



SIMPLE CHRISTMAS
UNCONQUERABLE LIGHT
John 1:1-5
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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Introduction

Christmas is too complicated. At least, that's how I'm increasingly feeling at the outset of each new Christmas season. And I suspect I'm not alone in my feeling this way.

I know at least one of my kids was thinking something similar, when last week she asked: "Daddy, why are they selling all this Christmas stuff when it's not even Thanksgiving?" Yes, exactly, I thought to myself.

Doesn't Christmas seem like it's become too complicated? Too much wrapping paper, too many candy canes, and too many Christmas cards; too many expectations, too many activities, and too much money to be spent; too much anxiety, too much rushing around, and, frankly, too much stress.

Somehow, we seem to have lost the simplicity of Christmas under the clutter of a thousand other things, so that what we're left with is quite a lot of merry making but very little mystery.

Let me ask you: How do we recover a *Simple Christmas*? How do we step back from the clutter and complexity of what Christmas has become, in order to take in the beauty and mystery of what Christmas truly is?

I'm convinced that the only way we will truly de-clutter Christmas is by dwelling on the profound reality at the center of Christmas.

"The true light, which enlightens everyone," John tells us, "was coming into the world" (1:9). That's certainly something simple, and yet profound. And as John's gospel makes clear, this light is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh. As Jesus himself says: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

But this light is not just any light. This is *unconquerable light*. This is light that cannot be snuffed out. This is light that cannot be dimmed by even the deepest darkness. This is what John means when he says in today's passage: "Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5).

The Darkness of our Fallen World

Darkness. We find darkness quite fascinating. Sometimes we even romanticize it. Edgar Allan Poe had the dark in his tale-tell heart. "It's the finest time to strike," said Napoleon Bonaparte. Batman catches criminals in the dark of night, saving Gotham City from evil designs.¹ We sing about and even celebrate the darkness.

But the reality is that this fallen world is a dark, dark place. It is dark in a concentration camp in Auschwitz, as a young Jewish teenager named Elie Wiesel watches black smoke unfurl from a furnace chimney, carrying the ashes of his mother and his sister into an already dark night sky.

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God himself.

Never.

It is also dark in a hospital performing abortions in Cape Town, South Africa, as one of our recent high school graduates, Kathryn Birkey, is certainly discovering. As she's written her most recent blog post:

I went to the hospital today to start doing post abortion counseling. It was more like during-abortion counseling. I'm actually at a loss for words. It was one of the most graphic, saddening, awful experiences I've ever had. And yes, I may continue doing it. And yes, I had some good conversations with some of the women there. But it was...I don't even know the word. There were about 11 women sitting in hospital chairs in a room. All with hospital gowns on. Nurses everywhere, taking some of them out on beds to give them operations. Some girls coming back from having theirs done. Some girls with pained expressions on their faces. Some crying. Some

¹ Lines taken from a song by Peter Mayer entitled, "The Dark," from *Million Year Mind*.

trying to sleep. Some of them were throwing up. Some of the things I saw I can't even explain to you because they were so awful to see.

There's darkness in Auschwitz. And there's darkness in Cape Town. And, if we peer beneath all the glossy facades, we'll quickly realize that there's darkness in every place in this fallen world of ours.

You see, the Bible is not being overly pessimistic or melodramatic when it refers to the world in which we live, "this present darkness" (Eph. 6:12). What Gandalf the Grey feared for Middle Earth—that Sauron would find the one ring of power and plunge Middle Earth into a second darkness—this has become our reality. Because of the rebellion of our first parents, the whole earth has been plunged into darkness—moral and spiritual darkness.

Unconquerable Light Still Shines in the Darkness

Yet, the good news of Christmas is that no matter how deep and dense is the darkness of our fallen world, unconquerable light still shines—and is not overcome! This is the triumphant note John sounds in these opening few verses. With the Advent of the Son of God, unconquerable light has dawned. The glory of God shines—unstoppable—in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The glory of God shines unstoppable in his life: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). What was the earthly life of Jesus if it wasn't a life full of grace and truth—a shining forth of the glory of God.

But we also see that the glory of God shines unstoppable in Jesus' own death on the cross. Anticipating his own cruel and dark crucifixion, Jesus prays to the Father:

"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." (John 12:27-28).

The glory of God in his life, his death, and of course in his resurrection! Christmas is the advent of unconquerable light; Easter is the triumph of unconquerable light—as the Sun of Righteousness rises with healing in his wings.

He descended into the very depths of the darkness of death itself, embracing the curse of death itself, yet there and on the third day, by the power of God, overcame darkness itself. So we say and we sing:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."
"O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?" . . .
Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54b-57).

Overcoming The Darkness of Your Fallen Human Heart

Unconquerable light has overcome the darkness of our fallen world. But before it becomes real to you and me, unconquerable light must also overcome the darkness of our fallen human hearts. And here is where a real battle lies, if your fallen heart is anything like mine.

While the Bible paints a dark picture of our fallen world, it paints an even darker portrait of our fallen hearts. The Bible says that darkness, not only covers the whole earth, it also shrouds every human heart. We are born into darkness—into spiritual death! And therefore, apart from Christ, we are “darkened in [our] understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in [us], due to [our] hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18).

Unfortunately, however, this dark picture is even darker than we would like to admit. Not only are our hearts darkened so that we cannot see spiritual truth, in our fallen condition *we love the darkness*. This, at least, was Jesus’ own assessment of us: “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (3:19).

You may recall that creepy and sniveling little creature named Gollum from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Gollum found himself trapped in the deepest of dark caves under the Misty Mountains. The one ring of power had taken hold of his heart and driven him there—into the darkness. And over time he became accustomed to living in darkness. Then, eventually, he even began to like the darkness, crave the darkness, need the darkness. So, too, he began to hate the light. Yet, tragically, in the end, he even hated the darkness itself even though he could not forsake it.

We are, in our fallen condition, all like Gollum. We not only descend into darkness, but we like the darkness, crave the darkness, need the darkness.

Believe in the Light And You Will Shine the Light

But how, then, does one find escape from this darkness? The Bible answers that you must see the light—you must *believe* in the light.

Speaking to a crowd of people who were asking who Jesus was, he said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light” (John 12:35-36).

Only by believing in the light—this unconquerable light—can you escape the darkness of your own fallen human heart. Only by seeing the light will you begin to see spiritual realities like the glory of God, the beauty of Christ, the wonder of the incarnation, the joy of the cross, the splendor of the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of eternal life with God.

And, once you see, you will begin *to shine*. As you believe in the light of the world, you will in turn become, as Jesus himself says, “the light of the world. A city set on a hill [that] cannot be hidden” (Matt. 5:14). You will begin to shine for the glory of God as sons and daughters of light—“that you might proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Shatterers of Darkness

Shortly after Kathryn had written her post about the darkness of her experience in the hospital in Cape Town, her brother Taylor, whom many of you know, provided not only a wonderfully affectionate and empathetic response, he also captured with his words precisely what it means to be sons and daughters of light shining in the midst of the darkness of this fallen world. Listen to Taylor's thoughtful response, which summarizes perfectly the burden of today's message:

KGB: Tears. My heart is broken for what you're writing about . . . and I can't believe you witnessed it. How immensely, deeply sad. Right now I'm sitting next to my beautiful newborn son. I'm looking at a candle in the corner of our living room . . . it's just sitting there in the dark, flickering and emitting a warm, comforting aroma.

That candle is you. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. A shatterer of darkness.

Be bold, be courageous, and be broken just like you are already doing. Put on love and don't take it off for anything. You are walking in Jesus' sandals. You are touching with his calloused hands. You are speaking his powerful words. Where religion dares not go, Jesus is. Stay there with him.

This, friends, is our challenge this Advent Season: to trust in the unconquerable light of the world, the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ; to find this unconquerable light living in us and shining through us into the darkness of this fallen world; to be that city set on a hill that cannot be hidden, to be "shatterers of darkness."

Remember, even a very small light can dispel a roomful of darkness. Even a small candle can illumine an entire room. It doesn't take a thousand floodlights to drive back the darkness of night that is around you. And remember that even though light and darkness are opposites, they are not opposites of equal power. "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).²

The light that is in you is stronger than the darkness that is in the world. So, no matter how fierce and foreboding is the darkness of your experience, greater still is the light of the world whose light dwells within you.

Amen.

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² Both points depend upon comments made by F. F. Bruce, *John*, p. 34.