

The Light of the World

John 8:12-20

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

¹³ So the Pharisees said to him, "You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true."

¹⁴ Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going."

¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one.

¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.

¹⁷ In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true.

¹⁸ I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me."

¹⁹ They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

²⁰ These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Closing Ceremonies

The 2012 Olympics just finished up a couple of weeks ago with a spectacular closing ceremony. Thus, you will be able to relate in some way to what the Mishna says about the closing ceremonies of the “first holiday” otherwise known as the Feast of Tabernacles,

He who has not witnessed the rejoicing at the water-drawing has, throughout the whole of his life, witnessed no real rejoicing. At the expiration of the first holiday of the festival they descend into the women’s court, where a great transformation was made. Golden candelabra were placed there, with four golden basins at the top of each; and four ladders were put to each candelabrum, on which stood four lads from the rising youth of the priesthood, holding jars of oil containing 120 lugs, with which they replenished each basin.

The cast-off breeches and belts of the priests were torn into shreds for wicks, which they lighted. There was not a court in Jerusalem that was not illuminated by the lights of the water-drawing. Pious and distinguished men danced before the people with lighted flambeaux in their hands, and sang hymns and lauds before them; and the Levites accompanied them with harps, psalteries, cymbals, and numberless musical instruments ... Our ancestors, who were in this

place, turned their backs on the Temple of the Lord, and their faces towards the east; for they worshipped the sun towards the east; but we lift our eyes to God. R. Jehudah says: They repeated again and again: “We belong to God, and raise our eyes to God.”¹

No wonder this was the best attended holiday of the Jewish calendar. What a sight that must have been.

I tell you this piece of history because **John 8:12ff** continues Jesus’ teaching at this very same **Feast of Tabernacles**. In fact, the passage we are looking at today ends with Jesus saying these things “**in the treasury**” (**vs. 20**). The **treasury** is inside this “**women’s court**” that they descended 15 steps at the easternmost part of the inner area of the temple to perform this lighting ceremony, meaning that Jesus must have participated in this grand event just prior to his teaching here.

The Feast of Tabernacles was indeed a feast of water and light. You may recall in the last chapter it said, “**On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever**

¹ In b. Talmud, Mishnah *Sukkah* 5:1–4.

believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38). Jesus was claiming to be the fulfillment of the water rites of the Feast of Tabernacles. John 8:12 now says, "Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" D.A. Carson makes the interesting observation that if we take out John 7:53-8:11 from the original text as well as 7:40-52 from Jesus' public utterances, then what we have here are Jesus speaking publically to the people about water and then his very next public words are right here about light.² This is noted in our text by the word "again" (John 8:12).

I explained to you in the section about water that it was especially important to look at Zechariah 14:8, 16-17. "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter ... Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 337.

shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, there will be no rain on them.”

This actually became part of the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles (b. *Megillah* 31a). It just so happens that the verses right before **vs. 8** refer to light saying, “On that day there shall be no light, cold, or frost. And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters ...” (**Zech 14:6-8a**).

Light of the World

When Jesus says, “I am the light of the world,” we have here his second “I Am” statement in the Gospel of John (the first being “I am the bread of life” (**6:35**)). In light of Jesus’ statement about himself as the light of the world, I am going to look at our entire passage today (**John 8:12-20**) through this prism of “light.” This might seem strange at first, since the only mention of light in all of John 8 is this single verse. I

hope to show you why all of our verses must be read this way, and what it means for us that Jesus is the light.

Of course, we know that John thinks very highly of this metaphor throughout his Gospel. Remember that after **John 3:16** it goes on to say, “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God” (**John 3:19-20**). Here, light and darkness are used metaphorically for sin and righteousness, yet also for Christ who has come into the world.

Walking in the Light ... of the Covenant

Something similar will be said in **John 12:25-36**. “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 ... I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.” The idea of walking with Jesus is the idea of doing what he commands, walking in obedience rather than disobedience as those who walk in the darkness.

Just here I want to **plant a little seed in your mind**. As this seed grows today, it will help you make sense of why John only talks about the light for a single verses here, but goes on to speak about such things as “**bearing witness**” and having a “**testimony**” in many of the verses of our passage. To walk in light can be considered **covenantal** language. Consider **Psalm 74:20**, “Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.” See the connection between disobedience, the covenant, and darkness? I’ll mention another verse in this Psalm a little later on.

John speaks here of the “**sons of light**.” This was a very popular phrase used by the people of Qumran by the Dead Sea who regularly attached the light or the sons of light to the covenant. Listen to what they said. “**May God’s anger and the**

wrath of his verdicts consume him for everlasting destruction. May stick fast to him all the curses of this covenant. May God separate him for evil, and may he be cut off from the midst of all the sons of light because of his straying.”³ “The sons of your covenant, bless your name, with all the companies of the light ...with all the tongues of knowledge.” “Accursed be all the spirits of his lot for their wicked plan, may they be damned for their deeds of filthy uncleanness. For they are the lot of darkness but the lot of God is for everlasting light. You God of our fathers, we bless your name forever. We are the nation of your inheritance. You established a covenant with our fathers and ratified it with their offspring for times eternal. In all the edicts of your glory there has been a remembrance of your clemencies in our midst in order to aid the remnant, the survivors of your covenant and to recount the deeds of your truth, and the judgments of your wonderful mighty deeds. You, God, have redeemed us to be for you an eternal nation, and you have made us fall into the lot of light in accordance

³ 1 QS Col. ii:15-16. Taken from Florentino García a Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, vol. 1, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition (Translations)* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997-1998), 73.

with your truth. From of old you appointed the Prince of light to assist us, and in his hand are all the angels of justice, and all the spirits of truth are under his dominion.”⁴ It is interesting that John never uses the word “covenant.” But as we are going to see, he uses other language associated with covenants, and this is quite important for you to understand, if you want to know what is really going on in our passage and the many others like it in this Gospel.

Being in Darkness and Judging Jesus

I am struck when I read John 8 (and many other parts of John), by just how strange the things Jesus says really are. Who talks the way Jesus talked? Go home and read John 8 out loud at the supper table and listen to the strangeness of his language. It will cause you to understand why the Pharisees were so baffled by this man. It sometimes seems like Jesus would make **the Riddler** seem like a plain speaking news reporter.

⁴ 1QS33 Col. xiii:4-10. Ibid., 135.

“I am the light of the world” (8:12). Who speaks like that? “I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going” (8:14). “If I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me” (8:16). And it only gets stranger in the rest of the chapter.

They did not understand him. They said he had a demon. They thought he was raving mad. In vs. 15 Jesus says, “You judge according to the flesh.” These were their judgments of him. It is in no small part to the way he spoke to them. Do you ever stop to consider just how different Jesus was, and that if he were to come here in our midst, how many of us might have the same reaction to him? Or have you tamed the Lord and made him into your image, thinking that if God were actually to come into your presence, he would seem perfectly normal to you (i.e. just like you). I’m not saying Christians wouldn’t accept him, but we do so only because of the grace of God. Were we to judge him by the flesh as they did, we too would think him a raving lunatic.

This reaction is part of what it means to walk in darkness. It means you can't make sense of the light. It seems **strange** and foreign like trying to decipher ancient hieroglyphics. The light seems too **incredible** to you, other-worldly like seeing a flying saucer land in your back yard. It seems **ridiculous** like a cartoon that you know is not reality.

If part of what it means to walk in darkness is to end up judging Christ according to the flesh, then this is how we are to view the specific reaction of the Pharisees to his comments about the light. Their specific statement is, “**You are being witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.**” He says he is the light, they call him a liar and say that his testimony is false. This ends up becoming the main theme of our verses.

Jesus as Witness

Jesus' answer is two-fold. First he talks about his own witness. Then he talks about the witness of another. Let's look at his own witness first, and then ask how this might relate to the light. “**Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I**

am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going” (vs. 14). Here Jesus makes a two-fold reference to himself as God.

He does this by explaining that even if he were the sole witness here, his testimony is true. In doing this, Jesus does not appeal to any other witnesses, though John has already given us many in this book that testify that Jesus is God. To understand how his own testimony is a reference to his deity, it might be helpful to think about **Hebrews 5:13-18**. “For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might

have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”

Very simply, this passage teaches us that God cannot swear by anything higher than himself. To do so would be to commit idolatry. This is like light, which is self-attesting. You don't need anyone to tell you that it is light, unless you are blind. The sun speaks for itself and is its own best witness. It cannot swear by something else to prove it is really light. We swear by things higher than ourselves, and thus demonstrate that we are not divine. But Jesus says that his testimony is true and that he doesn't need anyone else to validate it, just like the sun, because Jesus is the light. See the connection? This means he is either insane or God in the flesh. John's answer is the later. Is it yours?

Jesus' refers to himself as divine [a second way](#). This he does by referring to his [origin](#), which is from heaven. Since this has come up several times already ([John 3:13, 31; 6:32-51](#)), I want to deal with this in a way we haven't looked at

before. I want to do it in a way that returns us to the theme of light. Then I want to relate this to the covenant.

You should recall that there are more passages than those we have already seen in John's Gospel that talk about Jesus and the light. In fact, the book begins this way, "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. 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. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:4-9). Notice the "witness" language again; it is all over this book.

Now recall that John 1:1ff is John's inspired commentary on Genesis 1:1ff. It is not a coincidence that he has light early on in his gospel and that Genesis has light early on in chapter 1. Recall that in Genesis 1:3-5, "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. God

called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

There is all kinds of speculation about what the light of day 1 was. What people don't often focus on is the **role of light** with regard to **covenants**. Make no mistake, Genesis 1 is all about covenant. It is God building his earthly temple so that he might take up residence inside of it, whereby he might rule over the nations in a covenantal relationship.

Recall again **Psalm 74:20**. “Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.” Now I want to bring up another verse in this Psalm. It is **Psalm 74:16**, “Yours is the day, yours also the night; you have established the heavenly lights and the sun.” The reason the Psalm talks about the day and night, the heavenly lights and the sun here is because **they serve as a witness** to God's faithfulness, to his covenant. Jeremiah says God made “a **covenant**” with the day the night (**Jer 33:20**).

Throughout the OT, the heavens (including the heavenly bodies: sun, moon, and stars) are witnesses for God. “I call

heaven ... against you today” (Deut 4:26). This has a covenant context, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death ... therefore choose life, that you ... may live” (Deut 30:19). This is the language of obedience and disobedience to God’s covenant.

Once they break the covenant, God speaks to these witnesses to remember what Israel has done. “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: ‘Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me’ (Isa 1:2). “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed ... evils” (Jer 2:12-13).

Psalm 89:36-37 has a strange saying regarding these heavenly bodies and the witness. “His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established forever, a faithful witness in the skies.” There is dispute over what this witness is. Some think it is David’s throne.⁵ Others think the witness God Yahweh

⁵ Paul G. Mosca, “Once Again the Heavenly Witness of Ps 89:38,” *JBL* 105:1 [March, 1986]: 27-37.

who is “in the clouds.”⁶ Still others think the witness is the sun and moon.⁷

Our translation makes it sound like it is the sun and moon.⁸ If this is the case, it should be noted that around the ancient near east, the sun gods were often called on to be witnesses in covenants.⁹ He/they had a legal obligation to make sure the covenant was carried out and they also insure the stability of the covenant itself.¹⁰ This was the role of the witness.

But often times, the sun and stars stand as a kind of **metonymy**, where one thing stands for another. In this case, perhaps the heavenly bodies stand for God himself. After all, Jesus is called “**the morning star**” (**2 Pet 1:19; Rev 22:16**) and the “**sun of righteousness**” (**Mal 4:2**). He is also the cloud-rider (**Dan 7:13; Matt 24:30; Rev 14:14**, etc.). Job says, “**Surely my witness is in heaven, and my guarantor is on high**

⁶ Timo Veijola, “The Witness in the Clouds: Ps 89:38,” *JBL* 107:3 [Sept, 1988]: 413-17.

⁷ E. T. Mullen, Jr., “The Divine Witness and the Davidic Royal Grant: Ps 89:37–38,” *JBL* 102:2 [June 1983]: 207–18

⁸ An alternate translation is, “... **as the moon it will be established forever. And a witness in the clouds will be faithful.**”

⁹ See Mullen, p. 210, 214, 218.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

... he pleads with a man before God, as a man for his friend” (Job 16:19, 21). Surely, Jesus is the witness of God’s covenant and this is even what Isaiah says, “I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations” (Isa 42:6). So this is some of the background behind why the John moves from Jesus as the light to Jesus bearing witness. The Pharisees are unwitting players in this covenant that God is now carrying out through Christ.

Father as Witness

But now I have said that it is a covenant God is carrying out through Christ. But we can be more specific about this. Indeed, we need to be. For in our passage, Jesus ties his witness to his judgment. While the Pharisees judge according to the flesh, and are thus incapable of seeing Christ, Jesus makes a right judgment.

We have been speaking much about judgmentalism vs. Jesus’ lack of judging, say, the woman caught in adultery. But this does not mean Jesus makes *no* judgments. Indeed, while his purpose is to save and not condemn, this is because people

stand condemned already. And if they will not turn to him, then they will be judged by him for as one person says “his very presence guarantees that humanity divides around him, and a large part of it is correspondingly judged by him.” Jesus says in **John 9:39**, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” Jesus has been given a unique authority to judge, because of who he is (see **John 5:27**).¹¹

Who gave Jesus this right? It was the **heavenly Father**. Jesus now speaks about the Father again. The Father also judges (**John 8:16**). The Father is also a witness (**17**). “**In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true.**” Jesus is referring to places where a person can’t be judged on the basis only of one witness (cf. **Num 30:35**). How many times do you entertain the judgments of but a single voice against another person? That is against ... the Law.

The witnessing going on here is between the persons of the Godhead about the work of Jesus. “**I am the one who bears**

¹¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 340.

witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me” (vs. 18). But again, those walking in darkness do not understand the mysteries of Jesus. “They said to him therefore, ‘Where is your Father?’” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (vs. 19). This is going to turn into a very confrontational discussion later on in this chapter. But for now, we want to look at the reason Jesus brings the Father into this discussion of light and witnesses.

First, it should also be remembered that not only is Jesus light, but “God is light” (1 Jn 1:5); Not only the son, but also the Father and the Spirit. Second, this relationship between the Father and the Son has to be understood as a *covenantal* relationship.

The Father sent the Son here on “a **covenantal commission**.”¹² The Father sent the Son here to fulfill a covenant task. Notice the language later in our chapter, “**And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I**

¹² See Ralph Allan Smith, “The Trinitarian Covenant in John 17,” <http://www.berith.org/essays/j17/05.html>

always do the things that are pleasing to him” (John 8:29). His coming to the world (5:23, 30, 36, 37; 6:39, 40, 44, 57; 8:16, 42; 10:36; 12:49; 14:24) and the works He performs (5:17, 20, 36; 10:18, 25, 32, 37, 38; 14:10, 11; 15:24) are *covenantal* works.¹³ You don’t have to use the word “covenant” in order for it to be staring you in the face, anymore than you have to read the word “Trinity” in the Bible for it to be a biblical idea.

How does this relate to you, then? This relates to you, in that if you trust in Christ, you are **part of the covenant the Father sent the Son to enact**. Listen to the OT way of speaking about the covenant again. “**Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments**” (Deut 7:9). “**Because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers**” (Deut 7:12).

¹³ Ibid.

But Jesus came to fulfill the terms of this OT covenant to bring about a new one. Listen to how he prays in John 17 to his Father. “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:4). The purpose of Jesus as a witness, then, is that he testifies that he came to the world to fulfill this covenant and to bring about a new one in his blood. Like the sun, moon, and stars, he guarantees the stability of the covenant grant as its witness. He is the mysterious figure in the heavenly council come down to earth that testifies to God’s covenantal promises in Psalm 89 and as such he intercedes on behalf of the Great King God the Father and stands as the legal guarantor of the greater promises that are made to you in the new covenant.¹⁴ The purpose of the Father as a witness is that he testifies that he sent the Son into the covenantal arrangement on your behalf. The purpose of both of them as judges is that if you will not believe in this work of the Son, that you will stand condemned on judgment day.

¹⁴ These ideas are found in Mullen, p. 218. Would that Dr. Mullen would have realized that the figure in the heavenly council he identifies with the heavenly objects was Christ. His article is so close to the truth, yet so far from it.

I want to make one point about why it is important to understand the Scripture covenantally. Covenants imply something. They imply relationship. If God is in covenant with the world through a covenant of works, it means everyone has a relationship with him. But it isn't a good relationship, since they have violated the covenant. The covenant of grace allows us to be in a good relationship with God, and this relationship comes through the works of Christ and the very things he is talking about here.

All of this is wrapped up tightly with the idea that **Christ is the light of the world** and that **whoever believes** in him should have life and no longer walk in the darkness. This is made possible because of the new covenant put into effect through the perfect blood of Jesus Christ on the cross where he died as a sacrifice for our sins. Your response to this must be, as it seems it always is in John's gospel, **to believe** in the one the Father has sent; so that in believing, you might have life. Understand that through belief, God puts you into a right relationship with him, so that he is now your Father and the

Son is now your brother. Can this have any other impact than a radical transformation of your whole life, when you understand what happens here?

Thus, your response is to be to walk in that light as one walks in the day. As it will say later in **John 15**, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love” (**John 15:9-10**). He told his disciples in **John 9:5**, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Again, in **11:9-10**, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”

This is not to be a burdensome thing, to walk in the light, but rather a joyous and festive procession as you walk with the Lord in this life. Perhaps this is the reason Jesus chose this moment, at the very **end of the feast**, when the light the lamps and sang songs as only Jews can do to the LORD God

Almighty for his bountiful provisions the previous year. As we learn in the last verse, Jesus spoke these words in the **treasury**, as he taught in the temple. He spoke in a place where all could hear him, in the women's court. A right response to him could be in no more appropriate place than the treasury, where the people would give to God their freewill offerings of money, thanking him for what he has done. This is how you must view good works, as your offering to God in service for his blessings.

Some believed in him that day. But others didn't understand him at all. Yet the witness attested to His own truthfulness. Those in darkness could not see. Those he brought to the light could not turn away. May he who has eyes to see, see and she with ears to hear, hear what the LORD has spoken through the Light of the World who alone gives life. As the Psalmist says elsewhere, **“With [the LORD] is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light” (Ps 36:9)**. **“You have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from**

falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life” (Ps
56:13:1).