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First John
I. In Him Is No Darkness
I John 1:1-5

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It springs forth from the page – the joy, the amazement, the excitement. Even now, at some distance from the event itself, still John finds it hard to restrain his emotion:

We are writing to you about something which has always existed yet which we ourselves actually heard and saw with our own eyes: something which we had opportunity to observe closely and even to hold in our hands, something of the Word of life! For it was life which appeared before us: we saw it, we are eye-witnesses of it, and are now writing to you about it. It was the very life of all ages, the life that has always existed with the Father, which actually became visible in person to us. We repeat, we really saw and heard what we are now writing to you about. We want you to be with us in this—in this fellowship with the Father, and Jesus Christ his Son. We write and tell you about it, so that our joy may be complete.¹

This is what was so exciting: that in Jesus Christ, says John, we saw God! God Himself, in human flesh! The very same claim John made at the beginning of his Gospel: “*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.*”² And we saw Him, writes John here at the opening of his letter – we saw Him with our own eyes, we heard Him speak with our own ears, we touched Him with our own hands, we came to know and to love Him with our own hearts.

In Jesus Christ, God has revealed Himself to us in a way that we can at last comprehend. In Jesus Christ, God has made known to us His nature, His person, His being. And in Jesus Christ, God has opened up before us His will, His intention, His desire regarding us. And what is the great truth about God which Jesus has revealed? Writes John, that “*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*” “*This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*”

“*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*” In the incarnation of Jesus Christ we see that God’s intent toward us, His will regarding sinful, rebellious, suffering humankind, is not and never is to harm, to condemn, to discard, to destroy – but only to save, to restore, to draw near to Himself in mercy, love, and peace. God is light, and in Him is no darkness. Indeed:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*³

That God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all means, above all else, that we are loved by God – and not just when we have dressed up our lives in our Sunday best, but loved even in those places where we are at our worst and weakest and shabbiest. Loved without any preconditions being attached. For it was while we were still sinners, still the enemies of God, says Paul, that Jesus Christ came into this world to reconcile us to Himself.⁴ There is no darkness in God’s will for us, God’s plan for us, God’s intent toward us – He seeks only to save us.

I wish I had written this – it’s so good a summary of the Gospel. But I do want to share it with you. The writer begins with the goodness of God’s Creation back in the opening chapter of Genesis; and the goodness of the life God gave to His beloved human creatures, made in His own image – the goodness of the life He intended for us to live in His Creation:

Yet rather than live under the good care of our Creator, we try to be our own gods. We listened to the devious voice of the serpent rather than the gracious voice of God. I don’t think I need to explain this part of the story very much. We all know that something is fundamentally wrong. Things are not the way they are supposed to be. Children are trafficked. Workers are exploited. People are homeless. We feel isolated and disconnected from others. Our closest relationships—those with family members, spouses, friends—are sometimes racked with conflict and anger. And I haven’t even begun to mention the conflict within our souls. The guilt we carry and the shame that burdens us feel unbearable at times. We don’t feel at peace in our own skin. We don’t do what we want to do, and the things we know we should do seem impossible (see Rom. 7:15-20). No matter how hard we try to change, no matter the methods we use or the people we ask for help, it feels like we’ll always be helpless and hopeless. Who can save us when our main problem is ourselves?

Well, “thanks be to God through Jesus Christ” (Rom. 7:25) that he did not leave us helpless. Christ came down to us, and the Maker was made in the womb of a virgin. The independent became dependent. God got breastfed. He entered the world to take the human plight of sin upon himself. The Creator God came to his own creation to be rejected and killed by his own people. The hands that God made slapped him. The mouths that God formed spat upon him. “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). We didn’t clean ourselves up. We didn’t turn our lives around. Even while we were sinners, in the depths of despair, at our very worst, Christ died for us. He was raised from the dead because he never sinned, so death had no

*power over him. He then ascended into heaven, and now he sits at the right hand of the Father, whence he will come again to judge the living and the dead. When Jesus returns, there will no longer be pain or suffering or cancer or injustice. God will put all wrongs right.*⁵

That God is light and in Him is no darkness at all – that which Jesus Christ has made know to us through His Incarnation, His birth, life, death, and resurrection – that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all means that we can be assured of the love God has for us; be restored through the salvation He has accomplished for us; find peace and joy in life made new, made the way it was always supposed to be, by abiding in His love and salvation. “*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all*” – meaning, Jesus Christ has come to save us and not to condemn us.

“*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*” In Jesus Christ, we have seen something else which is good. That God is never the author of the darkness that we suffer in our lives on earth. Rather, that He is the Helper and Healer – the Light – who brings us through every darkness we suffer. So often in a time of tragedy or sickness or some other form of darkness descending – so often well-meaning people will say to those hurting, “It was God’s will.” Which to the suffering person means that “God is the One who deliberately did this terrible thing to you.” But what Jesus has revealed to us is that we are wrong to say that – that our words, however well-intentioned, simply are not true. In fact, that they are a downright and destructive lie about God. That in Him is no darkness at all means that God is never the source of any evil which befalls us. To paraphrase one of Jesus’ teachings, when His children pray for bread, God never hands them a scorpion instead.⁶ That in Him is no darkness at all means that God is never the source of our sorrow and suffering. He who loves us would never harm us – any more than a loving human parent would ever deliberately set out to hurt his or her beloved child.

One of the most powerful statements of this – and one of the most powerful funeral sermons ever preached – was the funeral sermon William Sloan Coffin, then pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, preached at the funeral of his twenty-four-year-old son, Alex. Alex had died in a single car accident on a stormy night in the waters of Boston Harbor. A well-meaning soul had approached Coffin in his grief, telling him that it was God’s will that Alex had died. In his funeral sermon, this is how Coffin answered that well-meaning, but very wrong and very un-consoling consolation:

*. . . nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels . . . The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is “It is the will of God.” Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.*⁷

That in Him is no darkness at all means that God is not ever the source of the darkness we experience in this world. He does not give us cancer, He does not crash our cars, He does not

break our hearts. To the contrary, that God is light means that He comes to us in the midst of our struggles with the darkness to help us and to heal us – to bring us from out of the darkness back into His light. This is what we see in Jesus – again and again we see Him drawn to those who are hurting, drawn to those who are weeping, drawn to those who are grieving or sick or excluded or in pain. His heart going out to them in compassion – literally the very meaning of the Greek word we translate as compassion – His heart, His inward being going out to them. And through His compassion and power, they are helped and they are healed, they are lifted up and they are consoled. They are made new. They are made whole once again – brought out of their darkness by the light of His love for them and the gift of His compassion toward them and the might of His healing power working within them. I have heard it said that we should never confuse life with God. Life sometimes does terrible things to us – we live, after all, in a fallen and broken world, and we ourselves are fallen and broken creatures. But God never does bad things to us. God brings us only good.

And so it is for us that God is both never the source of our darkness, but can always be found with us in that darkness to help and to heal, to strengthen and to deliver. I've told this story before, but it bears repeating because it witnesses so strongly to this truth about our God. Taylor Field, an inner-city pastor, tells of a woman in his church named Fresca who once lived on the streets of New York City. She was a heroin addict when he first met her, but gradually the church he served drew her in and introduced her to Jesus. The people of that church were gentle with her, and slowly, like ice thawing on a sidewalk, she began to warm up to the realization that God loved her even though she was a mess. Field writes that inch by inch, step by step, things then began to change in her and for her. It wasn't dramatic, but within a few months she had become a very different person. She went into drug rehab and quit her addiction; she got back in touch with her family. She began to smile again, and even to laugh. *“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”*

Then one Sunday after church, Fresca was in the basement restroom when the sexton, unknowingly, locked her in and turned off all the lights. Fresca stepped out of the restroom into complete darkness and began to panic. She screamed, but no one could hear. It was like all her old nightmares of life on the street had come to reality. She frantically began to feel her way along the wall, desperately trying to find a way out. She banged her head on a water pipe, tripped and fell over some boxes. Finally, she got hold of her panic and said to herself, *“All right, I am trapped. I can't see and I can find absolutely no way to get out. So I am going to pray.”* And she got down on her knees in the darkness. And no sooner had she done so than she noticed that she could now just make out something on the far side of the room – that on her knees in prayer she could now just manage to see a slender crack of light coming from beneath the door that led to the outside. On her knees, she crawled towards that light, found the way out, and soon was free.

Later, writes Field, she recounted this experience to the whole congregation. It had become for her a symbol of everything that had happened to her since she had met Christ – of how she had been lost and trapped in the darkness of her addiction, and of how now she was found and made free in the light of God's love for her and grace towards her.⁸ Which is precisely what John wants us to understand when he writes to us, *“God is light, and in Him is not darkness at all.”* That, in the midst of our darkness, we will find Him there beside us – the Light of His presence helping us to hold on and giving to us hope. In the midst of our darkness, the light of His love for us will

prove sufficient to lift us up and lead us through the darkness into the light of life made new, made good once again.

“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” One further meaning of that revelation of Jesus Christ to us. That God is light, and that in Him there is no darkness at all also means that, in the end, the darkness does not win. It means that, when all of history is said and done, the light prevails. It means that on the day Jesus returns to earth in glory, the darkness will be no more. As John puts it in his Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first Heaven and the first earth had disappeared and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, descending from God out of Heaven, prepared as a bride dressed in beauty for her husband. Then I heard a great voice from the throne crying,

“See! The home of God is with men, and he will live among them. They shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death shall be no more, and never again shall there be sorrow or crying or pain. For all those former things are past and gone” . . .

Nothing that has cursed humankind shall exist any longer; the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be within the city. His servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name will be upon their foreheads. Night shall be no more; they have no more need for either lamplight or sunlight, for the Lord God will shed his light upon them . . .⁹

That God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all means that we can be assured, and that we can live our lives even now in the confidence that:

- Love really will prove stronger than hatred
- Goodness really will prove more powerful than evil
- Hope really will prove more durable than despair
- Kindness really will prove more lasting than anger
- Peace really will prove more durable than war
- Laughter really will overcome all our tears
- And life really shall overcome death.

For this is what John saw in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh – and this is what he longs for us now to learn and to believe and to trust: that, truly, *“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”*

¹ J. B. Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 500.

² John 1:14.

³ John 3:16-17.

⁴ Romans 5:8.

⁵ Alex Sosler, A Short Guide to Spiritual Formation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), pp. 20-21.

⁶ See Luke 11:11-13.

⁷ William Sloane Coffin, "Alex's Death," in Thomas G. Long & Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., eds., A Chorus of Witnesses (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 264.

⁸ Taylor Field, Mercy Streets (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), p. 67.

⁹ Revelation 21:1-4, 22:1-5 in Phillips, pp. 547, 549.