

The People Living in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light

Rich Nathan
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John 1

Back in the 1970's, there was a wealthy business man named Jaime Jaramillo. He was walking along the streets in Bogota, Colombia, when he saw a little girl climbing down a man hole into the sewer below the streets. Jaime went home and got a wet suit and followed the little girl into the man hole. When he got down there, he saw 90 children living underground in filthy, rat-infested sewers.

At the time, there was a civil war going on in Colombia and many children found themselves orphaned. They were at the bottom of the pile, subject to gang violence and abuse. One gang member said, "We regard these street kids like lice. The best thing is to kill them."

Jaime, this wealthy businessman, didn't see the kids that way. Instead, he devoted his fortune to rescuing as many street kids as he could. He built a children's home where children could be fed and cared for and loved and get an education. Over the next few decades, Papa Jaime (as he is lovingly known) has rescued thousands of children from the streets.

Why do you think Papa Jaime had this belief that all kids – even kids living in the streets and in the sewers – had value? Why do you think Papa Jaime decided to give away his fortune to help children that many people considered no better than sewer rats? Where did he get the idea that every human being, no matter how poor or how abused or how neglected, every human being has worth? Here's what we read in the gospel of John:

Slide John 1:1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

The Bible is a book about light. In fact, it's bookended by light. At the very beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis, the first creative act of God was to make light. And at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, the light of God obliterates all traces of darkness. We read this:

Slide Revelation 22:5

⁵There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.

But between the beginning of creation and the end of time, in the middle of history, God's light broke in through the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. Have you ever noticed in the gospels how many references there are to light at Christmas? At the birth of Jesus, light accompanied the appearance of the angels to shepherds. We read that the glory of the Lord shown around the angel. A star lights the way of the Magi to the house where they find Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Messiah Jesus this way:

Slide Isaiah 9:2

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

When the old man, Simeon, first saw the baby Jesus in the temple, he says that God has given

Slide Luke 2:32

a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."

A lot of people wonder what does it mean to become a Christian. The Apostle Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, said that to become a Christian is to be called out of darkness and into God's wonderful light.

The world into which Jesus was born was a very dark place. There's a wonderful YouTube video of

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Tom Holland and NT Wright picture

Tom Holland who is one of England's most popular historians and writers. In the video, Tom Holland is talking with N.T. Wright, who is one of the world's foremost New

Testament scholars. The video is called “Why I changed my mind about Christianity.” Tom Holland, this writer and historian, said that he always thought that he got his values from the great civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. He thought that these two great civilizations were the source of what mattered to him the most.

But as he studied ancient Greece and Rome, he came to see these civilizations were incredibly dark places. In one of his books, he talks about Julius Caesar who lived just a few decades before Jesus was born. Caesar murdered over one million people who lived in ancient France. He enslaved another million. But rather than being ashamed about this slaughter, Caesar bragged about it.

The poor and the weak had absolutely no value in ancient Rome or Greece. Rome’s economy was entirely founded on slave labor. And their sexual economy was founded on the right of every free Roman man to have relations with anyone they wanted any way they wanted. The world into which Jesus was born was unspeakably dark and cruel to our way of thinking.

So, Tom Holland pondered this question for years: Where did he get his values from? The things that he cared about the most – caring for children, human rights, women’s equality, caring for the sick and the weak – who taught the world to care about these things? The more he studied, the more he found that all of these concerns came from Jesus.

As I said, the world into which Jesus was born was a very dark place. In a Roman family, the father got to decide whether other family members lived or whether they died. A child didn’t have an absolute right to life just because the child was born. The father decided in the first eight or nine days whether a child was going to be welcomed into the family or whether they were going to be put to death. If a child was born with a physical deformity or some kind of disability, Roman fathers typically tossed that child out into the streets in the cold or killed them in another way. Children were legally allowed to be abused by their fathers. They could be sold as slaves.

Have you ever asked yourself why you believe that children ought to be protected? Where did that idea come from? It came from the Bible. And in its clearest form, the idea that every child has worth and every child ought to be loved and protected, that came from Jesus. Jesus welcomed children to himself. He made children the hero of some of his stories. He told people that if they hurt a child, they’d be better off tying a rock around their necks and jumping off a bridge than to face God and what God would do with abusers. But it’s not just what Jesus **said** that made us believe that every baby and every child has worth and ought to be protected. It’s the way God decided to come into the world.

I read a story about a terrible tornado in Kansas that ripped through a little farming community and nearly destroyed one Kansas family's home. The family had a little girl and after the tornado, the little girl was frightened every time a storm came up and she would cry in her bed. One evening, there was a terrible thunderstorm over the community and the thunder rattled this Kansas family's windows. When the little girl's bedtime came, she was afraid to go upstairs. Her father walked her upstairs and put her in bed. He went downstairs and from the living room he could hear his little girl crying. He went upstairs and he said, "There's no reason to cry. It's only a thunderstorm. It will be over soon. You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to be scared." The little girl looked at her father and said, "Daddy, that's easy for you to say. But you don't know what it's like to be little."

What's absolutely amazing about the God that the Bible teaches us about is that God doesn't just stand near to us, telling us not to be afraid, not be scared of what's coming or to cheer up. What's really amazing about the God the Bible tells us about is that **God knows what it's like to be little**. The God we worship at Christmas, the God that we sing Christmas carols to, the God we pray to when we need help – that God knows what it's like to be little. He came into this world as a newborn baby. And it's because God became a baby that God gave every single baby, every single child, divine worth.

Christians throughout the ages have worked to protect children. Christians started agencies to keep children from being abused. Christians started orphanages all over the world to make sure that children who had no one to look after them were cared for and given an education, food and clothes. The God we worship at Christmas was once a baby.

The world that Jesus was born into was, as I said, a very dark place.

How many of you think that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men? Or do you think that men should have all the rights, all the privileges, all the opportunities, and women should have none? And, before you answer that, men, if you are married and your wife is sitting next to you, consider where you'd like to sleep this Christmas Eve – in the garage or in your bed.

Let's ask the question again, do you think women should have the same rights and opportunities as men? Where do you get that idea from? Now God designed the world so a relatively equal number of baby boys and baby girls would be born. But ancient historians who have studied ancient Greece and ancient Rome discovered that in ancient Greek and Roman cities men wildly outnumbered women. The reason is because families didn't want girls. Ancient records show that there was virtually no large family in ancient Greece or Rome that had more than one daughter.

If you're a woman here or a girl and you have an older sister, if you lived in ancient Rome or ancient Greece you probably would not have seen your first birthday. The records in one ancient Greek city showed that of 600 families, only 6 – one percent – raised more than one daughter. Girls received little or no education at the time Jesus was born. They were married off at age 13 or even younger. Before Jesus, men could divorce their wives simply by ordering their wives out of their home.

It was the early church that changed all of this. The early church prohibited putting girl babies to death. The early church forbid men from simply divorcing their wives for any reason. They rejected the double standard which allowed men to have sex with whoever they wanted, but women had to be virgins when they married and faithful to their husbands throughout their marriage. Where did the church get the idea that women had as much worth as men? They got it from Jesus who forbid easy divorce by men. It was Jesus who called women to be among his early followers.

The gospels tell us that the last people to stand by the cross when Jesus died were women. The first folks to proclaim that Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus gave that honor to women. Women were the heroes of many of Jesus' stories. You can trace women's rights in the western world back to one source, Jesus. The world that Jesus was born into was a very dark place.

Do you think sick people should be cared for? That the sick should be entitled to go to a hospital for treatment and be nursed back to health? Or do you think that if a person is sick, they should be left alone to fend for themselves, shunned, rejected by their friends and family? Ancient records tell us that when disease spread in the Roman empire, non-Christians left their relatives to die. It was Christians who alone stayed to help their relatives and friends and loved ones and cared for them and nursed them back to health. Why did they do that? Because of Jesus who healed the sick and taught his followers to always care for the sick.

The world that Jesus was born into was very dark. You know, there's still a lot of darkness in the world today. Here in the United States, life expectancy is declining for the third straight year. For most of the 20th century, life expectancy in the U.S. went up and up. But now in the 21st century, for the third straight year, life expectancy is going down.

Birth rates are dropping. We're more divided than ever. Surveys tell us that nearly half of us as Americans think that the other political party is not just wrong or misguided, but evil. Half of us believe different facts than the other half. Social media just keeps pouring gas on the fire. We're the richest country in history and yet most people are pessimistic about the future for our country. Local communities are collapsing. There are fewer Little Leagues. Rotary Clubs are dwindling. Many of us don't know our neighbors two or three doors down from us. For many of us, work is not what we'd

hoped it might be. We have almost no life-long colleagues anymore. People are much less attached to their workplace.

Most of the social trends indicate that we're more isolated than ever. Long term friendships are in free fall. Very few people keep friends for decades. Fewer and fewer families are stable. Fewer parents stay together through the lifetime of their children. There's a thread that runs through life in America today, and that's a thread of loneliness. Many of us feel increasingly disconnected from others. We're not rooted. We move from home to home and church to church. People think that what's going to solve our problems is politics. If we just give our allegiance to a political party all of these deeper social issues will be healed.

Do you understand that as our connections to each other become more and more tenuous, we find ourselves getting more and more frightened. We rail against other people. Politics has become the way that people feel part of a bigger team. The cure for what's ailing America is not going to be found in politics. Listen. Light is not going to come to our country this Christmas through the Republican Party, and it's not going to come through the Democratic Party, either. Or any other political party. Light is going to come as you and I make the continual decision to follow Jesus who is the Light of the World.

Let me close with this. You know, a lot of people say that faith is a leap into the dark. But faith is not that. Faith is a step into the light based upon evidences. What you're not doing if you decide this Christmas Eve to become a Christian is to choose to step off a cliff over a dark abyss. What you are doing is deciding to take a step toward light based upon reasons, based upon evidences.

I would not be a Christian if the claims of Christianity weren't testable. There are a lot of reasons why I believe that Jesus is who he said he is – the Light of the World, God come in the flesh. There are a lot of reasons I believe that Jesus really did die for our sins and really did rise from the dead and he's alive this Christmas Eve.

But rather than talk about the objective reasons, I want to mention a few things in closing that are testable in our own lives. Jesus made a lot of promises to people. He said that if he came into your life, he'd give you peace. He said if he came into your life, he'd give you forgiveness. He said if he came into your life, he'd give you hope. He said if he came into your life, he'd give you the answer to death.

I've been a follower of Jesus for 45 years and I've tested these promises regarding peace and forgiveness and hope and an answer to death. I've tested it not only in my own life, but I've seen it tested in the lives of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people. I've met people who were addicted to drugs, people who had stage four cancer and were dying, people who lost loved ones, people who were going through a divorce, had

their hearts broken by someone they trusted, folks who had achieved everything in life but still felt empty inside. I've met hundreds and hundreds of people who went through something that for them was truly terrible and terrifying. You meet them six months or a year later and they've changed. They're at peace. They have hope. They feel clean inside. They no longer feel empty. They feel like their lives have meaning. They're not afraid of dying.

When you ask, "What happened to you?" They may use different terms and say "I became a Christian" or "I was born again" or "I gave my life to Christ" or "I finally surrendered myself to Jesus". But whatever way they describe it, what they are saying is "I tested the claims of Jesus in my own life and they worked". I wouldn't be a Christian if when you put it to the test Christianity didn't work.

This Christmas Eve, I want to invite you to not to take a leap into the dark, but take a step toward light, to make a decision to become a follower of Jesus who is the Light of the World and promises to bring light into every dark place in our lives.