

The Great Light

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Claude Monet was one of the most famous French painters. He started a whole new way of painting called Impressionism. He refused to copy the Masters' realism, and instead used light to create impressions of real life. At the time his works of light were scorned as An Exhibition of Impressionism. Today we look back and praise him and his work as priceless. This morning I want to look back at a light that, at the time, was utterly scorned but now we praise him. Let's see why he's worthy of praise: the true light, great light, total light.

True Light (1-2)

Our passage opens by contrasting darkness and light: **"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"** (9:2). You can hear Andy Serkis' voice from the new Star Wars trailer, "The darkness...and the light." Before we go too far, it's important to say something about "the light." Light is a universally positive image, often associated with spirituality. It shows up even in everyday conversation. Say you're at a Christmas party, the year is winding down, and you hear someone say "I can see the light at the end of the tunnel." It's a good sign that the workload/semester is coming to a close. But if you talk long enough, you'll eventually hear someone use light *spiritually*. "I'm looking for the light." In Austin, you'll hear **"There are many paths to the light. I'm trying to find my way."** What do they mean? *That there's good, indefinite spiritual center we can reach by any spiritual path.* It sounds tolerant and accommodating, but it's actually quite intolerant. This spiritual view of the light says, *"I know you think your way to the light, Judaism, Islam, Christianity is the only way, but think again because my way is better. Despite the fact that you've spent thousands of years working out your beliefs, I'm here to say, off the cuff, you're wrong. My way is the only way, which is many ways."* The pluralistic, spiritual approach assumes it has the light and everyone else is in the dark. Christianity, on the other hand, recognizes the clear differences between religions *and* makes a definite claim about the light. Angels announce in glory, wise men follow a star. The light doesn't give them options. It points in a single direction: **"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, Jesus."** John, a follower of Jesus comments on his birth, **"He was in the beginning with God. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world"** (1:1-4,9). The clear claim is that Jesus is *the* light. He's not claiming to be *a* light, one light among many, but *the true* light. So why do we need the Light? Well, *because of the darkness.* What's the darkness? The darkness that has come over Israel has an outer and inner dimension. Outwardly, it is the gloom of *Assyrian* invasion. They are oppressed by a pagan king who worships Shamash, the Mesopotamian god of light. He deports them, stripping them of their home, and gloom sets in on the northern territories. Christmas is not all cheer and eggnog. Remember the Xmas party? People are looking for the light at the end of the tunnel, an escape from the gloom. Maybe you're anticipating family tension, the reminder of a lost loved one, or that you are alone? Stanley Hauerwas wrote, *"the deepest enemy to Christianity isn't atheism; it's sentimentality."* Sentimentality offers a veneer of Christmas cheer to paper over our troubles. Hope, joy and peace trip off our lips like sound

bites while the *inner* darkness remains. To get beyond sentimentality, we have to go deeper into the darkness, not pretend like it isn't there. What was Israel's inner darkness? *Worship* of false gods. What is worship? It's what you live for, and it may be so ordinary that you don't even notice it, like walking or dwelling. When we dwell somewhere, what do we do? We put roots down, sink our life into a place. We might say, "My life is in Austin." The city becomes part of you. Worship is what you live for, it's part of who you are, where you dwell. I had a friend tell me a disturbing story about Valentine's Day. His mother, knowing that she wouldn't receive the cards and gifts she wanted, contacted each of her family members and told them, specifically, what to send her. What did she live for? *Attention*. If she didn't get it, she do something to get it. We all have these narcissistic fantasies, but she actually dwelt in them. Worship, it's what you live for, it's also *what you can't live without*. It's the thing, if you lost it, you couldn't go on living, For me, it can be *character*. Years ago, after I realizing I'd completely blown my character to bits, I came within inches of taking my life. Why? The thing I loved most—looking good/Christianly in the eyes of others—was taken away from me. Attention looks worse than Character, but its not, not when its what you worship. All idols are equal, equally dark, and no matter how good they seem they push away true light, hope, joy, peace. They cover it up, paper over it. Sdentiment. What can't you live without? We need the true Light. Something powerful enough to deal with our inner and outer darkness, our circumstantial suffering and our inner idolatry. God is saying there's a light that shines, that's so powerful, it turns our idolatrous places into glorious places. It pierces the darkness, but to get it, *you have to let go of what you live for*. **In him is the life and the life is the light of men. Life is made for the Light, the true light.** See, the light isn't an undefined center discovered on any path. Light is defined in the person of Jesus Christ, and to truly live, you have to accept the Light, take it.

Great Light (3-5)

That's the true light. **Verses 3-5** show us the great light, what its like when the Light overthrows the darkness—exponential joy and peace. Variations of the word joy are repeated four times. Why are they so joyful? Like joy at harvest—plenty to eat! Like joy at the spoils of war—cultural treasures. Their full and having fun. Now we read this list and kinda go, eh. Why? Because we have spoil and harvest. We don't live in squalor wondering where our next meal is coming from. We don't even have to wait for the harvest, we just go to the pantry or the grocery store. Cultural treasures? We don't have to wait for victory, the spoils of war are in our laps. Apple and Anthropologie. Have you noticed it's getting harder and harder to buy Xmas gifts? Why? **Presumed joy**. Since we've already bought ourselves lots of gifts, what else do we need? We presume we're glad, when we all really have is happiness. Do you know the difference? **Happiness is fleeting satisfaction in temporal things. Joy is enduring satisfaction in eternal things.** When you watch a child play, have you noticed how joyful and giddy they get? It's like they disappear into a different space and time. We'll say something like, "They have no idea what its like in the real world." But maybe they are in the real world? Maybe we're made for joy that comes from a truly real place. Sociologist, "**Joy is play's intention. And when we realize that intention, our life overlaps with eternity.**" It's the final insight of Nietzsche's Zarathustra in the midnight song: "**All joy wills eternity—wills deep, deep eternity!**" Joy is eternal. It comes from a great, real place. It's not a fiction. If you look at our text closely, you'll notice their joy

doesn't come *from* harvest or spoil; the joy's *like* harvest and spoil. Happiness is just an echo of Joy. There's something deeper, eternal. **Verse 3 says you have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy.** You. **You is the great light shining on their darkness.** He is the joy our play, the laughter of eternity, the gladness behind happiness. Deeper than sentiment, True joy comes from the Great light. He's a Person, not an idea. Born in the city of David, Christ the Lord, but you have to embrace him. Exponential joy and total peace. We're told he breaks the yoke and **rod of the oppressor as in the day of Midian.** He overthrows the outer darkness. How? The same way Gideon overthrew the Midianites. Outnumbered he put his faith in God and with torches and swords beat insurmountable odds. The greater Gideon came, scorned and outnumbered, to overthrow the darkness, beat the odds. His name is the *Prince of Peace*. Prince is a bit misleading, too soft. The word means "commander" of myriads of angels, warriors of light. He is the General of Peace, mighty God to secure it. But Jesus was born 2000 years ago, where's the outer peace? The light takes its time to get here, like the light from star. But it's coming. What started in his first advent is completed in his second. He carries so joy can be multiplied, his Light spread.

Total Light (6-7)

We've seen the true light, exposes our false worship. The great light, accomplishes exponential joy and peace. Now **verses 6-7** show us, in bold print, that Christ is total light. The Light is nothing less than the child that is born (the seed), the son that is given (the branch). The Christmas birth is the dawning of the light. In *Him* is the light and the light is the life of men. **The light isn't platitudinous; it's a person, not just an idea an incarnation.** Light compressed into flesh. Do you know what happens when light is compressed? This week an **unprecedented photo** was taken by an international radio telescope in the high desert of Chile. It captured the birth of a young star named HL Tauri. Do you know how it was born? Compressed by gravity, light and dust merge to form planets and stars. **Light compressed makes new life.** Centuries ago, Light was compressed to form a child, born in a stable, who grew up to be crushed for our darkness, in order to create unprecedented life. Jesus is very light of very light, the Joy of all joys. The wonderful counselor, mighty God. If you accept his light, and take it into your darkness, you can know him as your prince of peace. But you must admit your inner darkness. Many of us are too proud to let the light in. **So we live, dwell in false worship, trapped in sentimentality, trying to squeeze lasting joy out of fleeting happiness.** Will you humbly receive the True light, the great light, and allow the wonderful counselor to do his work? If you do, you get total light. What do I mean? Leap forward to the end of Isaiah and we find the great light shining again, but this time on all creation: "**Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising**" (60:1-3). Who's he talking to? To creation, to Mt Zion to be exact, the metaphor of a new world bathed in light, where God's glory shines so brightly there is no need of a sun or a moon. Christ, the great light, will shine upon us and all creation forever and ever, banishing injustice. Peoples from all nations magnetically stream to him. **He rules, as king of the mountain, in perfect peace, exponential joy, and total light.** No thing will be untouched by the light. The darkness swallowed up. Compressed light will be expressed light, unending. Every harvest and every



spoil will be reminders of his joy. Will you take in the light, exchange it for your darkness? If you do, you can walk in the light, and dwell in the mountain of joy. Christ is true, and Christ is great, but Christ is also all. Total light.