

There Shone a Holy Light



On a recent episode of Now or Never on CBC Radio, the host was asking children which one they preferred: day or night. Universally children preferred the daytime. When asked why, the typical answer was “because it’s not dark?”

In childhood, darkness brings something fearful. We can’t see. We feel isolated, alone, and uncertain. We want the closet door to our room closed. We don’t like the thought of what might be under our bed. The noises sound a lot closer and more uncertain. And by removing one of our senses, we feel the loss of control, the uncertainty of the night, and the dread of darkness.

So it’s no wonder that we don’t like being alone in the dark. We want some comfort, some hope, and some reassurance. Revelation 22 is written with those goals in mind. The apostle John writes as an old man to seven churches who are experiencing the darkness of their day. He wants to reassure them that history is working itself out towards a goal of darkness being defeated and light winning. And this has been the message of the Bible: God is light; the people who have walked in darkness are going to have a light break in; the Creator of light at creation is creating a light for people to see the light of the world; and this light will end all darkness. So let’s see how John gives hope to people who are experiencing the darkness of this world.

First, Find God to Be the Source of Life

There are two things that are absolutely essential to sustain life. The first is water. It is essential so that life flourishes. Cities were always designed to be next to a major source of water.

This is true of the city of God. When we come to the last chapter of the Bible, what we have is a vision that John is receiving from heaven, except heaven has come down to earth. The new creation has broken in to this world, and it comes as a garden. The more that we read the description of this garden, we can’t help but notice all the parallels to the opening chapters of the Bible:

Genesis 2:10	River	Revelation 22:2
Genesis 2:9	Tree of Life	Revelation 22:2
Genesis 3:14, 17	Curse	Revelation 22:3
Genesis 1:28	Dominion	Revelation 22:5

But these parallels are just the beginning. All throughout the Bible we have had this anticipation of a day that there is something better coming, a day without trouble or difficulty. And John’s vision is pulling together things from the Old Testament from the vision of the temple in Ezekiel 47 and the hope of a new day in Zechariah 14. He is seeing the end, and everything wrong has been put right. There are no more missing puzzle pieces. It has all come together, and it gives him hope in the midst of his suffering and exile and isolation.

The reason John finds hope and passes on hope to the seven churches is that he sees how God is the source of all life and light.

Just consider the river. In a world where clean water is often hard to find, John sees a river that is crystal and clear and clean. There is no pollution in it, no contaminants. And this river begins at the throne of God and the Lamb. When Ezekiel saw this river flowing out of the temple, it started as a trickle, but as he went downstream, it got deeper and deeper and deeper so that he could not pass through it. The irony of this river is that there were no tributaries. It just was a river that got deeper and deeper on its own.

Contrast that to what happens here on earth. Consider the Colorado River. From its origins in the Colorado Mountains, it snakes its way across the US Southwest and passes through the Grand Canyon, down to the Hoover Dam southeast of Las Vegas. But by the time it gets to the Gulf of California, the river is almost non-existent. Even though there are many tributaries that flow into the Colorado River, the water is used up by the time this 1400+ mile river comes to its delta in the Baja region of Mexico because it has been used up for irrigation in the deserts of California.

But not so the River of God. As Psalm 46:4 says, this river makes glad the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Lord. That's because this river flows from God. And it nourishes the tree of life that is on both banks. We don't need to worry about how this is possible – John is having a vision, and sometimes dreams don't make sense to us, but we know how meaningful they are.

Here this river feeds the tree of life, whose leaf does not wither and the fruit never fails. In fact, it produces fruit every month of the year! And interestingly, it produces 12 kinds of fruit! This is your one stop tree for everything that you need! Not only that, but this tree's leaves have a medicinal property. We are told that they have healing to make every day filled with health and happiness, joy and strength.

What this tree heals though, is the nations. Suddenly the struggle between economics and nature is healed as well! In our day, climate change is a threat to economics and economics is a threat to the climate. But in the city of God, the tree of life brings healing to the world and to economics! And these leaves have a healing power to them so that the hatred between nations, the racism, the histories of division and warfare will be brought to an end just by this tree.

From God and the Lamb, from his rule and his throne, come only that which brings life. This is why Psalm 1 pictures the man who meditates on God's word to find that God himself is the source of all that is good – all life, fruitfulness, joy, and strength comes from God. So what should we do? Psalm 1 tells us to meditate on this word day and night. It will enable you to be strengthened day after day after day. It will bring healing to your soul. It will nourish you and strengthen you. It will renew you. Why? Because even when times are hard, when life is difficult, you can say with the Psalmist in 73:26, my heart and my flesh may fail, but God is strength of my heart and my portion forever! Find God to be the source of your life.

Find God to Be the Source of Light

The other thing that sustains life is light. Light provides warmth and growth. I love to start seeds and try to plant things. I have found that various seeds sprout when they are in a moist, dark spot. But they will not become green until you put them in soil and give them light. Life requires light.

This principle is true not only for plants but for spiritual growth as well. John describes how God is the source of life and light. He brings an end to the curse that was brought about to Adam's line in Genesis 3. The end of this curse is because there is no more darkness. As John will say in his gospel, people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil, and whoever does what is evil loves the darkness (John 3:19-20).

Instead of living in darkness, the curse has been overcome. Darkness ends. The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those dwelling in a land of shadows, on them a light has dawned (Isa. 9:2). The God who said, "Let light shine in the darkness" has given us the light of the knowledge of his glory in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). What Isaiah said – that there would be no more sun or moon (Isa. 60:19) has come true. And what the light of God does is it enables us to see him! So we can say with the Psalmist, "In your light do we see light" (Ps. 36:9). The blessing that Aaron said in Numbers 6, "The Lord bless you and make his face shine upon you and give you peace" (Numb. 6:25) now enables us to see his face.

One of my favourite stories in the gospels comes from Mark 10. A man by the name of Bartimaeus is blind, and he begs Jesus, the son of David, to have mercy upon him. As a child, the little Lutheran Arch Books told this story in poetic form, so that it made me tear up. Why? Because the first thing that Bartimaeus saw when he opened his eyes was Jesus. He opened his eyes and the first thing that he saw was his Saviour, his Healer, his King.

This is the source of life and light. It brings hope and joy and peace. It means that God's presence is with us forever, and we will do what Adam failed to do – rule in this Garden with God forever. He will walk and talk with us. Why? Because of three things.

First, there is no serpent. He is gone. He's been thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:2, 10) There will be no more evil. The fear and dread of the darkness will be gone. There will be no more hiding. No more wondering if something is lurking under the bed. He won't be tempting you any more. Every impulse, every desire to do wrong is gone. Why? Because there is nothing working against your joy.

Second, there are no angels with flashing swords guarding the way to the presence of God (Gen. 3:24). Instead, we can come into his presence with joy.

Why? Because third, the curse has been dealt with. God sent his One and Only begotten Son to become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). The thorns that Adam struggled with in his work, the pain that Eve endured in childbearing – Christ has taken those on himself on the cross. He wears the crown of thorns. He endures the pain of suffering. He takes our sin and gives us life and light.

And so Isaac Watts could write (in “Joy to the World”),

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground!
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found!

The very things that we need to flourish – light and life – come in Jesus Christ. As Charles Wesley would say (in “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”):

Light and Life to all he brings
Risen with healing in its wings!
Mild He lays his glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth!

Here is the fresh start that comes. Darkness might seem so close. But Jesus Christ has come and will come again to end all darkness and bring his light and life, bringing joy to the world!