

Jesus is the Light of Life

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Date: 30 May 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Josh. Hello, everyone. Hello, everyone at home. If you have a Bible with you, please turn to John chapter 8. If not, there's a service sheet on your chair and the passage is on the back. It might look quite a complicated passage and there's a lot going on, but I think God's got quite a simple message for us this evening. So let's start with a moment of prayer and ask for his help. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this opportunity that you provide us with to hear you speak to us and we pray that by your Holy Spirit you would change us, that you would transform us, and that you would grow us more and more into the likeness of Christ. Amen. So when I first came to Scotland, I hadn't done any real hill walking. I'm originally from Norfolk and the landscape is famously flat.

The hill of Gibson Street going up to the library is far bigger than anything you'd see in the whole of Norfolk. So walking up Monroe's here in Scotland has been amazing. But I have very little experience and a terrible sense of direction, so I always need a good leader to follow. And Michael Reader Harris, for example, is always prepared with lots of maps, experience, lots of food cooked by Susan and plenty of enthusiasm. Meaning both myself and the whole walking party rest assured that the journey will go smoothly and we'll arrive at our destination. He's a good leader. And life itself is a huge expedition and who we follow will ultimately determine what kind of journey we will have and our destination. We all follow someone or something. The word follow in recent years has become synonymous with social media. When Instagram first came out, I think I just followed everyone and everything. But as we've grown in knowledge and understanding of social media, we've realized how persuasive it can be, how it guides our thoughts and opinions. If it's not social media, then we are following our hearts. Perhaps we are following our emotion or we're following our thoughts. We follow certain sports teams. We follow political parties. We follow ideologies. We follow campaigns for justice.

We all follow someone or something. So this evening, we're going to be thinking about what makes Jesus a person to follow. And not just like a person to follow, but why he should be above everyone and everything else as someone to follow, our number one priority. So our first point this morning, as we look at the first half of the passage, Jesus is the light leading us through the darkness. So what makes a good leader? Well, often presidents and people who want to be followed have a good tagline. I wonder if you remember Obama back in 2008? Yes, we can. Trump did the whole make America great again, again. And Biden, well, I think he had that no malarkey thing on the bus and build back better. Well, Jesus throws out this phrase in verse 12. I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Maybe not as short and simple as the American presidential campaigns, but maybe that's because he's promising something far greater. Jesus is the light of the world. And if we follow him, we will not walk in darkness, but we will have the light of life. Big promises. So let's unpack it. In our passage today, we arrive at the end of a festival, the festival of tabernacles. For hundreds of years, the Jews have been celebrating this. And during the festival, Jesus keeps getting up to teach. I like to think of the film Now You See Me, when people randomly appear at different places so that the police don't catch them. And when Jesus pops up to teach, the Jews are amazed, they're confused, they're challenged, they're disgraced, all sorts of reactions. But they're all absorbed by Jesus.

The Pharisees, however, are just extremely annoyed. In chapter 7, just before our passage, they try to get him arrested and removed from the party. But the temple guards are also becoming absorbed by Jesus. So the arrest fails. Then chapter 8, our passage this evening, Jesus pops up again and draws all the attention to himself. In chapter 7, he did it during the water pouring ritual and declared that whoever is thirsty for God's spirit should go to him. Now, during what was probably the time of the light dancing ritual, he pops up again and again draws attention to himself by saying, I am the light of the world. Now, this statement is huge. This is a massive thing to say when the light ritual is taking place. The Pharisees who devote their lives to studying scripture, they know the weight of this statement. I am the name that God gives himself as we read in Exodus.

I think people weren't even allowed to say it out loud. Here Jesus takes the name of God for himself, but also claims to be the light. Not a light, but the light. Jesus is the light of God. And the timing is perfect because at the festival, they would look back to the great exodus from Egypt, and they would have these light rituals as symbols of how God led his people, their ancestors, through the desert at night by a pillar of light. In Nehemiah, we went through it a few weeks ago. We have an example of God's people at a festival of tabernacles, and I'll read out a section of what they would have read out at the festival. So this is from chapter 9 in Nehemiah. Because of your great compassion, talking about God, you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day, the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. God guided his people through the darkness of night with a pillar of light. And here Jesus is standing up and saying that he is that very light. And not only that, he continues by saying, verse 12, whoever follows me will have the light of life. People will have the light of life. It's like Jesus is standing up and saying, everything in this festival is pointing towards me. I am everything this festival is pointing to. And I've arrived, and you can have the light if you follow me. The Pharisees are outraged, and so they try to challenge Jesus' authority, of course, for making such big claims. But in chapters, in verses, sorry, 14 to 20, if you look down at that little section, Jesus obliterates their challenge by not only revealing his authority, but their ignorance. Notice how John couples together two positives about Jesus to contrast against two negatives about the Pharisees. Jesus says, I know where I came from and where I am going. I am not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me. But the Pharisees, Jesus says, have no idea where Jesus comes from or where he is going, and they do not know him or his Father.

[8 : 10] I think this is really brought out in the question we read in verse 19. Who is your Father, they ask? Now for the Pharisees, they're continuing to run with what they think is a trump card that they were using back in chapter 7, that no prophet comes from Galilee. They just see the son of a carpenter, not the son of a carpenter, not the son of a carpenter. But really with this question, who is your Father, we read it and realize they genuinely do not know God the Father.

Jesus says to them at the end of verse 19, if you knew me, you would know my Father also. Jesus is saying that because the Pharisees failed to see who he is, they are left in the dark.

He is not alone, they are. They are standing alone, separated from God. And we should really feel the seriousness of this passage. If we are not following Jesus, we do not have the light of life, meaning we would be alone in darkness. This is serious.

Me and Fern were watching one of those typical survival expedition programs with Bear Grylls, but this one was interactive. So at each major checkpoint in the journey, he would address the audience and we could choose between two options on our remote control. And then he would just deal with the problem that we chose and lead us further into the journey. You know, serious issues, but not taken very seriously as we sit on the sofa. But following Jesus is not like that. The word follow that Jesus uses here is not something to be done at a distance. Following Jesus, being his disciple, is joining his expedition party and being out there with him in real life, facing everything that the journey has to offer. Sometimes we talk about the Israelites being led through the desert by a pillar of fire like it's some Netflix show because it feels so distant. And for the Jews at the festival in our passage, I imagine it was also difficult to grab hold of the reality. But for the Israelites, we read about in Exodus, for them in the desert, it was intensely real. They were actually out there walking through the desert in the darkness, placing their hope for survival in God's light.

What is difficult for us today is that darkness is no longer black and white. Being out there in the desert, the Israelites had a very obvious need to follow the light. But the reaction of the Pharisees in chapter 8 is so like the reaction of people today, isn't it? People fail to see the intensely real need to follow Jesus. The last time you introduced a friend or a family member to Jesus. Did they immediately cling to him for survival? Did they instantly see him as the light? Jesus has become at best an historical figure. Christianity is a piece of the jigsaw of so-called Western civilization. Jesus is not seen as someone to follow for survival as the light of life. And so the world that is being built and developed around us, it doesn't look like darkness. It doesn't look like a desert. It's trying to generate its own light. And so it's very easy to forget that we need Jesus to lead us through the darkness.

[11 : 51] It's very easy to wake up in the morning and look for our iPhone, look for our coffee, look for our jobs that we need to do and forget to look for the pillar of light. The world wants us to live in a way that says we've arrived, but for disciples of Jesus, we know there is a long road ahead for us. Are we going to let Jesus lead us or are we going to gamble on someone else? Jesus is the light leading us through the darkness. We need him for our daily lives for every step of the journey because we know that, counter to the cheesy saying, it's actually all about the destination. And that brings us to our second point.

Jesus is the light leading us out of the darkness. A good leader is someone who supports you on the journey and through any difficulty. But ultimately, a good leader is someone who is able to get you to the destination. Jesus is a good leader. Jesus is someone to follow because he knows the consequences for not following him. He knows there is a good and a bad destination. Going the other way, not following Jesus, is a terrible idea. So let's take a look at how Jesus communicates that to the Jews. As we've already established, Jesus is at this big party, the Festival of Tabernacles. Now, what's a guaranteed way of spoiling any party?

Well, how about trying what Jesus does between verses 21 and 24? Three times he tells them they will die in their sin. Seriously, try it next time you're at a dinner party with a group of people.

The consequence for not following Jesus are repeated three times. You will die in your sin. I told you that you would die in your sins. You will indeed die in your sins.

Jesus does this because the seriousness and the weight of the situation is not lost on him. It's all very well gathering together to joyfully sing about God's salvation, but it's meaningless unless the weight of the reality is felt and understood.

[14 : 14] Being a member of God's people is not like being a member of a social club or going to a festival for good times. God is offering salvation from the darkness of sin, which wages our death.

Yes, Jesus is offering a way through the darkness, but he's also going to lead people out of the darkness into the glorious future of the new creation, eternally dwelling with God.

We're not talking about gentle hill walking on a sunny day where you can easily go ahead without an expert to lead you. This is serious stuff, and the destination will only be reached by following Jesus.

Do you see that in verse 21?

Once more Jesus said to them, I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come. Jesus is going to the Father and saying to them, If you're not with me, you're against me, and that means you cannot follow him into glory.

[15 : 23] If we do not follow Jesus we die in our sin, it's worth reminding ourselves every day of how extraordinarily grateful we should feel for having Jesus to lead us.

If people could truly see the scale of the importance, they would not see following Jesus as an option, but like Andrew, Peter, James, and John, and so many, they would cast aside everything to immediately follow him.

Just take a moment to look at verse 23. We are from below. He is from above. We are of this world. He is not. What it truly means to follow Jesus is to believe that this is true.

That he is from above and not of this world. That he is I am. That Jesus is God. When the Jews ask, verse 25, Who are you?

I think it's kind of like an excuse me. Did you just say what I think you did? Look at the previous verse they're responding to. Sandwiched between two accusations that they will die in their sins is the proclamation, unless you believe that I am here.

[16 : 32] This I am is just like the I am of taking the name of God. And so verse 25, people are just astonished. What? Who are you? Jesus says, I know this is hard to hear, but I've been saying it from the beginning, and it is all coming from the Father who sent him.

This judgment on them, this accusation, this sentencing of dying in their sins, it's hard to hear, but it is from God the Father. It's hard to hear, but Jesus says, verse 28, 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, but speak just what the Father has taught me.

One day everyone will meet Jesus. One day everyone will know the judgment he spoke of is real. One day everyone will either be saved from or die in their sin.

One day everyone will reach a destination. There is a real sense of tragedy and sadness in this passage. There they are all celebrating a festival that points towards the Messiah.

All their time and energy is going into gathering together to worship and call out for salvation. Hundreds of people before them have celebrated the same festival.

[17 : 50] They have lived and died. Time has passed. And now here are people who get to see Jesus Christ arrive. And they misunderstand him. They reject him.

And eventually go on to kill him. In the news, we unfortunately read too often about people who have died on an expedition up Ben Nevis.

And I remember fairly recently reading about an instructor who was leading a team, especially teaching them how to deal with dangerous weather. And he died in what I think was an avalanche.

The instructor, the man in charge, the expert died. Because humans are fragile. We break. We're weak. However strong we think we are.

No one wants to follow the wrong person. But the scary reality is that everyone is. Everyone has a weakness and a flaw. And ultimately, the one we all share is that we are not God.

[18 : 51] And I think we can humbly accept that. None of us are God. Only Jesus, because he is from and is one with the Father, can we follow fully knowing that he will lead us through the darkness and out of the darkness.

God is saying to us through this passage that our biggest fear should not be dying in an avalanche, dying having underachieved in our career, or even dying alone.

Our greatest fear should be dying in the darkness of our sin. Jesus says that he is the light of God, and if we follow him, we will have the light of life.

On Sunday mornings, we've been working through a series in Isaiah, and perhaps in no other book, we see more clearly the promise of God's light to his people. Just listen to a few verses.

Chapter 9, verse 2. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. For those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.

[19 : 58] Isaiah 60, which Robbie preached on last week. Go check it out if you missed it. Verse 1. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

See, darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness is over the peoples. But the Lord rises upon you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

And again in chapter 60, perhaps mostly relevant for this afternoon. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more.

The Lord will be your everlasting light, and our days of sorrow will end. We are all on a journey, and we all reach a destination. The big question for us and for everyone, are we going to be following Jesus?

Are we going to reach the destination only he can lead us to? Are we going to die in sin, or live in the everlasting light of the Lord?

[21 : 07] Let's pray. Father, again, we just thank you for your word. We know sometimes it can be challenging, and we struggle to hear it and accept it, but we pray that you would help us to humble ourselves, to soften our hearts, to continually cling on to the message that you give us through this passage, that you are our salvation.

and we just pray, yeah, that as we go out into our week, that we wouldn't leave this behind, but each day we would be looking to your light to guide us.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen.