

John 8:12-59 - "I am the Light"¹

Before the lesson – Prepare the handout, “Kindle thy light within me, O God!” Prepare the handout, “**Literal vs. Symbolic Understandings.**” Have colored pens or pencils for the Information session and the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

How many flashlights do you own?

How many light bulbs are in your kitchen?

Information

One thing we take for granted is light and sources of light. For much of our year, we spend hours of our “day” under light bulbs while it is dark outside.

We in the scientific age know that the sun gives off light. The ancients had a different idea.

“For the ancient Mediterranean, light was the presence of light, and darkness was the presence of darkness. That is, both light and darkness were positive entities having no relationship to any source of light or darkness other than themselves. Thus, the sun did not ‘cause’ daylight nor did the moon and stars ‘cause’ light at night.”²

This may be difficult for us to grasp. Day and night just *are*, like air just *is*. Yet, understanding this ancient concept addresses an often overlooked part of the creation story.

“In the story of creation, the creation of light set itself apart from preexisting darkness, just as the creation of land (earth) set it apart from preexisting water (Gen 1). Note that light (day) was created before the sun and night before the moon. Dawn (morning) and dusk (evening) occur independently of the sun as well...Since all living beings have light, light and life go hand in hand (John 1:4). In this perspective, light and life have their origin in the creative work of God alone; they can be handed on by human beings but not created by them.”³

God alone is the source of light and life.

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc., 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 40

³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 40-41.

- Have a class member read John 8:12.

If God alone is the source of light and life, what is Jesus' point in proclaiming, "I am the light of the world"?

When we want to teach a person, we may demonstrate by saying, "Let me show you." If we understand, we might respond, "I see!" If they trying to convince us of a point of view, they might say, "Let me give you an illustration." Then, we might respond, "I see what you mean."

Jesus is God's illustration, God's demonstration, of God's character. Teachers and prophets are "see-ers" (seers) who tell those of us who have no spiritual in-sight what we need to know. If we listen and if we trust, we convert because now we "see." As the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, put it, "I once was blind but now I see." (That line is adapted from the story of the healing of a blind man, which is in the next chapter of John.)

Some can't or won't believe. The remainder of chapter eight is the light of the world trying to convince people who are contentedly and stubbornly blind that he has come to bring life. They are blind, spiritually. When it comes to Jesus, they have a "blindspot." Jesus offers an abundant life, freedom from anything that hinders our relationship with God and others. and a permanent abode in the presence of God, but they discount or dispute everything Jesus offers.

In the next long passage, Jesus is still in Jerusalem celebrating the Festival of the Booths. We talked about the important symbolic image of water in our study of chapter 7. In this chapter and the next, there is an emphasis on light and sight.

The Festival of Booths included "a ceremony of light with dancing, lasting most of the night for seven nights...At dawn each day the priests, after processing to the east gate of the temple area, faced away from the rising sun and toward the temple and proclaimed that while some of their ancestors had worshipped the sun (see Ezek. 8:16), 'our eyes are turned towards the Lord.'"⁴

Jesus is saying, "Turn to me. I am that light - the essence of life and the temple of God."

"In the actual ceremonies of Tabernacles...on the first night (and perhaps other nights as well) there was a ritual of lighting four golden candlesticks in the Court of the Women...When they were lit, it is said that all Jerusalem reflected the light that burned in the Court of the Women

⁴ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 164.

through which the water procession passed...In the Gospel scene Jesus stands in the same Court of the Women and proclaims that he is the light, not only of Jerusalem but of the whole world.”⁵

[Distribute the handout, “Literal vs. Symbolic Understandings.”]

Jesus and those who are arguing with him are talking on two planes. The Pharisees are talking on a literalistic, black-and-white plane. Their image of God is wooden and unchanging. Jesus is talking on an enlightened plane. He speaks metaphorically and symbolically. Jesus uses an image of God that is not unheard of, but one that puts God on such an intimate level that “father” is seldom used. Yet, it was the most common way for Jesus to address and refer to God.

Note the “powerful set of images: First, there is *the natural imagery of light and darkness*. Then there is *the courtroom imagery of believing or not believing testimony*. Then comes the *theological and cosmic imagery of below and above*... Finally, there is the *household imagery of being either a slave or a child in the family*.”⁶

- Use colors to mark the margin beside the paragraphs which image is being discussed. Circle the places Jesus uses the phrase “I am.” Underline the words or phrases that relate to father or son.

[Plan for several minutes of silence for this exercise. When it looks as if most are finished, ask the following two questions. Then, use the following selections from some Bible scholars to address some issues that may arise.]

What did you notice as you did this exercise?

What made you curious?

At the temple treasury: As far as we know, the treasury was a storage chamber and hence Jesus would not be inside it...The temple treasury abutted on the Court of the Women and was also the scene of Jesus’ teaching in Mark 12:41 [the widow’s mites offering].”⁷

Pharisees and Jesus’ followers not understanding his symbolic language: In “the challenge to common sense meaning, the first shock is to the imagination, trying to conceive a person who is ‘light of the world...the light of life.’ The reader has been prepared for the shock since the very beginning through the most comprehensive meaning statement of all, ‘The Word was God’ (1:1), followed soon by ‘in him was life’ that ‘was the light of all people (1:4)...But the characters in

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 344.

⁶ Ford, 182. (author’s italics)

⁷ Brown, 342.

the drama of chapter 8 have not read the prologue. As so often in John, the meaning is given by Jesus saying things that make sense in terms of the prologue but are almost bound to be misunderstood by his interlocutors.”⁸

Light: “As with the water ceremony, there was biblical background for the theme of light at Tabernacles and, indeed, in the same passages of the Old Testament...’And there shall be continuous day...for there shall be light even in the evening.” {Zech 14:8} The story of the Exodus wanderings that supplied the imagery of the water from the rock also provided the imagery of a flaming pillar that guided the Israelites through the darkness of the night (Exod 13:21).”⁹

Lifted up: “In John’s narrative world, Jesus never talked about the cross. Of course, we are able to read between in lines in hindsight...and see veiled references to the crucifixion. But the disciples didn’t see it coming...The way John tells the story, the Twelve would only understand Jesus’ talk of being ‘lifted up’ as a reference to the cross post facto. ‘So that’s what he meant when he said “lifted up” - he wasn’t talking about being lifted up in honor. He was talking about a cross.””¹⁰

Transformational Exercise

[Distribute the handout, “Kindle My Heart, O God!”¹¹]

It may be tempting for us to place ourselves in a higher realm of spiritual understanding than the contemporaries of Jesus. If we are true to ourselves, however, we must confess that we can be just as blind and dull as they.

This is a prayer written by Howard Thurman, professor at the Howard University School of Religion and author of over 20 books. One of those, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, was, along with the Bible, always in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s briefcase.

We will read this prayer silently. Read through the entire prayer twice; first, just to read it for familiarity. Then, pay attention to how this prayer speaks to you. Read through it again, underlining the sentence or phrase that speaks to you today.

I will close in a spoken prayer. In my prayer, I will give each of you an opportunity to voice those words you have underlined. When I say, “so we pray...” we will begin with the person to

⁸ Ford, 181-182.

⁹ Brown, 344.

¹⁰ Rodney Reeves, *Spirituality According to John: Abiding in Christ in the Johannine Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 54.

¹¹ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1994), 159f.

my left and go around the classroom. It will be fine if someone else has already said the same words. Just repeat them. It is fine if you want to pray the sentiment in your own words. When all have spoken, I'll conclude the prayer with an "Amen."

[Give time for the reading and underlining of the prayer, then conclude with a prayer something like this:] *God of Light, whatever light we have within us is merely a foggy reflection of yours. Jesus, you are the light of the world. It is a dark world within us and outside of us, so we pray...*

[Allow class members to speak their sentences or phrases, then end the prayer with "Amen."]

Literal vs. Symbolic Understandings

Jesus and those who are arguing with him are talking on two planes. The Pharisees are talking on a literalistic, black-and-white plane. They have an image of God that is wooden and unchanging. Jesus is talking on an enlightened plane. He speaks metaphorically and symbolically. Jesus uses an image of God that is not unheard of, but one that puts God on such an intimate level that “father” is seldom used. Yet, it was the most common way for Jesus to address and refer to God.

Note the “powerful set of **images**: First, there is *the natural imagery of light and darkness*. Then there is *the courtroom imagery of believing or not believing testimony*. Then comes *the theological and cosmic imagery of below and above*. . . Finally, there is *the household imagery of being either a slave or a child in the family*.”¹²

- Use colors to mark beside the sentences/paragraphs which image is being discussed.
- Circle the places Jesus uses the phrase “I am.”
- Underline the words or phrases that relate to father or son.

John 8:12-59 (NRSVUE)

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” **13** Then the Pharisees said to him, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” **14** Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. **15** You judge by human standards; I judge no one. **16** Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid, 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 witnesses is valid. **18** I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” **19** Then they said to him, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” **20** He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

21 Again he said to them, “I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” **22** Then the Jews said, “Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come?’” **23** He said to them, “You are from below, I am from above; you are from this world, I am not from this world. **24** I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.” **25** They said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Why do I speak to you at all? **26** I have much to say about you and much to condemn, but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” **27** They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. **28** So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. **29** And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.” **30** As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

¹² David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 182.

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, **32** and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” **33** They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

34 Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. **35** The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. **36** So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. **37** I know that you are descendants of Abraham, yet you look for an opportunity to kill me because there is no place in you for my word. **38** I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”

39 They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you are Abraham’s children, you would do what Abraham did, **40** but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. **41** You are indeed doing what your father does.” They said to him, “We are not illegitimate children; we have one Father, God himself.” **42** Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God, and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. **43** Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. **44** You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. **45** But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. **46** Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? **47** Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.”

48 The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” **49** Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. **50** Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. **51** Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.” **52** The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets, yet you say, ‘Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.’ **53** Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?” **54** Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, ‘He is our God,’ **55** though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him, and I keep his word. **56** Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.” **57** Then the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” **58** Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” **59** So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Read this prayer silently. Read through the entire prayer twice. First, read it for familiarity. Then, read through it again, underlining the sentence or phrase that speaks to you today.

Kindle Thy light within me, O God!¹³

Kindle Thy light within me, that all my darkness may be clearly defined. It is so easy for me to recognize and respond to the darkness in others. Far more conscious am I of the errors of others than of my own. The temptation is ever present to compare my strengths with another's weaknesses - to my own advantage, to my own self-glory. Searchingly, there wells up within me the terrible thought, "I thank thee that I am not as other men."

Kindle Thy light within me, O God, that I may be guarded against self-deception and the vanity that creeps into my spirit where a shadow is cast between me and Thy scrutiny. I must know how through all the reaches of my spirit that my light at its best is dim and clouded with shadow! Teach me the technique by which I can lay bare not merely my failures, my shortcomings, my sin; but also my successes, my strengths and my righteousness.

Kindle Thy light within me, O God, that Thy glow may be spread over all of my life; yea indeed, that Thy glow may be spread over all of my life. More and more, may Thy light give radiance to my flickering candle, fresh vigor to my struggling intent, and renewal to my flagging spirit. Without Thy light within me, I must spend my years fumbling in my darkness.

Kindle Thy light within me, O God!

- Howard Thurman, 1899-1981.

¹³ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1994), 159f.