

December 20, 2020 by Steve Brandon



The Gospel Is Light

2 Timothy 1:10

1. Christmas

2. Life

3. Gospel

Before our worship service began this morning, I placed a gospel tract in every hymnal (or Bible) in the seat in front of you. It's right in the front cover of the hymnal (or Bible). I want for you to locate one of these tracts, and pull it out. I want to begin by reading through this little pamphlet that explains what a Christian is and how to become a Christian.

This gospel tract is entitled, "The Light."^[1] It begins with a grumpy man in a green shirt, looking into the darkness, with a bright light behind him. The next frame has this man turning around to look at the light. Then, seeing the light, he says, "WOW"! In the next frame, we see a grumpy man in a blue shirt, who is looking into the darkness with the same bright light behind him. The one who was amazed at the light says to him, "Hey! Look at this!" to which man grumpy man in the blue shirt replies, "No way!"

Then, the conversation ensues, back and forth, with the man in the green shirt trying to convince the man in the blue shirt to turn around and look at the light! He says, "No, seriously! Turn around and just take a look at this!" The response comes, "No, I like what I'm seeing here." Then we read the following conversation.

"But that is just darkness."

"Yes, but I'm comfortable with it."

"But this is light!"

"I know. I can see the reflections."

"But that's nothing compared to this!"

"I enjoy looking at the reflections."

"But this is beautiful!"

"What are you, some kind of fanatic?"

"You really should turn around."

"Are you judging me? You are judging me, aren't you?"

"This is incredible! Everyone should see this!"

"Hey! I like what I have here. I accept what You've got. Just accept what I've got."

"But this is it! What you've got is nothing!"

"Nothing!?! ... You arrogant closed-minded @*#%*!!"

At this point, the guy in the green shirt says, "I've got to get closer." He then leaves the panel. Then, the guy in the blue shirt starts speaking to himself.

"How can he say I've got nothing? Why, I've looked this direction for years!"

"... for years and years!"

"I'd think after all those years I would at lease see something!"

"Maybe I should take a look."

"But what if it's not what I hope it is? What if I'm disappointed?"

"At least this way I can still have all this ... "

"Nothing!"

Then, the guy in the blue shirt begins to turn toward the light. He says, "Maybe just a peek wouldn't hurt." So, he turns around to look. Then, he sees the light and says, "Wow! Why did I wait so long?" In the next frame, the guy in the green shirt is talking to a new guy in a purple shirt. He says, "Hey! Take a look at this!" To which the guy in the purple shirt says, "No way! I like what I have here."

The tract then goes on to explain that the light in the cartoon represents Jesus, who said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12). The tract continues then to speak about sin and forgiveness and eternal life, which all comes through faith in Jesus.

This gospel tract is a good introduction to my message this morning, which is entitled, "The Gospel is Light." This is the third of our Christmas messages this year around the theme, "The Lights of Christmas." My aim in these messages is to help us lift the darkness from 2020, which, by all accounts, has been a bad year. We have faced the lockdowns due to COVID-19. We have faced civil unrest and a politically divided nation. There have been massive fires out west this fall. Now, this winter, there have been storms out east. I'm hoping that by considering the topic of "The Lights of Christmas" to help us all be free from the darkness.

I think that my topic this Christmas season is much more needed than I ever thought. I was talking with several men this week who were talking about my messages. Their perspective was that my messages were especially appropriate for the end of 2020. Both of these guys

talked with me about how the effect of everything in 2020 has been worse than I think. One guy described it to me as a general fog that has been over our world for almost a year. It's as if we are in the doldrums of winter, when we have gone weeks without seeing the sun!

It reminds me of a condition called S. A. D. Perhaps you have heard of it. S. A. D. stands for Seasonal Affective Disorder. It's a term that people have come up with to describe the depression that's related to changes in seasons, particularly, the depression that comes during the fall and winter months, when you are forced to remain indoors, and out of the sunlight. My wife, being from California, faces this struggle each winter in Illinois. With the long months of indoors and very little sunlight, it's often difficult for her. So, this Christmas, I bought her a gift to help her with the difficulties of a sunless winter in Illinois. With all of our children in town, we had a gift-exchange yesterday. I gave her a "happy light."^[2] My hope is that she uses it. Just sits in front of it for 15-20 minutes a day, and my hope is that this light will help her feel better during the long winter months. I'm not sure if this can really replace the sun. But at least she knows that I'm sympathetic to her experience in Illinois with the long, dark, winter months. This is exactly what I have sought to do with these messages for you all during this 2020 Christmas season. I have sought to give you a "happy light," by showing you how light can be a help out of the darkness, we have known as 2020.

Two weeks ago, we looked at how Christmas is light. There is something about Christmas that brings cheer to all of us. It's no accident that the common greeting is "Merry Christmas." That is, "Have a happy and joyful time of year!" Light and happiness and joy is evident in the Bible's depiction of Christmas. Both Zechariah and Simeon spoke of Jesus, as bringing light into the world, brightness out of a world of darkness. The Christmas message is "good news of great joy!" (Luke 2:10).

Last week, we looked at why Christmas is light. It is because Jesus, himself, is light. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Throughout the gospel of John, we see Jesus identified as the light. He is the one who brings hope and joy into the world.

This week, we will be looking at the good news, how the gospel, itself is light. This is where you need to turn to get out of the darkness of this time that we are living in. The gospel, alone, can give true help to put away the darkness. People in our world today will try to escape the darkness through spending on gifts, binging on Netflix, or banking on nostalgic feelings. Those facing the biggest difficult difficulties may seek virtual counseling or join a group-therapy program like "Emotions Anonymous."

But any relief that these things give will only be temporary. There is only one way the path of our present darkness into the light, which will lead you to the true light. It's through the gospel. It is through the freedom of knowing the truth, which sets us all free.

This morning, as we consider this theme of "The Gospel is Light," I want to focus our attention upon one verse of Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:10. We look at this verse because this verse links the coming of Jesus into this world, as bringing light into the world, which comes through the gospel.

There is no more appropriate morning to talk about this than this morning, which is December 20, 2020. Tomorrow is the first day of winter. It is the darkest day of the year. So 2 Timothy 1:10 will guide us to the light. It will guide us to the truth. It will lead us to freedom.

In 2 Timothy, Paul is writing to Timothy, his young disciple. He is urging him on not to be timid or fearful (2 Timothy 1:7). Rather Timothy should "fan into flame the gift of God" which is in him (2 Timothy 1:6). Paul urges him to be a faithful, zealous minister of the word of God, who is not ashamed of the gospel (2 Timothy 1:8), nor of Paul's imprisonment because of the gospel (2 Timothy 1:8). Instead, Paul urges Timothy to boldly trust in the power of God and in the love of God to stand firm on the gospel. Let's pick it up our reading in 2 Timothy, chapter 1 and verse 8.

2 Timothy 2:8-10

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

We see the gospel clearly in verse 9, which speaks about God saving us, not because we are good and righteous and can bring ourselves to God, but because of God's purpose for our lives, and God's grace in our lives, which comes through Jesus. This is no Johnny-come-lately plan. No, this plan came about before time began. Look at the end of verse 9, "which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." That is, before creation, before there was an "in the beginning" God had a plan. He had a plan to save sinners, before we had done anything good or bad. In fact, before we even existed, God gave Jesus to us who believe. That's why our salvation has nothing to do with things we have done. "[He] saved us ... not because of our works" (2 Timothy 1:9), because, our salvation began in eternity past, when God gave Jesus as his gift to us.

Now, in the course of time, that which was promised long ago, came into fruition, when Jesus came into the flesh, "born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Galatians 4:4-5). This is what we celebrate at Christmas. This is what we see in verse 10, which leads me to my first point:

1. Christmas

We see this in the first part of verse 10, speaking of how God's purpose in saving us was carried out.

2 Timothy 1:10

and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus.

This is Christmas, through and through, when Jesus "appeared." That is, Jesus "appeared" on earth as our Savior.

Notice here that Jesus didn't come into existence when he came to earth. He "appeared" on earth. He was not visible before, but now,

coming into the flesh, he was made visible for us to see. Or, to use the phrasing of 1 Timothy 3:16, "He was manifested in the flesh." He came. We saw him.

The shepherds, who came in from the fields, saw him in the manger. Simeon saw him in the temple. The disciples, who walked with him for three years during the days of his ministry, saw him and talked with him. So also did many Jews see him, particularly, those with diseases, who needed his healing hand. They experienced Jesus in a special way. Even the politically powerful people saw him, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, even Herod, and Pontius Pilate.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas: God in the flesh. Immanuel. God with us. We saw him and heard him and experienced him. This is what 2 Timothy 1:10 is talking about. It's Jesus "appearing" as our Savior.

Even his name has significance. Remember what the angel, Gabriel said to Mary? "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The name, "Jesus" means "Savior." Jesus came into the flesh to be our Savior, to save us from our sins, to save us from the wrath of God, and to save us from the terrors of hell. This is the good news of Christmas. Because, with Christmas brought Jesus, who brought life to us. Look again at verse 10:

2 Timothy 1:10

and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

This is the reality of what Jesus did. He abolished the dark things, like death. And brought to us ...

2. Life

Christmas brings life. Jesus coming to earth was a life-saving mission. We were perishing, but God came to save us.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned Louis Zamperini, the World War II hero, who survived a plane crash over the Pacific Ocean and 47 days on a lifeboat, susceptible to the sun and sharks. So this imagery is on my mind (and perhaps on yours as well). So picture with me the fighter jets during the days of war, going on a mission across the ocean. During the mission, the plane is shot down by enemy fire and crashes in the ocean. Miraculously, the pilot survives the crash, only to find himself in a life-boat, drifting in the ocean, heading for a slow death through exposure and mal-nutrition. Until, command center sent out a rescue mission, which scans the ocean surface and spots the lifeboat drifting on the surface. The rescue mission radios coordinates to a nearby ship, who scoops up the pilot and brings him home to safety.

This is what God has done through Christmas. He sent his son on a rescue mission, a mission to save us and give us life! He did it by abolishing death! That's what verse 10 tells us.

2 Timothy 1:10

and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

That's what Jesus did upon the cross. By dying upon the death, he abolished death. One of the great classic of Christian literature is John Owen's treatise on the death of Christ. The title alone is worth the book. He entitled it, "The Death of Death in the Death of Christ." That is, when Jesus died, he abolished death! He wiped it away for those who believe. This ought to bring us to a place where we don't fear death, because Jesus defeated death for us.

This COVID-19 season has brought out many fears, one of the greatest is the fear of death. We were around our dinner table yesterday during a Christmas dinner with my children and their spouses (and a friend). The discussion turned to COVID-19. We all were talking about what we have learned. One person mentioned that we have learned the reality that Philippians 1:21, "To live is Christ and to die is gain," is difficult to believe. It's one thing to say. Yet, it's another thing to really live.

Perhaps those with family understand why this is. In the context of Philippians 1, Paul says that it would be better for those in Philippi that he live (Philippians 1:24). So, he was content to live. But he had to fight to settle for this. He said he was "hard pressed" (Philippians 1:23) to believe this. With COVID-19, we can say that it might be better for our family that we live on. But we ought to be "hard pressed" to believe that to stay is better. That is, if we believe that "dying is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

All of us who believe in Jesus, ought to believe that our death is gain! This is what the gospel teaches us! It teaches us that reality. In the gospel, this is the reality! Jesus has abolished death! He did it by dying upon the cross for our sins! He did it by destroying the enemy of death, itself.

Hebrews 2:14-25

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

When Jesus came as a baby. He came to die upon the cross and raise from the dead, that we might not fear death. This is the gospel! This is the good news! This is my third point:

3. Gospel

2 Timothy 1:10

and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought

life and immortality to light through the gospel.

We see this in the last phrase of verse 10, "life and immortality [is brought] to light through the gospel!" It all began with Christmas, when God became man and dwelt among us.

The plan of the life of Jesus was clear from the beginning. We read the Christmas story together as a family yesterday before opening any gifts. And we reflected upon God's saving plan. That this baby, born in a manger among the smelly animals, would be the savior!

Let's look at it together in Luke 2. This chapter is often called, "the Christmas story." It begins with the census decreed by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1). This census brought Joseph and Mary from Nazareth in the north, to register in Jerusalem in the south. While in Jerusalem, Mary gave birth in the barn with the animals, and "wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger" (Luke 2:7). This is exactly what the angel announced to the shepherds out in the field, ...

Luke 2:9-11

And an angel of the Lord appeared to [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Right from the beginning, before Jesus ever left the barn (or cave or wherever he was born), it was told these shepherds who he was and what he would do. A Savior was born that day for the people of Israel. He was born of the line of David, the king, just as promised in Psalm 89 (which was read for us this morning). This Savior was the Messiah. He was "the Christ," the anointed one. This Savior was "The Lord," the master of us all.

The angel told those shepherds that this message to them was "good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10). It was a good thing that Jesus was born. It should bring us all great joy. Even in 2020, this news should bring us "great joy." As this "light of lights" has come to earth to save us from our sins. There is no better way out of the darkness of 2020, than to believe in the gospel, that Jesus has died for our sins to forgive us and bring us to God. The angel continued ...

Luke 2:12-14

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Note here that the message to these shepherds was surrounded by God's glory. First, before the angel spoke to the shepherds, the angel came in glory, as "the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Luke 2:9). Then, when the angel had finished, the single angel was joined with a whole choir of angels, who praised God saying "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:14). Indeed, Jesus came as a baby. But, he came in glory, not him and his heavenly stature, but the angels who announced his birth.

The glory of Jesus was plain for all who knew him. When John described the ministry of Jesus, he said this: "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). The glory of Jesus came in his angelic birth announcement. His glory was plain to see for all who saw him. And the shepherds saw him, ...

Luke 2:15-20

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This is the wonder of Christmas. That this baby was announced in angelic glory. This glory was confirmed by the shepherds who came and saw these things.

We leave Luke 2 with Mary processing all that had happened to her. Gabriel and promised her that she would have a son in her virginity, impossible apart from the power of God (Luke 1:37). The shepherds came and explained all that they saw and heard. Mary was taking it all in, "pondering [these things] in her heart" (Luke 2:19). We leave Luke 2 with the shepherds returning to their fields and to their flocks, "praising God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20).

The obvious question of application for us this morning is this: Are you like Mary? She was pondering the marvels of the incarnation of Jesus this Christmas season "Are you like the Shepherds?" They were glorifying and praising God this Christmas season? Even through the darkness of 2020, are you finding your hope in the baby born in Bethlehem?

It might be easy for you to say, "Well, if I had an angelic vision; if I saw the glorious appearance of the angelic choir in all their glory; then, I would believe." But I say to you, you have seen the glory. You have seen it in the gospel. We see this connection in 2 Corinthians 4, where Paul connects shows how the gospel displays God's glory. It also shows why some don't believe in the light. Listen to Paul, who describes those who don't believe, ...

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

If you don't believe in the gospel, you are just like the guy in the gospel tract, who had his back to the light and refused to turn to the light. With the light of the gospel behind him, he says that he likes what is in front of him, even if it's total darkness. He is content looking into the darkness, not understanding why he would ever have to turn around to see the light. Why doesn't he turn? Because "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers" (2 Cor. 4:3). They don't want to turn to the light. they want nothing of it.

Unbelievers love the world and the things of the world. So, they pursue after the world and are blinded to the light. They won't turn around. They won't turn to look at "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." If that's the case with you, turn around! Don't be stubborn like the guy in the blue-green shirt in the gospel tract, who likes looking into the emptiness of this world, not realizing that there is glory behind him! Paul continues, ...

2 Corinthians 4:6

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Here, this light theme goes back to creation. The same God who said in the creation account, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), is also the God who brought Jesus into the world. He's the one who shines in our hearts the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. So, we who believe have seen the gospel. We have seen the glory of God! (like the shepherds did!). Remember, Paul was writing to those in Corinth, far from Bethlehem. They never saw Jesus in Jerusalem or Judea or Samaria or Galilee. They came to faith after Jesus died. And yet, Paul says that they saw the glory of God through the gospel.

Have you seen the glory? Are you like the shepherds, glorifying God? If not, it may just be that God has blinded your eyes. If so, I would urge you to turn around! Look upon the light that's shining at Christmas time. Turn around like the guy did in the gospel tract. Turn and see the cross. See that there is something more glorious for you to have, than your own life.

I want to close my message with one more text, which comes with an application: Matthew 5:14-16. In these verses, Jesus talks about how we are lights. We have focused this Christmas season, looking at how Christmas is light, Jesus is light, and the gospel is light. But we also are lights. This is what Jesus says, ...

Matthew 5:14-16

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus said that we are the light of the world. He says that we ought to shine forth for others. How will the world see the light of Jesus, but to see us, the "little lights," who are lights of the world?

Now, there is a way that we shine that is different than Jesus. Jesus shines because he, himself, is light. He is like the sun. We are like the moon. We merely reflect the light of Jesus. Yet, we are lights, reflecting Jesus. And when people see our reflected lights, they ought to be directed toward the source of the light, God himself.

Here is a simple challenge to all of you. Take the gospel tract that you found in your pew and give it to somebody before Christmas. It can be today after church at Walmart. It's better if you give it to someone that you know, because they would have someone to go to if they are interested or have any questions. It doesn't much matter who, but be a light to somebody. I distributed 100 tracts in the chairs this morning. Let's give out a hundred of them before Christmas. We are lights, who have known what it is to walk in the darkness. We know what it is to turn to the light. So let's give the opportunity for others to know the same joy.

We are going to conclude our service by singing Charles Wesley's hymn, "And Can It Be?" I requested this hymn because it captures very well the heartbeat of my message this morning. We should be amazed at the light of the gospel, just like Charles Wesley was in the first stanza:

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Such is the amazement that everyone who believes in the gospel ought to have! We ought to be amazed that we should gain at the expense of our Savior! In the fourth stanza, Charles Wesley describes his salvation in terms of light shining in darkness, which is the essence of the gospel. He writes, ...

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Wesley describes himself in darkness and in nature's night due to his sin. Then he describes the moment when God shone his light into his heart. The dungeon in which Wesley envisioned himself in was filled with light! At that moment, Wesley spoke of his freedom that he found in the gospel.

I trust that this is in your heart this Christmas season. So be a light. Tell others of the light.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 20, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Click here to see a copy of the tract: <https://mwtb.org/products/the-light-tract>.

[2] <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079YBGPM5>.