

***The Old Testament Background to the Gospel Light Described in 1 John 1:7–14***

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In 1 John 2:7–14—the text of last week’s sermon, the Apostle John declared that the command to love one another (cf. 3:23; 2 John 5–6) “is true in [Jesus] and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:8). He then instructed the reader that “whoever loves his brother abides in the light” (2:10) but that “whoever hates his brother is in the darkness” (2:11). Because “God is light” (1:5), the text is stressing that our ability to love others is solely due to something new God has done in space and time—something new *through Jesus* (cf. 1:1–3). With the coming of Christ, the light of God’s love burst over the horizon of redemptive history, and with global scope this love of God is creating lovers (4:7–12).

I wanted to take this opportunity to comment on the Old Testament background to the “light” imagery found in this passage. Ever since the first chapter in Genesis, light has been portrayed as a force that overcomes darkness. Intriguingly, whereas most of our internal clocks view sunrise as the beginning of a day and sunset as the end, in heavenly time, darkness comes first and then light. Genesis 1 says, “There was evening and there was morning, day 1” (Gen 1:5). God’s view of time always has light triumphing over darkness, and not the other way around, and throughout the Old Testament hope of evil being destroyed and blessing triumphing over curse is consistently portrayed in terms of the dawning of a new day.

This light of hope is clearly seen in Gen 15. You will recall that directly after Adam and Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden, God proclaimed a ray of good news in Gen 3:15 when he declared that one day a male offspring of the woman would crush the serpent, putting an end to evil and all that is hostile to God. Now in Gen 15:5, in response to Abram’s question about the offspring of promise, God declares: “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your offspring be.” This gospel hope is further clarified in Num 24:17 when the pagan prophet Balaam prophesies that in the last days “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” In times of darkness, stars give hope of the faithfulness of God. But Balaam anticipated the time when a single great star would rise above the horizon and its light would outshine all other stars. This star would be a royal offspring of Jacob who would definitively put an end to evil.

Isaiah built upon this same light imagery when he wrote in Isa 9:2, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them a light shined” (cf. Matt 4:15–16). To what period in redemptive history is Isaiah referring? We get the answer just a few verses later when the prophet makes the bold, familiar assertion: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). (I just love that verse, for it calls this royal, messianic, human figure the “Mighty God” and “Everlasting Father.” Jesus is God!) Now, in this book, Isaiah’s favorite title for this coming royal, divine redeemer is the “servant” of God. And the global mission of the servant is regularly portrayed as one of light: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6; cf. 30:26; 42:6–7, 16; 51:4; 60:1, 3, 19, 20). We should not be amazed, therefore, when John affirms in the first chapter of his Gospel that “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:9). Nor should we be surprised that Jesus himself claimed in John 8:12: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” The tragedy, as noted by Jesus, is that “the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

1 John 1:2 was explicit: “[In Jesus’ coming] the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.” “God is light” (1:5), and in the coming of Jesus the light of God has dawned, dispersing darkness and enabling love light never before (2:8). The command to love “is true in us, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” May we “abide in the light” (2:11), knowing that all who do will become great lovers of others, as God’s love in and through us reaches its intended goal (4:12; cf. 2:5).