gift from God to guide our lives like a moral sat-nav! In Romans 1:21, on this topic, the great apostle wrote: *For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened .* In some people's minds the light of God's revelation is not welcome. Some atheists are quite honest in admitting that their faith is for them a liberating one freeing them from accountability for their lives to anyone. They don't want to look at evidence for a God to whom they must one day give an account. For others the evil one has influenced them to reject the truth. Paul wrote these words in his second letter to the Church at Corinth: *by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.* ³ *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.* ⁴ ***The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*** ⁵ *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake* (II Corinthians 4:2b-5). This is why we must pray for the Lord to open people's spiritual eyes to see their need of Jesus, or to bring them back to Him when they have gone away from Him.

(d) **In God's Old Testament People** God down through the years of recorded history has never left Himself without a witness on earth. There were times when very few individuals acknowledged Him. In the days of Enoch or Noah, the dark days of the Judges; the era of Elijah and Elisha, or that of Jeremiah and other prophets before the exile; In the years prior to Jesus' ministry John the Baptist was described as: *a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy His light* (John 5:35). Was John the light for whom the people had waited? No! John 1:6-9 makes this plain: *There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.* ⁷ *He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.* ⁸ *He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.* ⁹ *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.* The Old Testament Scriptures pointed to Me said Jesus as He expounded them to Cleopas and Mary on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter Sunday (Luke 24:27).

(e) **The Light-in Human Form!** The light in all His glory could not be seen by human beings. Moses had to cover his face in the presence of God's glory; yet even the reflected light on his face made a very powerful impression on the Israelites who saw him afterwards. (Exodus 34: 29-35: *When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.* ³⁰*When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.* ³¹ *But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them.* ³² *Afterwards all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.* ³³ *When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face.* ³⁴ *But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded,* ³⁵ ***they saw that his face was radiant.*** Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.) Yet if this reality was frightening for Old Testament

Israel to observe, God had something even more wonderful lined up for His people in the future. The light of the world (John 8:12) would become a human being and live in this world to point people to God so that they would have even less excuse than before. As Paul expressed it in II Corinthians 4:6 *For God, who said, Let light shine out of darkness, made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.* The appearing of the light of the world requires a response from us –have you trusted Him? Will you entrust Him with your life today? When we do acknowledge Him we then have a responsibility to share that light with other people who may be walking in spiritual darkness. Daniel, six centuries before Jesus wrote: *Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:3).* Jesus gives us this challenge: *You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).* How are you /How am I reflecting the light of God’s love this advent season? But this is not the end of the story:

(f) **The Light in Eternity** John, writing about heaven, in Revelation 21:23 stated: [that in God’s new world, *it does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.* Praise God for His light, may each of us respond by faith to it and in simple trust and obedience to our Lord and Saviour reflect something of it this Christmas, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.