The Gospel of John: The Light Shines in the Darkness
Genesis 1:1-4; 14-18. John 1:4-13

This morning as we resume our journey through the Gospel of John, I will attempt to tackle verses John 1:4-13. Please stand and let us read the Gospel together.

4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

My message will fall under three sub-headings this morning: 1) The New Creation; 2) a point of clarification; and 3) The Invitation.

I. The New Creation

Let us begin by reading Genesis 1:1-4, and then we will skip all the way to Genesis 1:14-18, and I want you to pay particular attention to all the “light” references, okay?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.

Now, after God separates the heavens from the earth, and land from the sea, and God creates all the fruits and vegetables and trees, we come to fourth day, and here’s what we read beginning with vs. 14:

And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights upon the earth. And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness.

I’ve read the creation story a thousand times and I’m sure many of you have as well, but I want to bring your attention to the “light” reference that marks the first words that we ever hear from God. “And God said, ‘Let there be light.’” How many of us, when we read that verse, immediately conclude that God is saying, “Let there be a SUN that burns brightly so that there can be light and heat, both necessary for sustaining life on an otherwise cold and dark planet?” I know for most of my life that was the picture that popped into mind. But then I would get down to vss. 14-18, where God clearly creates the sun and the moon and the stars, and places them in the heavens to give light to the earth, to separate the light from the darkness, etc…and that always seemed confusing to me. If God creates the sun on the fourth day, what happened when God said on day 1: “Let there be light!”?
Now, consider how the creation story sounds “in light” of John’s prologue:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the LIGHT of men.

The first four verses of John’s prologue, in my opinion, provide an answer to the mystery of “the Light” that the Father declares in Genesis 1:3.

Consider that, according to John, the Word, the Logos, was in the beginning. All things were made through Him, and “in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.”

In the beginning…at the beginning…the life—and the light of men—was in HIM…the Logos…the Word…Jesus, who was God and was with God, in the beginning.

What if, when God first speaks in Genesis 1:3 and says, “Let there be light,” the Father is not calling into existence a new planet or a new sun…instead, He is calling upon His Son! What if it was Jesus, at the beginning, who first separated the light from the darkness? What if it was Jesus who cast His glory, the glory of God Himself, onto the cold planet long before the sun was even created. By the way, when we get to heaven, the book of Revelation is clear: there will be no sun and moon and stars, there will be no darkness, for the light of God’s glory will provide all the light that is necessary…I think that condition existed in pre-history, and I think that’s a fair reading of the text.

I also I think that picture is loaded with meaning as we make our way through our thought unit this morning. The picture of the Word that we find here in John 1:4 as the pre-incarnate Son of God who first separated the light from the darkness at the creation of the world sets the stage for what John will say next in vs. 5 and 9-13 regarding the New Creation that has come in Christ: the light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And the True Life was coming into the world, but the world did not recognize Him, yet those who receive Him and believe in His name find entrance into the New Creation. We’ll get there in just a bit, but first..

I want to unpack this notion that “life was in Him”. To best understand this word “life” we will need “The Geek with the Greek!” (Please make a bullet point slide of the three words for love) There are three words for “life” in the Greek. 1) Bios is the first word for life, and it literally refers to life in the body…the physical life. Obviously, that’s where we get our word, “biology.” 2) Next, is Psuche, which is where we get the word “psyche” and “psychology.” Psuche is the life of the human soul…that is the life of the mind, the will, and the emotions. 3) Finally, the Greeks used the word Zoe to mean life, but the early church converted that word to mean the eternal, uncreated life of God. In the New Testament, Zoe is the divine life.

As we study the story of creation, we see all three forms of life. First, God creates man out of the dust. Man, like all of the plants and animals, is given physical life, the bios life. Then God imparts the man with the psuche life…the soul-life, which is why we are qualitatively different than the animals. The psuche life accounts for us being rational, moral, and personal. Animals have the bios life, but not the psuche life. But let us not forget that there in the garden, prior to
sin, mankind also had access to the ZOE life… The ZOE life was in the garden, presented in the Genesis 3 as The Tree of Life…the Tree of ZOE.

The picture here is that humans were intended to live forever in perfect fellowship with God, in perfect fellowship with creation, and in perfect fellowship with one another. We were intended to have life, and have it abundantly…every aspect of life-- to live a perfect bios life, with a perfect psyche life, and to live forever as we took in God’s ZOE life…the eternal life. But what happened? We fell…we sinned against God, we came under the curse of sin; and as a result, humans were cast out of the Garden, and access to the ZOE life of God was removed for all those corrupted by sin.

Now, keep that context in mind when John writes, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” John is pointing back to the beginning, and he’s setting us up. He’s saying, “In Jesus, in the Logos, in the beginning, was ZOE, the eternal life…the uncreated life of God.” John makes clear that Jesus was the active agent in creation (all things were created through him…nothing was created without him) and the ZOE that was in the Logos was in the beginning.

But watch what happens as we get to vs. 5. John is going to switch tenses. He is going to transition from pointing back to the beginning, back to the creation, and he is going to connect the dots with his readers in the first century and the 21st century. John is preparing us to understand that this Logos who was in the beginning as God’s active agent in creation, has now reappeared on the stage of history in a new way…a way that no one would have expected. He has returned to make all things NEW…to initiate a NEW CREATION. But before John lets us in on the incarnation of the ZOE…before he tells us about the Word becoming flesh, John concludes his introduction with these words of proclamation…it is a foreshadowing of the entire narrative of His gospel: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Did you hear the shift in tense? For the first four verses, John is pointing back to “the beginning” making clear who Jesus has always been and the role He played in the beginning of all things. But here in the 5th verse, we understand that the Logos still shines BRIGHTLY…even now, after thousands of years. Even now, after the cross. Church, even now…no matter how bleak things look…no matter how powerful the darkness may seem…the LIGHT of the LOGOS, the power of His ZOE, continues to push back the darkness. Are you hurting? Are you afraid? Are you anxious? Are you depressed? Raise up your heads and hear the hope of the Gospel: the darkness does not win! The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it! Do you believe that? Then why do we worry and complain, as though the darkness has overcome the light? The light still shines in the darkness, amen? The whole world needs to hear John 1:5, and even more, the whole world needs to SEE John 1:5 lived out in front of them by those who carry the LIGHT OF THE WORLD within them! Church: say it with me: “The LIGHT shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it!” Don’t just say it church, believe it. Don’t just believe it, BE IT! Be the light in our hurting culture, so they can see and believe that the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Now, before we move on to my second point it’ss once again time for…

A Geek with the Greek! For many of you who grew up reading the New International Version or the King James Version of the Bible, you may wonder about vs. 5 because the NIV reads, “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not understood it;” and the KJV read “The Light
shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.” So let’s talk about what this verb *katalambano* means. According to the Greek-English dictionary, *katalambano* can have a variety of meanings based upon the context. In a normal context, this verb means “to lay hold of.” In an intellectual setting, it would mean “to grasp or seize upon an idea; to comprehend.” But in the context of cosmic dark and light, where there is a conflict...where there is a battle...*katalambano* would indicate who wins out over the other. It would be like saying, “I owned you in that bike race!” or “I snatched the victory from his grasp.” Such is why it would be appropriate to say, “…the darkness did not overcome it…overtake it…eclipse it…obliterate it…or destroy it—try as it might.” Try as it might, the darkness could not win a victory over the Light...the darkness could not snatch away the power of the light that even now shines in the darkness.

NT scholar Leon Morris weighs in on *katalambano* this way:

We do not usually talk of darkness as trying to “understand” light. To take this meaning is really to think of darkness as equivalent to certain people, or perhaps the human race at large. But in this Gospel darkness is not so much people as the evil environment in which people find themselves. The theme of the perpetual conflict between light and darkness is found throughout the book. The verb (*katalambano*) we are discussing here has a rarer but sufficiently attested meaning, “overcome.” It is that that is required here. The light is shining in the darkness. And the darkness was unable to overcome the light. Some authors discern a reference to the Fall. Perhaps more likely is a reference to Calvary. There the light and the darkness came into bitter and decisive conflict and the darkness could not prevail. Probably in his usual manner, John is using an expression that should be taken as true on more than one level.

I think Morris is spot on. John has a gift for writing in a way that is true on many levels. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, and those who walk in darkness have not understood it; nor has the Kingdom of darkness overcome it...thanks be to God! No matter how *katalambano* is interpreted, the truth remains: the Light shines in the darkness! Amen!

**II. A Clarification**

Let us now turn our attention to my second sub-heading, “A Clarification.” If you recall my opening message in this series, I shared with you that there was a common heresy in the ancient world that involved John the Baptist. Apparently, there were those who mistook John for the Messiah...or at least revered John above Jesus, either out of choice or out of ignorance. We find a case of the latter in Acts 19, in Ephesus where John the Apostle is writing his gospel. In Acts 19 vs. 1-3 we read,

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ And they said, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ And he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’

The Apostle Paul then gently corrects these misguided disciples in vs. 4, “And Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. They were about twelve men in all.”

You may recall that the great teaching apostle, Apollos, who preached in Ephesus, “knew only the baptism of John” until Priscilla and Aquila set him straight in Acts 18.
Given this context that we find in Acts, it is more than likely that John the Apostle was all too familiar with “the Baptist heresy,” so right here at the outset of the Gospel, after declaring the truth about the Logos of God who in resides both the Life and the Light of men, John takes a moment to make a clarification. We read beginning in vs. 6:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

If there’s one thing I appreciate these days, it’s a person who can write with clarity, so as not to be confused or misquoted. You know what I mean? Let’s give John the Apostle some credit…this is as CLEAR as it gets. John was sent by God, Jesus IS GOD. John came to bear witness about the light, Jesus IS the Light. John was NOT the light; Jesus IS the light that John came to bear witness to. NT scholar John Stott writes:

This is the first occurrence of one of the key themes of this gospel, ‘bearing witness.’ John the Baptist is particularly identified with this activity. But there are seven others who testify to the truth of God’s self-disclosure in the Word made flesh; the Father, the Son himself, the Holy Spirit, the works of Jesus, the Scriptures, assorted human witnesses, and finally the evangelist himself. In John’s society witness bearing was a serious matter and was the means of establishing the truth.

Church, John the Baptist was a witness…we are all called to be the witnesses of Christ at any cost, and we are to be His witnesses in our Jerusalem, our Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, right? Acts 1:8! We’ll come back to John the Baptist in a few weeks and spend significant time on his “witness” regarding the identity of Jesus.

OK….clarification is complete…we now know with great clarity who John the Baptist is and who he is not. Let us now return to our regularly scheduled program, picking up with vs. 9…which sets the stage for my final sub-heading…

III. The Invitation John writes…

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

As we pick up John’s prologue about the Light, John refers to the Word as the True Light, a light that enlightens everyone. This universal enlightenment is what some call, “common grace.” It is the enlightenment that allowed Heraclitus, Plato, and Philo to discern that there was a Logos of God…they had the enlightenment to know that the Logos was the only way to account for the way things are. This “Common grace” is a gift from the True Light that enlightens all people to some degree, but without the True Light making personally known, even the little light that we have will remain darkness. Without the True Light, even the light that we have will be eclipsed by darkness.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “The darkness will not overcome the light - It never has done so; it never will. You may sometimes call the darkness the ignorance of men, or the sin of men. If you like, you may call it the wisdom of men, and the righteousness of men, for that is only another form of the same darkness.
Such is why, when the True Light was in the world, the very world that was made through Him, the world did not know him. In fact, says John, the Light came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him.

There can be little doubt that John is referring to the people of Israel, the sons of Abraham...these are His people, the people of His Father. As Leon Morris writes,

The Word did not go where he could not have expected to be known. He came home, where the people should have known him. And it was the home folk, “his own,” who “did not receive him.” This brings the rejecters into special relation with the Rejected. They should have known better.

The painful lament here in John 1 reflects the disillusionment of being rejected by one’s own family. Imagine the father who comes home to his family after the war only to discover that no one recognizes him. There are no hugs, no kisses, no banners, no singing, no dancing...just locked doors and looks of indifference. Such is the tragedy of the human condition: The Playwright stepped onto the stage, and the players knew him not.

Certainly there were some Jews who responded to the Word with faith (such as the disciples and many in the Jerusalem church), but John is stating generally what Paul also lamented in Romans 11, that “a partial hardening has come upon Israel.” We will see the sadness of this very situation over and over again throughout the Gospel of John as we did in Luke’s Gospel. But the rejection from those who should have known better is not the end of the story. Remember, says John, the Light still shines in the darkness…and that darkness did not snuff it out!

Hope returns in vs. 12 as John writes, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God…”

Here John turns his attention back to his Gentile, Greek neighbors, and he lets them know that the Logos came not only for “His own,” but for all who will receive Him and believe in His name. The family of the Word is not limited to the circumcised of the flesh, but the Word has come for all those who will receive Him. Like the Apostle Paul, John will come to understand that the “children of Abraham” are not identified by blood, but by those who love Jesus (John 8).

Thus, John begins his gospel in the same way he will conclude it: with an invitation. The invitation is to the reader, regardless of heritage...regardless of station or lineage...regardless of any external factor. The reader is invited into the family of the Word. Should the reader receive the True Light, should the reader believe in the name above all names, there is a transaction that will take place. The Logos will legally adopt the believer into God’s family...He will give the legal right to become children of God. These adopted children will not be as those born into the family, nor as those who have the right blood through their royal lineage; their place in the family will not be a result of their works or their decisions...their adoption into God’s family will be solely attributable to a rebirth; they will be those who have been born again in the Spirit, they will be a “new creation”...the old has gone, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17).

Church, John makes clear that all of the world will fall into two groups of people: those who reject the Word, and those who receive Him, believing in His name. There will be those who are the adopted children of God, and there will be those who are not. This perspective will be
common throughout John’s gospel, as it is in all of the Gospels. The Word has come to us…we must receive Him, believing in His name…and why would we not?

Make no mistake church, this invitation to receive and believe so that one might be adopted into God’s family is the entire point of John’s gospel. As John will conclude in 20:31, “…these things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Church, as we go through the Gospel of John, never forget that the whole point of the Gospel is not to find it “interesting;” rather the point is to invite lost souls into the family of God, to help people meet Jesus that they might become part of the New Creation that Jesus came to initiate. Apart from Christ, we are all spiritual orphans, we are all far from home. May we all take to heart the invitation to be “born again” into God’s family through the Son, the Logos, the True Light…Our Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Let’s pray.