



## “Children of Light”

*John 8:12; Matthew 5:14–16; Ephesians 5:6–21*

### **You don’t have to strive to be the light -- you are the light!**

At the first moment of creation, God said, “Let there be light” and there was light (Genesis 1:3). God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness and called the light Day and the darkness Night.

And so it was. Today, though, we have lost some sense of this. We can make light anywhere we want. The light from our cities chases the Night away, obscuring the stars that make up the night sky. The simple throw of a switch or two (and now a spoken command or two) and light floods our homes, banishing the darkness.

But the ancient world was different. The darkness was thick and inescapable for more than a few minutes. People went to bed when the darkness came and rose when it left. The darkness was filled with their fears, the things that go bump in the night. Spirits, demons, monsters, goblins, trolls, and more were just on the other side of a thin veil that became even thinner at night, in the dark. It was almost as if light and darkness were combatants and the humans were caught in the middle.

The book of Job is a case study in the imagery of light versus darkness. Job’s early speech of despair in which he laments that he was born (Job 3) is a curse on light, which is associated with life, and a plea for darkness, which is associated with nonbeing or death. Job’s deficient pictures of the afterlife are similarly pictured as the extinguishing of light, as in the description of death as “the land of gloom and chaos; where light is as darkness” (Job 10:22 RSV). The ruin of the wicked is portrayed by Bildad in terms of light being put out and of the light being “dark in his tent” (Job 18:5–6 RSV).<sup>1</sup>

So it is no surprise that light became a metaphor for the sanctuary that could be found in God; stepping out of the darkness and into the light became a metaphor for salvation, for rescue (1 Peter 2:9). Or, even more dramatically, as Paul puts it in his letter called Ephesians, “once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light” (5:8 above). These believers hadn’t just stepped out of the darkness into the light, they had been the darkness and were now the light. As Jesus told the disciples in his Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world.” Remarkable.

But perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised, for when we come to faith in Christ we begin a new life in him who is the light of the world (John 8:12).

### ***The Light of the World***

The festival of Booths (aka Tabernacles) was a joyous time in ancient Jerusalem. It was part of the Exodus story that the Jews lived out each year in their festivals. Passover festival in the spring was a party to celebrate God’s rescue of their enslaved forebears. Booths, an agricultural harvest festival in the fall, was a celebration of God’s care of those former slaves in the Sinai wilderness. Families were to live in temporary shelters (hence, “booths”) during the seven-day festival, so that they would never forget God’s graciousness in the wilderness.

The ancient Jews used light to express the joy of the great festival of Booths. They lit four giant golden lamps in the temple courtyards that were so bright, it was said they lit up the entire city. But that wasn’t all. The evening Booths celebrations also creatively incorporated the use of light . . . lots of light.

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<sup>1</sup> Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman, Colin Duriez, Douglas Penney, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 2000, 510.

Why so much light? Because the festival was all about God and God's saving grace, and God is the light that overcomes the darkness. "It is you who lights up my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness" (Ps. 18:28); "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear" (Ps. 27:1). God's Law is the light: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). Even God's servant is the light: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness and I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

Beginning in John 7, we find Jesus in Jerusalem for the fall festival of Booths. As a Lawkeeping Jew, Jesus would have come to the temple at least three times a year, for each of the three major festivals. This year's trip to Booths would be more memorable than most. What we find is a man in an ever-growing confrontation with his opponents. Jesus teaches with authority and the crowds wonder where he could have acquired such learning (7:14-24). Whispers and rumors begin to fly around the city; the people begin to wonder why Jesus hasn't been arrested, given what he has said and done. They ask, "Can it be that the authorities really know this is Messiah?" (7:26). In response, the temple priests and Pharisees send out officers to arrest Jesus during the festival, though they are unable to do so.

The confrontation continues to grow. The crowds are divided about Jesus, as are even the priests and Pharisees. When Jesus comes upon a crowd beginning to stone a woman for adultery, he confronts them, suggesting that whoever is without sin throw the first stone . . . and the crowd slinks away, one by one.

Then, with the seemingly innocent statement, "I am the light of the world," Jesus rocks the crowds again. Just as Jesus claimed to be the true "bread of life," the nourishment needed for eternal life, Jesus now takes upon himself the fulfillment of what the light represents. The Law is the light . . . now, Jesus is the Law. Isaiah's servant of God is the light . . . now, Jesus is that servant. God is the light that banishes the darkness . . . now, Jesus is the incarnation of God. And we live in him.

### ***The fruit of the light***

In keeping with all this, Paul urges the believers to "Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true" (Ephesians 5:8b-9 above). Again, Paul doesn't urge them to be the light -- they are the light -- and he expects them to live that way, to display the fruit of the light for all to see. In Galatians it was the fruit of the Spirit, here it is the fruit of the light. God's holy Spirit dwells in all believers; all believers are the light. The question is whether we will do our part in bearing the fruit (Galatians 5:22-23) and displaying the fruit of the light, namely, "all that is good and right and true" (Eph. 5:10). Further, Paul says, "try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord" (v.10).

And what is most pleasing to God? Genuine, true love that is lived out in our relationship with God and one another. Love expressed in the pursuit of justice, in kindness. and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). It is the love that is willing to lay down one's life one's friends. It is the love that puts the interests of others ahead of our own. It is a love that both gives and receives, lover and beloved. It is a love that is genuinely mutual. Thus, we come to chapter 5, verse 21:

- Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (New Revised Standard Version)
- Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (New International Version)

Scholars disagree as to whether Paul meant it to close out the preceding passages or introduce the teachings Paul has for the Greco-Roman households to whom he writes. Therefore, I think it right that the verse serves two purposes and is the lens through which we can understand what came before and what follows.

Eugene Peterson has captured the right tone in his rendering of this mutuality expressed in 5:22-33 (from *The Message*).

Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands.

Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ’s love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They’re really doing themselves a favor—since they’re already “one” in marriage.

Look at the verbs. What do they tell us about Paul’s vision of a God-infused marriage, the most mutual relationship any of us know?

- Understand
- Support
- Cherish
- Submit
- go all out
- give
- bring the best out
- feed
- pamper
- love
- honor

I’m no marriage counselor, but I’d be surprised if a professional could do much better with this than Paul. It is important for us to see that Paul is working outward from the biblical perspective on love. True love looks to the good of the beloved. True love is built upon a foundation of trust and faithfulness, from which one can go all out.

We live in a time when some Christians trip over the word “subject to /submit,” imagining that Paul would write the same letter to us. But he would not. Paul is not writing from our time and culture. He is writing in the first century, where his counsel to husbands would be seen as bizarre, wrong-headed, and downright revolutionary. Husbands had all the power, all the rights. A wife’s world was restricted to the private area of the home. She had little education and no public life. There can’t be many wives today who would want to switch places with any first century wife. Husbands might, but not wives. It is the husband’s world that is being turned upside here.<sup>2</sup>

And so, in Christ, love is expressed in mutuality, being servants of one another. It really isn’t more complicated than that.

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<sup>2</sup> If you’d like a clearer picture of the first-century Greco-Roman world, I urge you to pick up a copy of Sarah Ruden’s book, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. Ruden is a classicist who knows that world better than most.