

“Jesus, the Light” // Isaiah 9:2 // *The Everlasting Wonder* #3

(Adon reads/quotes Luke 2)

That was my son Adon, he turns 14 this year; he was born on Christmas Day in 2009. So, you can pray for him. I mean, it's hard enough to be a pastor's kid; he also shares a birthday with Jesus. That's gonna be a lot to live up to.

Over the last several weeks at The Summit Church we've looked at a handful of images that the Bible associates with Christmas that help us understand its meaning, and for our last one, we're going to talk about LIGHT. **Luke 2 is filled with images of darkness and light.**

- There's the literal darkness of the shepherd's field at night when suddenly the skies blaze with the glory of myriads of angels saying, "Glory to God in the highest;" and the literal brightness of the star as it pierced the night sky, leading the wise men to the place where Jesus had been born.
- That's literal darkness and light ... but there's also the more figurative darkness of the condition Israel was in when Jesus came. Israel was living under what can only be called the darkness of Roman oppression. They asked, "Where was God?" They were supposed to be God's people but Rome ruled them with an iron fist. They were poor and oppressed, and for 400 years there had been no word from God. That felt like darkness. Silence.

In describing that first Christmas night, Isaiah prophesied: **"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone"** (Isaiah 9:2). I want us to think for a few brief moments about what Isaiah meant by that; what he means when he says, *"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light."* First, he meant that Jesus was...

A light showing us that we are not alone

- Perhaps you've seen the **Netflix special about the Thai middle school soccer** team who went exploring after practice one afternoon and went deep into one of the underground caves out there, when a sudden, torrential rain storm came that flooded the entryways and trapped the 13 boys two and a half miles down into the earth. The Thai government made several brave, failed rescue attempts, and these poor boys stayed trapped down there for 10 days in total darkness. The best moment of the documentary is when these two British divers finally make it to them. Into this dark, cavernous room, a light suddenly appears. The boys, who had given up hope, started cheering. The light meant: You're not alone. You've not been forgotten.
- Maybe this Christmas finds you in a place where you feel alone: A comprehensive societal survey taken last year shows that the percentage of Americans who say they have no close friends quadrupled between 1990 and 2020. 61 percent of young adults now say they feel lonely almost all of the time, and 51 percent of young mothers say that.¹ Nearly half of today's teenagers say they feel "persistently sad and hopeless."

¹ David Brooks, *How to Know a Person*, 98

- Maybe that's you. You feel alone in your struggles. Alone in your pain. Alone in your marriage. Alone in your singleness. Darkness. **The shepherds in the field certainly felt that way.** The shepherds in our little nativity sets may seem quaint today, but "shepherding" was considered the lowest form of manual labor available in Israel—a job given to migrant workers or released prisoners. Shepherds were considered so low class in Israel that their testimony would not even be considered in court. **Of all the people in the world to whom God could have chosen to announce the birth of his Son, he chose them.**
- **Why? What was he saying? He was saying,** "I see you. Others may not. But I do." Jesus, the light of the world, came to them. Throughout his life, Jesus made his home with the outcasts of society; the sick, the broken, the guilty. His nickname, an insult his enemies hurled at him, was "the friend of sinners." He was a light of love coming to people sitting in darkness.
- One of the ironies of Christmas is that for many of us, this is a season where we feel an enormous pressure to look like we have it all together. We want the house to be perfect and the family to be perfect and the marriage to be perfect, and maybe you've been trying to pull it off but you know it's just not working. (You're like Clark Griswold in *Christmas Vacation*. Such high hopes, but the family's dysfunctional; the money's tight; your parents are insane; cousin Eddie just showed up in your driveway to stay for a month.) Such high hopes, but all this season does is reveal how "not together" things are in your life. And then you start getting all the Christmas cards where everyone else's family just looks amazing and their kids are doing awesome and you know your life is not like that. Well, first of all, everybody's lying on that card. I know that because my Christmas card looks great, but five seconds before they snapped the pic, two of my kids were like ... But, even more importantly, the whole point of Christmas is that Jesus came for those who don't have it together. He came to people in darkness. He didn't come for the healthy, he came for the sick! You don't need to pretend with him. He comes into darkness to find you and guide you home.

Which leads me to the second thing. To people who sat in great darkness, Jesus was ... **A light that guides us home**

- On the East Coast of NC sits one of my favorite places in the world, Cape Hatteras, world-renowned as "the graveyard of the Atlantic." They call it that because as you approach the shore from the ocean, all these shallow rocky shoals suddenly jut up under the water that wreck and sink ships. They estimate nearly 5,000 shipwrecks on the bottom of the ocean in those first few miles off the coast. And so, all along the coast you'll find one of the greatest concentrations of lighthouses in the nation. Tour them sometime, and you'll read story after story of some boat lost in a storm, tossed this way and that, with no knowledge of how to get home, when they see the light from one of those lighthouses that says, "This way to safety; this way to home."
- Jesus was the light showing us the way home. He showed us where we'd come from and how to get back. Most people live with the awareness that something is missing in their lives, and their lives feel like a quest to find that place of safety and home. The philosopher **Blaise Pascal** said it was like each human heart had been created with a gigantic hole in it, a great void, and we spend all our lives trying to figure out what goes into that hole. When we're young, we try things like friends or fun or athletic success or sex; as we get older we turn to things like marriage or family or career success or financial stability. Some turn to illicit things like drugs and alcohol—but it's all just a quest to figure out why we're not happy.
- None of it ever quite works, Pascal said, because that hole is a God-shaped and God-sized hole. Jesus showed us that what we're missing is the embrace of our heavenly Father, and that standing in heaven is a

Father with outstretched arms, saying, “What you’re looking for, what you’ve always been looking for, is me. Whether you’ve known it or not, it’s always been me.”

- Jesus shines that light home to us. **Listen, maybe you’re completely turned off by organized religion**, or maybe you’re repulsed by hypocritical church leaders. And you should be. And you don’t even know why you’re here. (You’re doing a favor for somebody, or your mom said you had to come to this, so you’re here.) But there’s still something about Jesus that captivates your attention. In the darkness of a world of corruption and confusion, he’s the light of God showing you where you came from, what you’re missing, and how to get back home. The arms you sought in romance were his arms. The meaning, security, and significance—it’s always been in him, and only in him.

To people who sit in darkness, Jesus was ... **A light that illuminates everything else around us**

- One of the greatest things about light is not just that you can see it in the darkness, but that by it you can see everything else.
 - In fact, most lights we don’t look directly at. **You don’t typically stare into the ceiling lights in your home. You don’t typically stare directly into the sun.** (You ever play that game when you were a kid—of who could stare at the sun the longest? Raise your hand. It’s not a fun game. All the people with glasses.) You don’t stare at the sun, but because of the sun, you can see everything else. **This, in the dark, would be a confusing, forbidding, scary mountain.** In the light of the sun, however, it’s breathtakingly beautiful.
- In Psalm 36:9, King David said, **“You are the fountain of life, the light by which we see [everything else].”**
 - You see, the world around us often feels to us like darkness and chaos. It feels confusing. We have lots of questions. Bad things happen to good people, injustice seems to prevail, and it makes us wonder how there really could be a good, loving God in charge of it all. Maybe you’ve wondered that coming into this Christmas: “If there really is a God up there who loves us, why is the world in the state that it’s in? Where was he when Russia attacked Ukraine or when Hamas killed all those women and children a few weeks ago?”
 - And **maybe those questions are really personal to you:** “Why didn’t God save my marriage?” “Why didn’t God heal my wife’s cancer?” “Why didn’t God bring home my child?” “Why didn’t you answer my prayer, God? God, if you love me, where are you?”
- The people in Luke 1–2 had all those same questions, and the birth of a baby was his answer. The birth of Jesus didn’t give them all the whys of everything that was happening, but it showed them the one thing that all their chaos and confusion didn’t mean. It didn’t mean that God had abandoned them. I mean, here was God, entering into our poverty and our shame and our pain and our confusion. This baby would grow up to heal our diseases, to walk on water; he’d be able to calm the most violent storms; to cast out our demons, to raise the dead; and then, he would voluntarily go to a cross to suffer not for his sin, but for ours.
- So, I may not be able to explain the meaning of every single thing that happens in my life, but I know the one thing my suffering can’t mean—it can’t mean that God has forsaken or forgotten me. His birth here into this world under those conditions shows me that he’s here, he’s present, and he’s involved. His bloody cross shows me the depth of his care, and his empty tomb shows me how much power he has. I may not understand everything about all of God’s ways, but I can understand that. Faith means accepting what you

cannot understand based on what you CAN understand, and I understand the birth of that baby shows me God is present, he cares, and that he's involved.

- **Tim Keller used to say, “Many people pride themselves on being skeptical.** They take nothing at face value; they doubt everything.” “Great,” he said. “But have you ever doubted your doubts? Have you ever doubted your doubts? Maybe your doubts aren’t the definitive proof that God is not real. Maybe there’s some things you don’t see clearly yet; maybe there are answers to your questions even if you can’t quite grasp them yet.” You see, if Jesus was the Son of God coming to the earth, it means our doubts and our deepest questions have answers. The birth of Jesus is the proof that there are answers. The problem, Keller said, is not that you are skeptical, it’s that you’re skeptical about the wrong things, and **you’ve never applied your skepticism to the one thing you should be most skeptical of: your own heart.** The miraculous birth of a baby, a bloody cross, and an empty tomb are a reason to doubt your doubts.
- **You say, “Ah, but that’s the thing: How do I know all of this happened? How do I know these are not just quaint, made-up stories invented by people who wanted to feel better about life?”** This is not the place where I can go into a full-scale defense of all that here, but let me at least invite you to consider the two things the **Bible most consistently points to:**
 - **The first is fulfilled prophecy:** Through his birth and life, Jesus fulfilled more than 300 specific Messianic prophecies—mostly historically verifiable stuff, and most of which he had no control over—including the year he was to be born (**Daniel 9:26**); and the place he was to be born—Bethlehem in Judah (**Micah 5:2**); what family line he would be from, from the line of David (**2 Samuel 7:12**); that John the Baptist would precede him (**Isaiah 40:3**); that his ministry would be characterized by deliverance (**Isaiah 61:1**); that he would be misunderstood and falsely accused (**Isaiah 53:3**); that he would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (**Zechariah 11:12**); that he would die by crucifixion, but without a single one of his bones broken, as onlookers around him shook their heads, claiming he was forsaken by God and soldiers divided up his clothing and gambled for it (**Psalms 22:12–18**); that he would be wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, chastised by our iniquities and by his stripes we would be healed (**Isaiah 53:5–6**); that he would be buried in a borrowed rich man’s tomb and then resurrected from the dead (**Psalms 16:11**), and **290 others.** Read this Bible, and you will see it’s one gigantic story—written by 40 different authors over 1500 years, across three continents, telling the story of the coming of one spectacular person: Jesus.
 - **The second thing Bible writers point you to is Jesus’ resurrection.** Again, not the place where I can go deep into this here, only that many who have studied the Resurrection arrive at the same conclusion as German theologian **Wolfhart Pannenberg: “The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”** Don’t believe him? All I can say is, “Go study it for yourself.”
- **My point is: If Jesus really came,** he’s the proof that God loves you and he is in control of history. He’s the light that shows you that God hasn’t forsaken or forgotten you. **He’s the reason to doubt your doubts.**
 - **And if you’re one of the ones who has just written these things off, let me ask you to consider:** What’s the real alternative? That this world is just a gigantic cosmic accident, that nothing times nobody equals everything, that things like consciousness and love and meaning are merely useful fictions? In your heart, you know that love is real; you know your internal drive to find meaning and

your yearning and hope point to something real. These things are the first witnesses of the light in you, and they point you to the light of the world, who, coming into the world, illuminates everything else.

Fourth, to those who sit in darkness, Jesus was ... **A light that revealed our need for a Savior**

- **One of the negative things about light**, if you want to call it that, is that **light reveals imperfections**. A couple of Sunday mornings ago I was getting ready for church, and because I sometimes go in early, I have to get dressed in the dark so as not to wake my wife up. Well, I grabbed this light-colored pair of jeans and a shirt/jacket combo to go with it and in the dark my outfit looked amazing! But then I got to church, where it was very well lit, and you could see plain as day that there was a big grease stain down one of my pant legs. (I don't know what it is about grease and my pants but the two love each other and always find a way to come together.) Of course our stage is extremely well lit so there's no hiding there, and I have to stand up here in front of 12,000 people, so all I could do was move around real fast up here and hope the camera guys kept the shot on my upper half.
- **Light reveals imperfections**. The Apostle John said that the light coming into the world revealed our imperfections—and some people hated him for it. You see, most of us have spent our lives trying to prove to ourselves and to others that we're a "good person." And our standard for that is how we compare to others. We assume that God grades on the curve, and if he does, we'll be fine. You're like, "I'm not perfect, but I'm for sure not at the bottom of the bell curve."
- The problem is that we're comparing ourselves to the wrong standard. Jesus shows us what goodness is. The Apostle Paul says it like this: **Romans 3:23, "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."**
 - **Fall short: Imagine we were all down at Atlantic Beach** and we decided to swim to England. Now, I can swim, but I'm not a GREAT swimmer. I might make it a mile and then I'd turn into an anchor. I'm pretty sure I could outswim Pastor Bryan, but that's about it. Maybe you're a much better swimmer than me, and maybe you could make it 10 miles. That's amazing! That's 10x longer than I got. But in the end, your 10 miles to my one mile doesn't make that much difference, does it? We both "fell short" of England by about 4,300 miles.
 - **For all of us, Paul says, our sin puts us miles away** from the glory God deserves and demands. And Jesus revealed that, and many hated him for that. His whole life screamed: "You're not good enough to earn God's love."
- **But that leads to maybe the best news of all. The light of Jesus was not just a revealing light, it was a healing light**. One of the most remarkable things about Jesus was that whenever someone who was sick touched him, instead of him getting sick, they got better. It works the opposite way for us. When I sit by someone on the plane who has a bad cough, I'm not like, "Hey, lean over here with yo sick self; I got health to spare and maybe if we breathe real close to each other, some of my health could get into you." No, I lean the other way, not wanting their sickness to get on me.
 - In a place obsessed with ritual cleanliness, like Israel, it worked the same way: When something unclean came into the presence of something clean, the unclean thing made the clean thing unclean. But study the life of Jesus. When he touched the sick, they became well. When he touched the unclean thing, instead of the clean thing becoming unclean, the unclean thing became clean.
- And that's because he came not to condemn our darkness, but take it from us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that on the cross God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to become sin for us. Our darkness went into him; Jesus, who knew no sin, who was himself the very brightness of God's glory and the brilliance of his perfection,

became the darkness of our sin and died. The light of the world was reduced to a corpse on a bloody cross, and the light of the world temporarily went out as it was laid into the darkness of the grave, but...

- **But... But. Not even the grave could contain the power of that light**, and on the third day, at dawn, death was defeated; the King was alive. Light burst out of the grave. Death could not hold him; the veil tore before him; he silenced the boast of sin and grave.
- As the Apostle John said: "The light shined in the darkness, and the darkness could not vanquish it."

One more. *For those who sit in darkness, Jesus is ...* **A light that assures us of future hope**

- **Imagine a person lost in a dark cave**, how relieved they are to turn a corner and see a ray of sunlight breaking through a crack. Or someone adrift on a life raft in the middle of the ocean, how overjoyed they are to see the light of an approaching ship on the horizon.
- **To people sitting in darkness, and loneliness, and pain**, the birth of Jesus shows us this pain is not forever. The first light of salvation has come, even if the fullness of that salvation has not yet arrived.

James Dobson tells a story about an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling through her first Christmas alone; her husband of 50 years had died four months earlier from a slow-growing cancer that had finally taken his life. She felt so heartbroken and alone that she couldn't even bring herself to decorate for Christmas. Everything seemed so dark and alone. To make matters worse, the week before Christmas, a terrible snow storm came into her region and she was snowed in.

The day before Christmas her doorbell rings, and she was surprised because she didn't think anyone was able to get out on the roads, but there on her front porch stood a delivery boy with a box. He said, "Mrs. Thornhope?" She nodded. He said, "Sign here, please." She invited him to come in from the cold weather, and she signed his clipboard, and she said, "What's in the box?" The delivery boy laughed and opened up the flap of the box, and inside was a little puppy, a little golden Labrador Retriever, bustling and jumpy. The delivery boy picked up the squirming puppy and said, "He belongs to you, ma'am. He's 6 weeks old, completely housebroken." And the young puppy was wiggling and squirming and tried to lick his face.

Mrs. Thornhope asked, "But who is this from?" The young man set the puppy down and handed her an envelope and said, "It's all explained right here in this envelope, ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift to you." The young man turned to leave, and she said, now almost in desperation, "But who sent this?" The delivery boy said, "Your husband, ma'am. Merry Christmas." And he left.

And there, in the quiet darkness, she opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered along with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments for her to be strong. He told her that she hadn't really lost him, she'd just lost contact with him for a little while, and that he'd be anxiously waiting for the day when she could join him in heaven. But until then, he said, she had this little puppy, this little ray of sunshine, to keep her company.

She wiped away the tears, put the letter down; and then, remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up the furry golden ball of energy, and held it to her neck, while he licked her and squirmed excitedly. She looked out the window at the lights in the houses of her neighbors, and from the radio in the kitchen she could hear the faint strains of "Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come." Suddenly she felt the most amazing sensation of joy wash over her—a joy and a wonder and sense of anticipation that was even greater than the grief and loneliness she'd been in for the last few months. She turned to the puppy and said, "We've gotta hurry. We've got to decorate this house for Christmas."

The birth of Jesus doesn't immediately take away all of your pain. But it is a ray of sunshine that shines into your darkness that tells you that you're not alone. You're not forgotten. You're loved. Joy to the world! The Lord has come. Let heaven and nature sing!

The birth of Jesus is God's promise to reverse the curse, abolish death, to wipe away every tear and heal every hurt. He's the first light of the new creation. No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; he's come to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found! Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

But that leads me to the last and maybe most important thing you must understand about the light of the world. This light is a gift. You choose whether or not you allow this light into your life.

- **Luke 2:11** says, "Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord..." "Unto you is born" is the language of gift, and like every other gift, you have to receive it! A gift for you left unwrapped under the tree never becomes yours, even if it was purchased for you and has your name on it!
- Jesus said in **John 1:12**, "To those who RECEIVED him, to them he gave the power to become the children of God." To as many as RECEIVED him. You have to receive it personally. **Have you done that?**
- Receiving Jesus means turning away from your sin, acknowledging him as Lord of your life—no longer you— and saying "yes" to his free offer to save you.
- Have you ever done that personally? It's not something you can just be born into. It's not something you get by having Christian parents or coming to church or being baptized or going to a confirmation class. Those things are fine, but you have to personally decide to receive Jesus as your Savior. We always say that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than ... You have to personally receive Christ as Lord and Savior.

Have you ever done that? Do you want to? I want to give you a chance to do that RIGHT NOW. Every head bowed...

- "Jesus, I want to receive you as my Savior; I surrender to you as Lord."
- Maybe you are filled with doubts, but you'll say, "Jesus, I don't know all these answers, but I'll trust you. I believe you are the Son of God and that you came into the world. I'll trust you with my answered questions for now."
- That's it. If you prayed that right now for the first time or for the first time you really understood it, **TURN ON YOUR LIGHT!**