

The Gospel of John
Session Eighteen: Jesus the Light of the World
Commentary

John 8:12-20

8:12. Here we find the second of seven “I Am” passages in John’s Gospel. Like water (ch. 4) and bread (ch. 6), light is necessary for life. And the Lord wasted no time in explaining that spiritual light comes to those who willingly follow him. Since light is one of John’s major themes, several assumptions arise from this verse. One is that the world needs light, something John has already told us in chapter 1. There are conditions for seeing and knowing the light—following Jesus. Finally, walking in the light can be permanent. The light of life can change a person so that he or she need never again walk in darkness.

Chapters five, six and seven of John’s Gospel have picked up three major Old Testament wilderness reminders of how God dealt with his people: the comparison between manna and the bread of life in chapter 6; the comparison between water in the desert and the water of the Holy Spirit in chapter 7; and here in chapter 8 a comparison with the pillar of fire which led the people through the wilderness and Jesus, the light of the world.

The Feast of Tabernacles was also known as the Feast of Lights because of the many ceremonies that involved various kinds of lighting. From the earliest verses of the first chapter in this Gospel, John has been fascinated with the link between light and life. Here, however, we do not have a statement about everyone participating in the light, but the exclusion of all who do not follow the true light.

Some interpreters have suggested that Jesus may have drawn his illustration from the great candlestick (Menorah) which cast its light over the room in which he was teaching. Everyone there knew the Menorah would be extinguished after the feast. But Jesus indicated that his light would remain forever.

8:13–14. As we might suspect, Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees. They argued that his own self-defense was not admissible evidence. But of course it was, since he is the omniscient, impartial, and perfect Son of God. They misunderstood and misconstrued everything he told them. When he spoke of heaven, they thought of Nazareth. When he mentioned the Father, they impugned the legitimacy of his birth. When he spoke of home, they concluded he was planning suicide!

As in chapter 7, the issues of origin and destination prevail. And as in chapter 5, the question of who has authority to witness truth dominates the conversation. As Morris puts it: “In the present passage He has two points to make, the one that He is qualified to bear witness though His enemies are not, and the other that in any case His testimony is not unsupported. The Father bears witness of Him. Here Jesus is contrasting Himself with the Pharisees. He knows both His origin and destination, but they know neither. They are not in a position to comment

on His witness. They are totally unaware of the great heavenly verities” (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 440).

8:15–18. Throughout this Gospel the author emphasized words of Jesus that referred to his own deity. There was no question in John’s theology that Jesus is God. This constant reference to the Father both in relationship and authentication forms a uniquely Johannine trait. In the eighteenth century, John Newton described the Light in these poetic terms:

’Round each habitation hovering, see the cloud and fire appear.
For the glory and a covering, showing that the Lord is near;
Thus deriving from their banner, light by night, and shade by day.
Safe they feed upon the manna which He gives them when they pray.

8:19–21. Since Jesus had identified the Father as one of the witnesses to his message, the Pharisees asked, Where is your father? Notice the absence of the capital letter in their question. Jesus referred to heaven, while they pondered his earthly origin. But since they had rejected his message, they had no understanding of the Father. This theme runs throughout John’s Gospel.

All this happened in a public place, at the temple where the offerings were received. But no one assailed Jesus because his time had not yet come. This important phrase appears seven times in John’s Gospel. At the end of the passage Jesus issued a threat that must be proclaimed to all who reject Christ. In human law a clever attorney can create innocence out of guilt and let murderers and rapists go free. But there is no escape from the law of God, no universalism, no second-chance gospel in the message of the New Testament.

One inescapable truth jumps at us from these verses: the heresy that everyone will be saved some day denies the clear teaching of the Bible. There will be no escape for those who refuse the gospel—not in the first century and not today. Three times Jesus warned them, you will die in your sins (vv. 21, 24). Borchert observes, “The use of the singular ‘sin’ here probably is a condemnation on their unwillingness to believe, but the repetition in the plural (sins) at 8:24 means that Jesus rendered his verdict on their evil actions as well” (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 299).

Verse 21 reminds us of 7:34, 36. At that point his opponents pondered whether he would go live among the Gentiles and here they wondered about suicide. In the wider context, John referred to Jesus’ glorification, including the cross, the empty tomb, and the ascension back to the Father.¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).