

I Am the Light of the World

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"Jesus Offering the Light," Jyoti Art Ashram

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, your Word is a lamp unto our feet
and a light unto our path. Illumine our minds,
illumine our path by your Spirit, so we may
follow Jesus, the light of the world, more closely.
Amen.

Background

To get a greater impact of Jesus' revolutionary words, "*I am the light of the world,*" we need background on the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles or Booths that was going on when Jesus spoke these words.

In the evening celebrations of this fall Festival, two powerful symbols are used: living water and light. We need to focus on the symbol of light that highlights our passage.

On the night of the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, there was a ceremony called the Illumination of the Temple. It took place in a portion of the temple called the Court of Women. Extensive risers were set up for all the spectators to see. Four massive candelabras were placed in the center of the court. Everyone waited for the darkness. When it became dark, the four candelabras were lit. It was as if all of Jerusalem glowed in the light. Every courtyard in the Holy City blazed with the brilliance of the four candelabras. All night long, until the cock crowed at dawn, the greatest and wisest and holiest men of Israel held burning torches and danced before the Lord, singing psalms as the people watched. Picture yourself in the scene, in the darkness of the night, in the temple, Jesus speaking:

You have seen the fiery torches piercing the darkness
in the Illumination of the Temple,
but let me tell you, I AM the light of the world.

I will light your darkness.
I will light your path, so you can go towards real life.

These blazing candelabras will soon be extinguished,
but I am the light of life, and I will burn for all eternity.
To follow me, is to follow my undying light.

We're also reminded of another light—the burning bush. We read in Exodus that Moses drew closer to the burning bush in the wilderness when he noticed that it wasn't consumed by the flames. He paid attention, got a closer look, and there God spoke:

"Moses, take off your sandals, for you are on holy ground."

So right there, in the light of fire, Moses received his call from God to set Israel free from the darkness of captivity. And it was in the burning bush that God revealed his name to Moses:

"I AM who I AM."

Similarly, Jesus declares:

"I AM the light of the world."

Forty times in John's gospel the Greek phrase "ego eimi" is used: I AM. It's an audacious claim. Controversial. Got people worked up. Still does. It kind of reminds me of a New Yorker cartoon.

There's a guy sitting alone at the bar. He's definitely had at least one too many to drink. The bartender is trying his best to ignore the obnoxious patron. "Hey pal," he slurs to the bartender while slouched over, "Do you have any idea who I think I am?"

Jesus is making some pretty serious claims here.

God is described as light in Scripture: "The Lord is my everlasting light." The ancient rabbis even said that the name of the Messiah was Light. But with Jesus, he's not like just anybody off the street, spouting hot air. He teaches with authority, heals on the Sabbath, turns water into wine, casts out unclean spirits. His words weren't empty—his deeds backed them up. And so people asked, Who is this? Could he be the Messiah?

Jesus isn't timid or apologetic about it: "I AM the light of the world." Not just the light of Jerusalem. The world. In other words, there's none higher than me. It was the religious leaders who were livid when they heard Jesus talking like this. Who does he think he is, God? Well, this is what much of John's gospel is about—the identity of Christ.

Sevens are important in the gospel of John. In it are:

- Seven conversations,
- Seven signs (meaning miracles Jesus performed), and
- Seven I AM statements.

Seven is the number of perfection and completion. And they all point to Jesus' identity—that he is not only human, but divine. It's a holy paradox, where Jesus says both:

"I and the Father are one." (John 10: 30) and

"The Father is greater than I." (John 14: 28)

Jesus, God's Unique Messenger, the Sent One, the Son of Man, is also the great I AM made incarnate. And so, as we listen to the words of Christ, we must ask ourselves:

- Who is Jesus for me?
- Am I walking in darkness...or light?
- Am I following Jesus' guiding light in my life right now?

Scripture: John 8:12 (NRSV)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

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SERMON – *I Am the Light of the World*

Florence Nightingale was born on May 12, 1820, in Florence, Italy to English parents who were well off. She was emotional, dramatic, loved fashion and good food, and one biographer described her as “perpetually burning with white heat.” Her father home-schooled her and the plan was for her to marry a similarly wealthy man. But this plan went awry when at the age of sixteen, Nightingale received a call from God to help the poor and sick. For a considerable time, her parents disapproved of Nightingale's vision, but they eventually relented and permitted her to study nursing in Germany and France. After returning to England, she was quickly promoted for her tireless work and hospital administration. But the real test came in 1854 when Nightingale, along with 38 other nurses, began her appointment by the British government to care for soldiers just outside Constantinople during the Crimean War. The conditions of the hospital were shocking, and Nightingale gave it the name “the Kingdom of Hell.” There were no medical supplies. Rooms were rat infested. Bread was molded. The overcrowded military hospital was literally set up on top of a large cesspool, which polluted the water supplies. Patients lay all around haphazardly. More soldiers were ill from infectious diseases than battle injuries.

Initially the male doctors resisted Nightingale and her team, not permitting women to work in hospitals. But she soon had strong advocates: the wounded soldiers. 40% of the men were dying. In desperation the doctors relented. It didn't take long for a transformation to take place under Nightingale's leadership: supplies and sanitary practices were introduced. Floors were scrubbed. Rooms received proper ventilation. Patients received individualized care. A hospital kitchen and laundry room were established. A classroom for the soldiers was instituted. Nightingale wrote Queen Victoria to not cut the pay of soldiers wounded in battle. The request was granted. Now, the mortality rate was lowered from 40% to 2%.

Not only the hospital, but nursing was forever changed by Nightingale. As the Kingdom of Hell became transformed into the Kingdom of Heaven, Florence Nightingale was given a new name: The Lady with the Lamp. She was known, every night, for carrying a lamp with her to check on the soldiers in her care. Longfellow would later pen this poem about her:

*Lo! in that house of misery
A lady with a lamp I see
Pass through the glimmering of gloom
And flit from room to room...
A lady with a lamp shall stand
In the great history of the land,
A noble type of good,
Heroic womanhood.*

“I am the light of the world,” says Jesus. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

What is darkness? It's a closed off existence—alienated from God, from others, from ourselves. Darkness is going at it alone. A lostness and stranded existence—fraught with fear and discouragement. Unaware and oblivious—disoriented.

What is this light Jesus offers to us? It's life. Awareness and insight. Light reveals rather than conceals, giving illumination, direction, and guidance. It helps us find our way to what we long for: forgiveness, healing, joy, growth, and true freedom. Light draws us closer to God, one another, ourselves.

Jesus is saying his divine authority isn't just for heaven. He's able to meet our needs now, in our living on earth. This is the good news Immanuel. Christ has come to our world, to us. The light we need doesn't originally come from within us—we're in the dark. Light comes from without, but it gets inside us. It dispels our darkness. And then it shows and shines through us. We can walk the path of life and healing.

In the Scriptures, light is very symbolic. Light often symbolizes the Lord in action in the world. "O send out your light and your truth," says the psalmist, "And let them lead me." This isn't a stationary light, it's a light that's on the move. A moving light that seeks to lighten the darkness. Or as John puts it in the prologue of his gospel: What has come into being in him was life, Life that was light of all people; And light shines in darkness, And darkness could not overpower it.

Christ's light is bright, but it isn't a harsh fluorescent kind of light. It's the light of LIFE. We're lighted with the light of life. "In your light we see light," Psalm 36:9 says. Hank Williams sang it this way:

"Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night
Praise the Lord, I saw the light
I saw the light, I saw the light
No more darkness, no more night."

In Exodus, we read about how God led his people by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night God led them with a pillar of fire to give them light. Christ is our personified pillar of fire, he's our guiding light when we're groping in the dark. He leads us through our wilderness—whether it be a family crisis, a pandemic, spiritual dryness, or confusing decisions to make. The light of presence becomes internalized in us. We reflect Christ's light wherever we go. Instead of cursing the dark, we light a candle. Where there's darkness, we bring light.

For those of us with beloved pets—what do our cats and dogs shed? Hair—it's everywhere. Their presence in our lives is marked. As children of the light, we shed everywhere we go too, but not hair. We shed light, where there's darkness and lostness. If we're doing it right, everywhere we go, people will know we've been there, because of Christ's light that's shed on dark situations.

"You are the light of the world," Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount. *"A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light in all the house. So let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."* The light testifies to itself, to Christ.

But darkness is all around us, often times in us. When Peter denies Christ, three times, he was asked in the dark of night, "are you a follower of Jesus?" His thrice given response was this: I AM NOT. Peter said I AM NOT a disciple of the I AM.

So Immanuel, it's vitally important for us to follow closely after Christ, so we might walk in the light of the I AM. This is our task, to keep up with Christ and his mission, not distance ourselves from him. To follow Jesus means to be his disciple. The Greek word for follow is used five ways in Scripture that teach us about followership:

- 1) **A soldier following close to his captain**—through marches, through campaigns, through battles, and bad weather. The soldier follows the commander wherever he leads.
- 2) **A servant following the master**—ever ready to spring to service and carry out the Master's commands.
- 3) It is also used for **following a wise counselor's guidance**. You seek out their wisdom, take it to heart, and follow it.
- 4) Following is used for **honoring the laws of the land**. So as citizens of the kingdom of light, we live by the golden rule that Christ decrees.
- 5) Finally, following is used for **following the argument, the line of reasoning of your teacher. You're attentive. Taking notes. Asking questions. Talking to the teacher after class. The light bulb goes off. You digest** the gist of their reasoning. You internalize the spirit of their words and you joyfully obey.

To walk in the light of Christ, is to give our body, mind, and soul to him. We stay close by his side, for he is our way, the I AM. He is our guiding light, our saving light. He is the light of our world.

Amen.

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