

John 1:9-13

Introduction

- John 1:1–5 — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This one [this very Word who was God] was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not a single thing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

It is the eternal Word who was and who still is active in creation, and therefore the creation itself is revelation – the revelation of God. We are living *in* revelation. It is the eternal Word who was also active in redemption, and therefore redemption is, supremely, revelation – the revelation of God. It's in these “miracles” of creation and of redemption that we have revealed and made known to us not just God, but God's desire that we should know Him and have the light of life.

Now, what the creation is proclaiming about God is equally clear and equally available to everyone without exception. All anyone has to do is open his or her eyes. But God's self-revelation in redemption is different. No man or woman or child just opens his eyes and sees redemption. We must have this revelation of God specially brought to us by those who have borne witness about this redemption. That's why the Apostle John is writing this Gospel. And that's why we go on to read in verses 6-8:

- John 1:6–8 — There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for the sake of witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came in order to bear witness about the light.

John was not *the* light, but he was *a* light. In other words, he was not the one *in whom* was the life that is the light of men—he was not that true and ultimate light—but in bearing witness to that light he himself was still a burning and a shining lamp. Later, Jesus will say to the Jews:

- John 5:35 — [John] was a burning and shining lamp [*phaino lychnos*], and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

In bearing witness about the light, there's a sense in which the true light was already shining in and through John. It's in this same sense that we can say the true light has been shining ever since the first Gospel promise in Genesis chapter three. Peter describes the prophetic word of the Old Testament as a lamp shining (*lychnos phaino*) in a dark place (2 Pet. 1:19). In bearing witness about the light, the true light was already shining in and through the “lamp” of the prophetic word. In the darkness, these candles—or lamps—shone brightly, but their light was always a derivative light. The light with which they were shining was simply the light of a witness borne to the true light. And so we go on, now, to read in verse nine:

I. John 1:9 — The true light, which gives light to every man, was coming into the world.

This is not the “true” light as opposed to false and counterfeit “lights.” This is the “true” light that all other lesser lights that came before were pointing toward. In so far as they witnessed to the light, they were channels of that light. But the true light is that which is light in itself. The true light is that which is, in itself, the revelation of God and of that eternal life that’s found in Him; or, as the writer of Hebrews says, “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature” (Heb. 1:3). That’s the true light!

The Apostle says that it’s the true light that gives light to “*every* man.” This is what tells us that even in the lesser lamps that came before, it was this true light that was shining and giving light to men. But now that true light itself—the one that gives light to every man—was coming into the world.

I hope you can see, here, that the point is not “every [single] man who lives” (cf. the discussion in the commentaries and the translation of the NKJV/KJV). The point, here, is that special revelation of God in redemption that gives light to every man, woman, or child who actually comes within the sphere of that light. In verse seven, we read that John “came for the sake of witness, to bear witness about the light, that *all* [*pas*] might believe *through him*.” Obviously, “all” means all those who come within the reach of John’s witness and testimony. So now we read, “The true light, which gives light to every [*pas*] man, was coming into the world.” And once again, “every” means every man, woman, or child who actually comes within the reach of this redemptive revelation (cf. Jn. 8:12; 12:46). It’s here that we begin to see the sovereignty of God’s grace. This is where we begin to be amazed that this light has shined on us and is shining on us even now as the Word is being preached. It’s also here that we begin to see the reality of our accountability in terms of how we’re responding to this light that shines on “every man.” “The true light, which gives light to every man, was coming into the world.” And yet now we go on to read in verse 10:

II. John 1:10 — He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him.

The Light was in the world, but He was specifically in that part of the world where the Jewish people lived. It’s the Jewish people in particular who are being considered here not as anything special, but just as a *part of* the world in general. Nothing more. And so the assumption is that even without any of the special privileges that the Jewish people had previously been given—without any of that, they still should have recognized instinctively this one to whom they owed their very existence as creatures. It’s not that they should have recognized Him just passing by on the road, but rather that as those who came into being through Him and as those living in the creation that came into being through Him they should have instinctively recognized Him in His words and deeds – they should have known Him immediately in the testimony that He bore concerning Himself.

Today, we tend to assume that when the Light came into the world, He would need other external evidences and proofs and witnesses to confirm and support His own. Otherwise, how could we really be held accountable for not recognizing Him? But the truth is that while God has

provided many such witnesses, and evidences, and “proofs,” this was all a merciful condescension to our sinful and inexcusable blindness. When God walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the garden, He didn’t need to convince them that He was God and that they were His creatures. They understood this instinctively because they had been made in His image; and so they recognized their finite dependence as creatures. Charles Hodge writes:

“Adam believed in [the true] God the moment he was created, for the same reason that he believed in the external world. His religious nature, unclouded and undefiled, apprehended the [truth of God] with the same confidence that his senses apprehended the [external world]” (Vol. 1; pp. 200-1).

In the same way, when the Light came into the world—the very world that came into being through Him—that world should have known Him instinctively simply and only in the testimony that He bore concerning Himself. And yet what do we read?—“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him.” The Apostle John emphasizes just how unnatural and how jarring and shocking this reality is by the way he has these three parallel phrases in rapid fire succession:

“In the *world* **He** was,
and the *world* **through Him** was made,
and the *world* **him** DID NOT KNOW.”

Are you just beginning to see, now, the true extent of our blindness? And yet so far we’ve only been told the half of it. In verse ten, we have the Jewish people being considered not as anything special, but just as a part of the world in general. The assumption in verse ten is that even without any of the special privileges that the Jewish people had previously been given—without any of that, they still should have recognized instantly and instinctively this one through whom they themselves and the whole creation in which they lived had come into being. But the fact is that the Jewish people were not *just* a part of the world in general. After reading in verse ten, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him,” we read now in verse eleven:

III. John 1:11 — He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

He didn’t just come to any random heathen and pagan nation. The true light came to that very people to whom He had already been giving the light of redemptive revelation ever since the days of Moses, and even prior to that ever since the days of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. So Paul writes in Romans:

- Romans 3:1–2 (cf. Deut. 4:8; Ps. 147:19-20) — What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.
- Romans 9:4–5 — They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory [the manifestation of God’s presence in the pillar of fire and the cloud], the covenants, the giving of the law [Mount Sinai], the worship [tabernacle and sacrifices and priesthood], and the

promises [prophets]. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ.

The light wasn't just in the world that came into being through Him. He came specifically to those who were His own – to those who had all the advantages and privileges of fourteen hundred years of the Light shining in their very midst, and yet when He Himself came to them—when He *Himself* came to them!—even they did not receive Him. Why? Because even they did not recognize Him or know Him.

Are you really beginning to see, now, just *how* blind we all are by nature? If the Jews ought to have instinctively known and recognized the Light even without any of the special privileges that they had been given, then how much more should they have known and recognized the Light as that which had been shining already in their midst and as the very one to whom they already belonged by covenant? The goal here is not just to point the finger at the Jews, but rather to expose to all of us the native blindness of our own hearts. A blindness that is totally inexcusable and that renders us wholly accountable to God. Are you seeing the true hopelessness of our situation? And are you seeing, now, on an even deeper level how dependent we are upon God's mercy and grace?

After all we've just read about the native blindness of every single one of our hearts, nothing should be more amazing to us than what we read in verse twelve. First listen again to verses 9-11: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him." And now be filled with wonder that the very next words can be these:

IV. John 1:12 — But as many as did receive him, he gave to them the right to become children of God, even to those believing in his name...

From out of that whole mass of blind and unbelieving people in this world, there was, and there still is even to this day, a remnant of those who *have* received him and of those who *are* believing in His name. Can you see the miracle that this must be?

On the one hand, we can talk of these people as a small minority, but there's also a universal freeness in the language John uses. "But *as many as*—*as many as*(!)—did receive him..." One commentator says that this expression "amounts to '*whosoever*' whether Jew or Gentile" (Hendriken). Not only is there a universal freeness here (*anyone* may receive Him and become a child of God), but there's also an emphasis on each individual person. "As many as" is an expression that's constantly inviting us all to ask: "Am *I* one of those who have "received" Him?"

We need to be careful about the common language today of receiving Him "into our hearts." That can be a really vague expression that actually undermines what's really meant. The point is not receiving Him into our hearts, but receiving Him specifically as He has come and made Himself known to us. The emphasis is on receiving Him *as* the eternal Word, *as* the one in whom is life, *as* the true light of the world, *as* the only Savior and Lord.

Have you *received Him*? According to John, this is really the same thing as asking, “Are you *believing in His name*”? The “name,” here, is not just “Jesus.” We won’t hear that name until we get to verse 17. The “name” here is not just a title. If it was, then “believing” might be just intellectual assent. In the Bible, God’s name encompasses everything that we can know of God on the basis of His self-revelation to us. In other words, God’s name refers to God Himself – not to the whole, infinite essence of God, but rather to all the *fullness* of God as He can be *known* by us. We read in Exodus chapter 33:

- Exodus 33:18–20 — Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And [God] said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you **and will proclaim before you my name** ‘The LORD.’ ... But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”

Earlier in Exodus, we read this:

- Exodus 3:13–15 (Isa. 42:8; Hos. 12:5) — Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ **This is my name forever**, and thus I am to be remembered [thus I am to be known and confessed and worshiped] throughout all generations.

Can you see the *goodness* of God when He says to Moses, “I will proclaim before you *my name*”?—And when He even tells Moses to tell the whole people of Israel: “This is *My name*”? Everything that God has made known to us about Himself— it’s *all part* of His name. So when John speaks of *believing* in His “name,” what are we meant to think of so far? What is His name? His name is “the Word”; His name is “the one who was with God and who was God”; His name is “the one through whom all things came into being”; His name is “the life”; and His name is “the light of men.” This is His name. His name is all that He has told us about Himself – about who He is. Therefore, to truly and genuinely believe in His name (contra 2:23-25) can’t possibly be just an intellectual assent to a collection of facts. It must be the surrender of our *whole self to Him*, receiving *Him* in all the *fullness* of *His own* self-revelation (cf. Lenski). This is of the very essence of true, saving faith. One commentator puts it this way: “Such faith yields allegiance to the Word, trusts him completely, acknowledges his claims and confesses Him with gratitude. That is what it means to ‘receive’ Him.” (Carson)

If these things are so, then this belief must also be something that’s active in us and continuously being exercised by us. If I can truly say, “I have believed,” then I will also be able to truly say, “I am believing.” If I can truly say, “I do believe,” then I must also be able to say even more truly, “I am believing.” John writes: “But as many as *did receive* Him [an aorist completed action], He *gave* to them the right [another aorist completed action] *to become* children of God [yet another aorist completed action], even to those *believing* [a present continuous action] in His name...”

Have you received Him? Have you surrendered your whole self to Him, receiving Him in all the fullness of His own self-revelation – of who He has said He is? Are you believing in His name?

This is the human response that all of God’s self-revelation is constantly demanding and requiring from us. But isn’t this also the response that we should be yielding to Him, as the hymn says, “glad-hearted and free”? Because what does the Apostle tell us? “As many as did receive Him, *He gave to them the right to become children of God.*” The point here isn’t only what God has required from us, but what God has promised to us. The point here isn’t only rendering to God what He is worthy of, but God freely giving to us what we are wholly *unworthy* of. The very first word of that second clause, in the Greek, is the word for “He gave.” What wonderful, beautiful words. “He gave.” What did He give? “*He gave to them the right to become children of God.*” Lenski says very simply: “As regards our relation to God, the Scriptures have no sweeter name than this that we are ‘God’s children’ and belong to his household.”

But wait a minute. How in the world did we get to this place? Having seen what it means to “receive” Him and to be truly “believing in His name,” how can any of this be possible in light of the astonishingly deeply rooted, ingrained, pervasive blindness of our hearts? There can be no two things in all the world that are more opposed and contrary to each other than the nature of my native spiritual blindness and the nature of true saving faith. How, then, is it possible that I should ever receive Him and be given by Him the right to be called a child of God? The Apostle John answers:

V. John 1:12–13 — But as many as did receive him, he gave to them the right to become children of God, even to those believing in his name, **who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**

The point here is very simple. It is the wholly supernatural origin of our salvation. My salvation finds its ultimate cause from its beginning all the way to its “end” in God. If I was not any less blind than any other man, woman, or child in this world—if I was not any less blind than even the Jews in Jesus’ day—then how is it that now I’m no longer blind, but see? How is it that now I’m no longer unbelieving, but believing? This, *in itself*, must forever be to me a miracle—a supernatural work—of God’s saving grace. Listen to what one commentator writes:

“Though human unbelief, viewed in the light of the creation of humanity by God, may be a riddle [something wholly irrational], faith is, in the light of human estrangement from God, a miracle, the fruit of new birth [of God begetting us according to His will; cf. Jn. 1:18]... However hard, accusatory, and humiliating the verdict against human unbelief may be, here and throughout the Gospel its intent is not to throw people back on themselves and to appeal to their ‘better’ nature but to portray to them their radical lostness.” (Ridderbos; cf. Calvin)

Why does John want to portray to us how radically lost we are? So that in coming to see our radical lostness, we might truly believe—and be always believing—in His name. Why does John want us to see how radically lost we are? Not so we’re left in despair, but rather so that we might surrender our whole self to Him, receiving Him in all the fulness of His own self-revelation. We never ask first if we have the new birth. We never “wait” until we have the new birth. Instead, having come to see how radically blind and lost we are, we simply believe in His name. And then *in the very act of this believing* we come to know that we have indeed been born, “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Have you received Him? Are you believing in His name? If not, will you receive Him and believe in Him today? If yes, then let us live this week in the power of that supernatural life of faith that God has begotten us to. If yes, then let us live this week in the peace and the assurance of knowing that we've been *given* the right to be called His children.