

Living in the Light

In last week's study, John offers a simple description of the Christian life: "If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (John 1:7). "If we walk in the light" that only Christ can give us we see everything through different eyes; our relationships are different from the world's thinking; and the healing of God's grace is always available when we fail.



Michael K. Olmsted

On my first visit to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico I had a dramatic experience with light and darkness. The tour guide takes visitors into that magnificent cavern, pauses when you are well beyond the reach of sunlight and turns off all artificial light sources. It is absolute black, with no space or direction indicators. When the guide turns the lights back on everyone is very pleased. We live in the light of each new day as human beings, but the light John references is the love, grace, and forgiveness that believers only know through the gift of Christ.

John is addressing a community of Christians who are experiencing conflict and false spiritual teachings within the church. Among the divisive ideas are gnostic denials that Jesus could be flesh and blood like us, that Christians must observe the laws and sacrifices of Judaism to really be God's people, and that belief in Christ is just another new religion that could join all the religions of the Roman world. So John reaches back to the foundation that Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I (Jesus) have loved you, that you also love one another ... this is how all people will know you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35). John is writing "a new commandment that is true in him and in you." So, if you claim to be God's

grace people, the darkness of this world has to be overcome by the light of God's love. We all know this idea is much more involved than flipping a light switch in Carlsbad Caverns.

Instead of words of shame or threats, John says that in Christ the old commandment has become "new" and "the darkness is passing away and the true light is shining" (v. 8). But John understands that all of his readers are not at the same level of spiritual maturity. So, he addresses children, young people, and fathers in the church.

Some believers are new in their faith, still learning the basics and figuring out how to live as God's children. (v. 12). Some are older and more experienced in their faith, recognizing the reality of evil in their world while knowing Christ has already won the battle (v. 14). Still others are the fathers (and mothers) who encourage, teach, and guide those who are growing in faith (v. 14). There is a simple crucial reminder in this text that we all fit within the family structure of a household of faith; we all must be encouragers, mentors, and teachers if all members of the church family are to reach mature faith. We all have the potential to fail, rebel, or give up, but the love of God offers forgiveness and a new beginning every day.

Our lesson is aptly titled "Living in the Light." Now, there is a title that challenges God's church in our world! The news that I have seen this week in writing this has been particularly horrible: political leaders attacking each other, horrific mass murders, violence around the world, nuclear threats, a volatile stock market, environmental disasters, and some religious leaders trying to bind together politics and God. And we thought the first century was horrible!

John is timely as he calls us to live the Christ life and show the world a better way. Very little has changed since "they" nailed Jesus to the cross.

John says WE MUST BE DIFFERENT! "Do not love the world, or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world" (v. 15). For extra measure, the apostle reminds us that a consuming passion for the world's trophies of success and power are nothing but the cheap prizes of a corrupt world that will not survive (vv. 16-17)! This is the "last hour," many antichrists are coming, and you know they do not represent God! There is an urgency in John's words that should stir an urgency within God's people today.

But urgency is not despair or fatalism. We are here today to show the world a better way. John describes the symptoms of this world's fatal disease: the "desire of the flesh," "desire of the eyes," and "pride in riches." There are two pivotal ideas to know in our spiritual battle: we live in "the last hour" and Christ has already won the war. Consider again the lesson title, "Living in the Light." God is with us. We know that we are safe in God's grace. We have the witness of the cross and resurrection that evil has already been defeated. We know that God's love has already replaced our sins and given us eternal life.

As we live in anticipation of God's ultimate victory, may we increase in our ability to love instead of hate, to trust God instead of panicking or giving up, to reach out to those who are lost in despair and tragedy, to answer hateful words with the forgiveness of Christ, to offer compassion instead of judgment, to draw others into the embrace of our loving Father.

Because the institutional church has too often been influenced and shaped by the world's values, we may give in to discouragement. But we can choose to reject flawed leadership styles and symbols of worldly success. We can choose to follow the example of Jesus. We can choose to speak out. We can choose to love. We can choose to "do the will of God."

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.