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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## THE LIGHT THAT SHINES IN THE DARK

By Ron Allen

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it" (John 1:1-5).*

In Outback Australia there is a phenomenon known to the Aboriginal people as 'Min Min' lights. In the long dry season, when atmospheric heat builds and thunder storms are plentiful, brilliant round shapes often appear out of nowhere, bobbing across the landscape. Old-timers working on isolated cattle ranches tell tales of being followed for hours at a time by these curious bouncing balls of light.

A friend of mine who once manned a lonely outback railway depot told me of a so-called encounter with a 'Min Min' light. Once weekly, a train would bring mail. Rather than stop unnecessarily, the engine man would slow the train while the guard would lean out and throw the mail bag down to the ground. My friend would take a stroll across to the tracks to pick up the mail and wave to the guard as the train pulled away.

One particularly hot, dark night, a perfect night for Min Mins to show themselves, the guard thought to play a trick. He found some old rags which he made into a tight ball and sprinkled with diesel fuel. The train clunked and rattled toward the drop point. My friend waited in the dark. At the critical moment the guard put a match to the rag ball and threw it out the door. My friend yelped in fright and ran for his life. He rushed into his house, slamming the door behind him. When he recovered his composure, he assured his wife that he had been chased by a Min Min light.

In the first few sentences of his book, John the Evangelist introduces us to some of his major themes. For him, Jesus is **life** and **light** (8:12). **Darkness** is the environment of jeopardy and harm in which any evil shock is possible when least expected. For example: *"The person who walks in the dark does not know where he is going (John 13:35). Darkness* is dominated by ignorance of God. To see Jesus is to see the One who sent him and to thus come out of the darkness into the light (John 12:45, 46).

Human obstinacy is a component of the darkness. *"Men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).* It consists of the unhappy state of human relationships in which men and women realize the **darkness** in their squabbles, their resentments and hatreds for one another. *"Whoever hates his brother walks around in the darkness" (1 John 2:9, 11). "But if we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7).*

This is **darkness**: Ignorance of God; hostility to God; the dysfunctional condition of human relationships in which men and women do not love each other but live in a settled state of fear and aggression. It is tumultuous, sick, exhausting and sad. It is chaotic

like the unruly void before creation (Genesis 1:2).

For John, the primeval night is a figure of the world before it was illumined by the living WORD—the light. He says that the *"light shines in the darkness" (1:5).* That is to say: it *has* shined, and it continues to do so. The shining is nothing less than the life of God expressed in the humanity of Christ.

The light has especially shined in the world since Bethlehem. Yet Jesus had shined on the human race before then. The Hebrew people saw his pre-dawn gleaming in the events of their own history. But they were not the only ones upon whose path the light fell. The Wise Men from the East who followed the star to his birthplace are an example of peoples outside the nation of Israel who glimpsed him. Others can be named: Melchizedek of Salem, Ruth the Moabitess, the Widow of Zarephath, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the Queen of Sheba.

All these individuals were enlightened by reason of their encounter with other persons in whom the light was manifest. Melchizedek met Abram, and acknowledged God was with him. Ruth met Boaz, the Kinsman Redeemer. The Widow of Zarephath met Elijah the prophet, a dim reflection of Jesus. The queen of Sheba met Solomon whose wisdom was a sign pointing to Christ. Nebuchadnezzar met Daniel, also a type of Christ. The light came to these men and women in living form. What they beheld was only a dull glow, but enough to inform them that they were seeing something extra-mundane; something more than human. They were witnessing small intimations of the Light of Life.

When Jesus came, that which in others had been a flickering candle became a blazing beacon. Faint glimmerings became the Sun of Righteousness. Myriad hints of a God of grace and mercy that sparkled here and there through time and tide were at last concentrated in one brilliant life. The light shined in the dark; it is shining still.

*"The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it."* Alternatively: *"The darkness has not overcome it"* (English Standard Version). *"The darkness can never extinguish it"* (New Living Translation). *"The darkness has never put it out"* (International Standard Version).

There are days in this life when the darkness is palpable. People of Aurora, Colorado know the truth of this. On a night of mayhem and madness, light was snuffed out. Fear and death reigned—but not absolutely. In the terror and carnage, heroism sparked in the blackness. One shielded another with his/her own body. Someone else was cut down in a brave attempt to protect a loved one, a friend; and afterward, courage and compassion in the face of evil. *The light shines in the dark. The darkness has not overcome it.*

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“And this was his message: After me will come one who is stronger than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7, 8).*

Most people have met, in the course of their life, someone who is energetic, enthusiastic, and eager to get things, always the first to volunteer. Such a person usually gets lumbered with an unequal share of what would normally be called ‘mutual responsibilities.’ Being quick to serve, he/she ends by carrying others who are less ready.

For society to function, certain minimum conditions need to be maintained. Some services simply have to be supplied in order that the community not descend into a chaos of failure. Because it is easier to make use of those who are more willing than it is to coax the reluctant, some do more than they should reasonable be asked to do, and others do far less than they ought.

Mark says that the Good News of Jesus began with the preaching of a wilderness nomad called John the Baptizer. People flocked to his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But the distinctive note of his message was this: *There is one coming after me who is stronger than I.* He is much exercised by the thought of a pronounced difference between himself and the One to come.

The nature of the discrepancy is clearly stated: *I am not worthy to even untie his sandals*—not worthy to be his slave. By dint of this confession, John, despite the nobility of his role as Forerunner, acknowledges that he is himself among them that need repentance and cleansing through the forgiveness of sin. The greater worth of the coming One consists in his superior moral strength. John’s recognition of his own status is a foil for Jesus’ spiritual excellence.


The Baptizer’s discrediting of himself brings him directly to a comparison of his ministry with that of his successor. He baptizes with water, but the Stronger One will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Water serves a certain purpose as a cleaning agent. It can rinse dirt from the surface of things but cannot cleanse on the inside. It

cannot make a person wholehearted. That is a task for the Spirit of God. John’s baptism stands for the best that people can achieve in pursuit of goodness and decency: A morality sullied by weakness and compromise. Human beings need help; not mere encouragement, but salvation. They need One who is stronger to rescue them.

If men and women are ever to realize the conditions vital to their survival; if ever they might wring from themselves the necessary moral effort, someone will have to do more than ‘go to meeting and get saved.’ More than clean up their life, or lift themselves up by their bootstraps. There is need for One who is stronger to come to us, immerse himself in our situation, face our challenges and bear our burden for us.

This Christmas we know more than ever that we have not proven our ability to meet successfully the challenges that existence calls us to. The lands most closely associated with Jesus at the time of his birth are right now roiled by hatred and terror. Cities lie in ruins; barren of the milk of human kindness and emptied of the joy of home, of kith and kin. Laughter and love driven out by fear and bitterness.

As the world pauses ever so briefly to acknowledge the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, do we not, in thinking of him, feel a little more homesick than usual? Does not remembrance of the Prince of Peace make us realize that there was/is in him a resource for our fatigued and threadbare spirits which might bear the weight of our moral crisis and lead us across Jordan to the Promised Land for which we were made.

We need not waste time looking for a populist spirituality which does not have at its heart he who was willing to suffer on our account. The world needs more than lovely worship-places filled with well-dressed folk who sing harmoniously and pray fervently. The world needs the Man for Others; Jesus, the Stronger One. 

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Lou Marsh was a religion student at Yale. Not completely satisfied with his studies, he left and went to work for the people in East Harlem. He infiltrated and gained the confidence of a gang of youths who called themselves the ‘untouchables.’ One night a ‘rumble’ was scheduled between the untouchables and another gang called the ‘playboys.’ Lou mediated and the rumble was averted; life and limb were spared. But there was resentment among some gang members. They attacked Lou and beat him to death. Darkness came.

Later, at Lou’s funeral, many hundreds of people came to mourn who had never been in a church in their lives. They came to acknowledge that they had been witnesses of something bright and promising in Lou Marsh. They resolved to perpetuate and cultivate the values they had seen in him. *The light shines in the dark. The darkness has never put it out.*

During the Second World War, thousands of Allied troops were captured and imprisoned by the Japanese when Singapore fell. They were taken into the jungles of Northern Thailand where they were forced to construct a railway into Burma. They endured →

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atrocities at the hands of their enemy. Not many survived.

Towards the war's end, some of those who were still living were waiting to be shipped home. They were near a rail depot. While they waited, a train pulled in loaded with Japanese soldiers. These poor creatures had been crammed into the rail cars like cattle. They were all suffering from various stages of dysentery. The Japanese commanders did not appear to care, even for their own men.

The allied soldiers were still prisoners, still depleted and sore from the inhumanities heaped on them by their captors. But they could not sit still and watch even their former tormentors suffer. They walked over to the rail cars and did what they could to relieve their suffering. *The light shines in the dark, and the darkness has not understood it.*

All over the world, the light that shone first at Bethlehem is shining still. In every nation, culture and race; in every human situation no matter how bleak, Jesus shines his light of hope and grace. He is not just the son of David. He belongs not just to the Jews, not merely to the Christian movement. He is the Son of Man. He belongs to humanity. In the same way that his story was foreshadowed in the history of the Hebrews, so now he does reveal himself surprisingly, amazingly, in humanity everywhere. Not one jot of his shining in the human drama has ever been eclipsed. The darkness cannot overcome him.

Jesus shines in a standard of human living that exceeds the ordinary. When love breaks forth from hate's ashes, we know that *this* is life. Life of this caliber is Godly. God has drawn near.

Jesus showed the world that it is divine to serve. Some religions do not have that. In Hinduism the highest man must be like Brahma, who does not serve. He sits in the jungle, apart, away from life. Jesus taught that self-giving is in the very heart of God. *"I am among you as one that serves,"* he said.

In Jesus, there was light and life because he carried love to lengths that no one had ever before taken it, or even thought of taking it. For him love was so much more than the elemental drive to *possess* another person (the accepted love stereotype in the contemporary West). He spoke of love in terms of undergoing *loss* on another's behalf. For Jesus, love does not acquire, it *endures all things, bears all things.*

After seeing love enacted by Jesus, John said, *"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him"* (1 John 4:16). *"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him"* (1 John 4:9). New Testament writers obtained their idea of what God is like from their knowledge of Jesus. After being with him for several years, they settled in the conviction that they had seen God's glory shine out from him.

*"The light shined and the darkness did not overcome it."* From the first sentences of his gospel, John has used the past tense to speak of God's past action in Christ. But in verse five a change in tense marks a difference between the shining, and what the darkness was unable to do. 'The light shines.' That is, it shined and it is shining yet. Whereas the shining is both past and present continuous, the tense in the verb 'overcome,' is punctiliar; there is 'onceness' to it.

Therefore John 1:5 can be read something like this: Whereas the light of God that shone in Christ continues to shine amid the darkness of human history, in the decisive and critical encounter between the two opposing powers, darkness failed. The language evokes the imagery of John in Revelation where he paints a picture of Calvary with his apocalyptic brush: *"Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough"* (Revelation 12:7, 8).

Both in his Gospel and the Revelation, John envisions history as a contest between two rival kingdoms—the kingdoms of light and darkness. The fortunes of each appear to wax and wane. At times the darkness appears triumphant. At other times the light twinkles and shimmers with such intensity that evil retreats.

But this contest is not destined to continue indefinitely, with no clear, decisive victor. A convincing battle has already occurred. Darkness arrayed its battalions. The weapons deployed were dreadful in their destructive proficiency: Envy, deceit, pride, ambition, lust, greed, political

artifice. To enhance darkness' capability, these tools of trade were clothed in religious dress. They acted as if on a godly mission. When the moment came for the killer blow to be struck, all hell broke loose with tortures, floggings, oaths, sacrilege, brutal language, brutal deeds. Hate bullied and blustered. Violence capered.

On the other side of the contest the royal law of love marshalled its troops. We can name some of them. One: *"Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant..."* (Philippians 2:6, 7).

Two: *"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed"* (Isaiah 53:4, 5).

Three: *"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats"* (1 Peter 2:22, 23).

Four: *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich"* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Five: *"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends..."* (John 15:13, 14).

In a fury of loathing, evil ransacked its arsenal of dark arts in an ultimate bid to thwart the love of God that shone from Golgotha. But even as evil had done its worst, Jesus announced its defeat. To the hapless criminal impaled on the cross beside him Jesus said: *"You will be with me in paradise."*

What does it mean now? It means no matter what shadows cast their pall across your life, they cannot stay forever. Whatever clouds loom on your horizon, they are part of a darkness that Jesus has vanquished.

Are you worried in your job? Are you desperate because you have lost your job? Does your future seem ever so bleak? Is your marriage a mess? Are you living through a horror of great darkness because of a divorce, an illness, a death in the family? Do you sometimes think the world is such a

*Continued on the next page*

# WHY I CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS

By Helmut Thielicke

Though Christmas is a festival of light and is celebrated with many lights, it often seems to me that for us it is not much more than a shadow—the shadow of a Figure who has long since passed by.

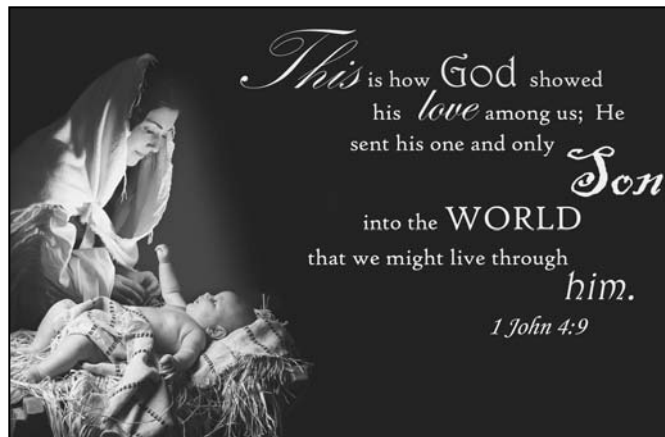
It is true, of course, that even the cast shadow has in it a certain greatness. At any rate, it indicates the contours of a reality which even the unsentimental man of today, who prides himself on his objectivity, somewhat shamefacedly calls love. At Christmas we are kind to one another, we emphasize the element of community, and enjoy ourselves. For a few moments we are troubled by the thought that anybody should be obliged to spend Christmas Eve without its lights on the lonely sea, that anybody should be walking the streets alone with nothing and nobody to call his own, not even a future. It is the greatness of this shadow that can arouse such sadness and concern.

But the irony, or better, the sadness that escapes into irony, appears when we measure the shadow by the original figure who cast it. For what is love that no longer emanates from immediate contact with him who *is* love but lives in us only as a kind of memory, a mere distant echo? Our everyday speech is sometimes capable of reducing this bizarre shadow of a vanished love and a fleeting joy to a grotesque caricature. I often think how absurd it is for us to say: “Have sunshine in your heart!” Or, “Wake up happy in the morning.” It is pathetic to see the yearnings that these expressions betray, but at the same time it is quite foolish to put them in the form of imperatives. How can I possibly go about getting the sun into my heart?

A person who invents imperatives like these strikes me as someone who has lost the real thing and finds himself walking around in the darkness where he is compelled to vegetate without love and without joy. So he says to himself: “I cannot live without these basic elements of human life; therefore I must produce them synthetically, namely, by an act of my will.” So he summons his heart to produce the sun. The futility of such an attempt is like the fool’s trying to catch sunlight in a sack.

When I am asked why, as a Christian, I celebrate Christmas, my first reply is that I do so because something has happened *to* me and therefore something can now happen *in* me.

There is a sun that smiles at me, and I can run out of the dark house of my life into the sunshine. I live by virtue of the miracle that God is not merely the mute and voiceless ground of the universe, but that he comes to me down in the depths. I see he ‘whom all the universe could not contain’ comes down into the world of little things, the little things of *my* life, into the world of homelessness and refugees, a world where there are lepers, lost sons,



poor old ladies, and men and women who are afraid, a world in which men cheat and are cheated, in which men die and are killed. Crib and cross: these are the nethermost extreme of life’s curve; no man can go any deeper than this; and he traversed it all. I do not need first to become godly and noble before I can have part in him. For there are no depths in my life where he has not already come to meet me, no depths to which he has not been able to give meaning by surrounding them with love and making them the place where he visits me and brings me back home.

Once it happened, once in the world’s history it happened that someone came forward with the claim that he was the Son of God and the assertion, “I and my father are one,” and that he proved the legitimacy of that claim, not by acting like a supernatural being or stunning men with his wisdom or communicating knowledge of higher worlds, but rather by proving his claim through the depths to which he descended. A son of God who defends his title with the argument that he is the brother of even the poorest and the guilty and takes their burden upon himself: this is a fact one can only note and shake one’s head in unbelief—one one must worship and adore! There is no other alternative. I must worship. That’s why I celebrate Christmas.

Christmas teaches us that, if we wish to know God, we must in our relationship to the world, begin at a completely different end, namely, that we do not argue from the structure of the world to God, but rather from the child in the manger to the mystery of the world, to the mystery of the world in which the manger exists. For if this child exists, then he is the heart and center of the world.

Then I see in this child that in the background of this world there is a father. I see that love reigns above and in the world, even when I cannot understand this governance, and I am tormented by the question of how God can permit such tragic things to happen. But if the manifestation of love conquers me at one point, where Jesus Christ walked the earth and loved it, then I can trust that it will also be the message at those points in the story of life which I cannot understand.

If I see the world through the medium of the Good News, then the center is clear and bright. There I see the miracle of love that descends to the depths of life. On the periphery, however, beyond the Christmas light, confusion and distortion prevail. The ordered lines grow tangled and the labyrinthine mysteries of life threaten to overwhelm us. Therefore our sight which grows aberrant as it strays afield, must recover its perspective by returning to the thematic center. The extraordinary thing is that the mystery of life is not illuminated by a formula, but rather by another mystery, namely, the News which can only be believed and yet is hardly believable, that God has become man and that now I am no longer alone in the darkness.

That’s why I celebrate Christmas.

-Thielicke: CHRIST AND THE MEANING OF LIFE. pp. 24-29.

*Continued from previous page*

shrouded place that you would rather be dead?

Know this: All that dulls your days and tarnishes your joy has already played its last card and lost. All that is dark and deadly in human experience *once* was robbed of its sting when it concentrated itself upon the Son of God. Now, there is nothing grievous, cruel, unjust or lonely suffered by anyone, that is destined to continue to define the human condition.

The star that shone in the East and led the wise men to Bethlehem was the fore-gleaming of a brightness that reached the zenith of its intensity at Calvary. Christmas helps us celebrate that which alone fills life with hope and meaning. The darkness of human sorrow has been irreversibly pierced. Light has come. It will never be eclipsed. Each day, each month, every Christmas, we draw nearer to the consummation pictured by John in Scripture’s last book: “*There will be no more night.*”