

Light Has Come: The Sovereign Love of God in the Gift of His Son

Reformed • Redemptive-Historical

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Fallen Condition Focus: We Are Lovers of Darkness

The Fallen Condition Focus of this passage is stated with devastating clarity by Jesus himself in verse 19: 'And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.' The FCF is not merely that we have done dark things — it is that we are, by nature, lovers of darkness. This is not a peripheral problem. It is the defining orientation of the fallen human heart. John's language here is the language of desire, of settled affection, of what the soul reaches toward when left to itself. The Greek verb *gap san* — the aorist of *agapaM*, the same word used of God's love — humanity's love for darkness. We loved the darkness. The very word Scripture uses to describe the highest form of divine love is turned on its head to describe the depth of human depravity. We are not neutral. We are not merely confused. We are, apart from sovereign grace, devoted lovers of the very thing that destroys us.

This is what the Westminster Standards call total depravity, and it must be understood correctly. The Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter VI) teaches that by Adam's fall — through his federal headship as our covenant representative — sin has corrupted every faculty of human nature: the mind, the will, the affections, and the body. Total depravity does not mean that every person is as wicked as they could possibly be — common grace restrains the outworking of sin in human society. But it does mean that there is no faculty of the soul untouched by the corruption of the fall, and supremely, it means that the will is in bondage. No one, apart from the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit, will turn toward the light. We do not drift toward darkness — we run to it, we love it, we choose it.

Jesus says in verse 20 that 'everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.' This is not a portrait of the obviously wicked alone. The Pharisees, with their elaborate systems of religious observance, were lovers of darkness. Nicodemus himself — a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel, a man who came to Jesus by night — came under the cover of darkness. Is that detail accidental? John never wastes details. Nicodemus, the most religiously accomplished man imaginable, came in the dark. The darkness is not only the haunt of the immoral; it is the natural habitat of all human religion that has not been transformed by sovereign grace. Our problem is not ignorance that education can fix. Our problem is not weakness that therapy can heal. Our problem is that we are, in our fallen condition, constitutionally opposed to the light of God. The prophet Jeremiah diagnosed it centuries before: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?' (Jer. 17:9). And the Apostle Paul, reflecting on the universal scope of this condition, quotes the Psalms: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God' (Rom. 3:10-11). This is our condition. This is why the gospel is not advice. This is why grace must be sovereign, or there is no hope.

John 3:19-20, Westminster Confession of Faith 6.2-4, Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:10-11, Psalm 14:1-3

Illustration: The Darkness of the Cave

Speleologists — cave explorers — describe a phenomenon known as 'cave blindness adaptation.' When a person descends into a cave system and extinguishes all light sources, the eyes do not simply fail to see; they begin to construct phantom images from the absence of light. The brain, desperate for input, generates its own false pictures. The explorer becomes convinced he sees shapes, movement, paths — none of which are real. Theologians have long used this as an analogy for the noetic effects of sin: the fallen mind does not simply lack knowledge of God; it actively generates substitute gods, false lights, counterfeit goods. We do not merely stumble in the dark — we furnish it and call it home. This is the condition John 3:19-20 describes. The light has come, and we preferred our self-generated shadows.

Source: Adapted from speleological research; theological application original

Redemptive Context: The Eternal Love of God Breaking into History

To understand John 3:16-21 within redemptive history, we must resist the powerful cultural temptation to read this text as a free-standing slogan. John 3:16 has been so thoroughly extracted from its context — printed on banners, painted on faces at sporting events, reduced to a bumper sticker — that recovering its redemptive-historical depth requires deliberate effort. Geerhardus Vos, the father of Reformed biblical theology, taught us that every biblical text must be read within the progressive unfolding of God's redemptive purposes. When we do that with this passage, we discover that John 3:16-21 is not a timeless proposition dropped from heaven — it is the culminating declaration of a story that began in a garden and runs through every covenant God has made with his people.

Begin with creation. John's Gospel opens with a deliberate echo of Genesis 1: 'In the beginning was the Word.' John is telling us that the story of Jesus is the continuation — indeed, the fulfillment — of the story of creation. Light is not merely a metaphor in John's Gospel; it is a creation category. 'God said, Let there be light, and there was light' (Gen. 1:3). The Word who was with God and was God is the one through whom all things were made, and in him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:4). When Jesus enters the world as the light that darkness cannot overcome (John 1:5), he is not beginning something new — he is restoring and fulfilling something ancient. He is the new creation breaking into the old.

Then comes the fall. Adam, our federal head, plunged the entire human race into darkness through his covenant-breaking disobedience. The covenant of works, which promised life for perfect obedience, was shattered. And into that darkness, God immediately began the work of redemption. Genesis 3:15 — the protoevangelium — is the first beam of gospel light: 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' From that moment, all of redemptive history is the story of that promised offspring making his way through covenant after covenant — Noah, Abraham, Moses, David — toward his appointed hour. Every Passover lamb, every Day of Atonement sacrifice, every Levitical priest entering the Holy of Holies with blood — all of it was preparation, prediction, and prefiguration of the one who would come.

Now we arrive at John 3:16, and we must feel the weight of the word 'so' — or more precisely, the Greek *houtōs*, which means 'in this manner' or 'in this way.' 'For God's love for the world' — emphasis is not merely on the intensity of God's love but on the manner of it. How did God love the world? He loved it by giving. The verb *edōken* — 'he gave' — is an aorist, a definite, completed act in history: the incarnation, the life, the death, and the resurrection of the eternal Son. And the object of his giving is his 'only-begotten Son' — John's vocabulary (cf. John 1:14, 18) carries the sense of the uniquely beloved, the one who stands in an utterly singular relationship to the Father. This is not the giving of a subordinate. This is the

Father giving his own heart, his own self, in the person of his co-equal, co-eternal Son.

The purpose of this giving is stated in verse 17 with equal precision: 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' The word 'world' here has generated significant theological discussion. Sinclair Ferguson helpfully notes that in John's Gospel, 'world' (kosmos) functions in multiple ways — sometimes referring to the created order, sometimes to humanity in its fallen hostility to God. Here, in the context of verses 16-17, it refers to humanity in its lostness and need, not to every individual without exception. The Reformed doctrine of definite atonement — that Christ died effectually for the elect — does not diminish the glory of verse 16; it magnifies it. The love of God is not a vague benevolence toward an undifferentiated mass of humanity. It is a particular, covenantal, electing love that actually accomplishes what it intends. Christ the Mediator does not merely make salvation possible; he secures it for all those the Father has given him (John 6:37-39; 17:6-9).

Verse 18 then draws the line of judgment with precision: 'Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.' The condemnation of the unbeliever is not a future verdict that might be avoided — it is a present reality. The Greek perfect tense *kekritai* — 'has been condemned' — indicates a state that already exists. This is the condition of every human being under the federal headship of Adam: already condemned, already under the just wrath of a holy God. The coming of the light does not create the condemnation; it reveals it. And here is the wonder of the *ordo salutis*: those whom God has chosen from before the foundation of the world, those whom he effectually calls through the preaching of the Word and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit — these are brought from condemnation into life, not by any native capacity within themselves, but by the sovereign grace of God alone.

[John 3:16-18](#), [John 1:1-5](#), [Genesis 1:3](#), [Genesis 3:15](#), [John 6:37-39](#), [John 17:6-9](#), [Romans 5:12-19](#)

Illustration: The Ambassador Who Paid the Debt

Edmund Clowney, in his work on preaching Christ from all of Scripture, used the image of an ambassador sent to a hostile nation — not merely to deliver a message but to personally absorb the cost of the broken treaty. The ambassador does not arrive with a diplomatic note; he arrives as the payment itself. This is what the incarnation means. God did not send a message to a fallen world. He sent his Son — and the Son came not merely to announce forgiveness but to accomplish it, to bear in his own body on the tree the full weight of the covenant curse that our federal head Adam incurred. The giving of verse 16 is not the giving of information. It is the giving of the Son as substitute, as sacrifice, as the one in whom the covenant of grace finds its ultimate ratification.

Source: Adapted from Edmund Clowney, 'The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament'

Grace Application: Living in the Light of What God Has Done

Bryan Chapell's great contribution to Reformed homiletics is the insistence that application must flow from the indicative before the imperative — from what God has done before what we must do. This is not merely a homiletical technique; it is the structure of the gospel itself. Paul's letter to the Romans spends eleven chapters establishing what God has accomplished in Christ before issuing a single imperative in chapter 12. The Heidelberg Catechism, that magnificent pastoral document of the Reformed tradition, structures the entire Christian life under three heads: guilt, grace, and gratitude. Gratitude — the response of a heart that has been transformed by sovereign grace — is the engine of genuine obedience. We do not obey in order to be loved. We obey because we are loved, because we have been brought out of darkness into the marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

So what has God done? He has given his only-begotten Son. He has sent the eternal Word into the

darkness of our world, into the darkness of our condition, to bear the condemnation that was ours. He has, through the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit, opened our eyes to see the light — not because we were more spiritually sensitive than others, not because we made a wiser decision, but because of his sovereign good pleasure and his unconditional election. The Heidelberg Catechism's first question and answer — 'What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong — body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ' — is the indicative from which all application flows. You belong to Christ. Not tentatively. Not conditionally. Not depending on the consistency of your faith or the quality of your repentance. You belong to him because he purchased you with his own blood, and because the Father gave you to him, and because he will lose none of all that the Father has given him (John 6:39).

From this foundation, the application of John 3:16-21 takes a very specific shape. First, those who have been brought into the light are called to walk in the light — not as a condition of their acceptance, but as the fruit of their regeneration. Verse 21 says that 'whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.' The person who has been transformed by sovereign grace does not avoid the light; they are drawn to it. They want their lives to be examined. They bring their sin to the light of the Word, to the means of grace — the preaching, the sacraments, the covenant community of the church — because they know that the light does not destroy them; it heals them. This is what it means to live *coram Deo*, before the face of God. Every sphere of life — vocation, family, civic engagement, intellectual labor — is brought under the light of the Word.

Second, this passage calls the covenant community to a posture of urgent, gospel-saturated witness. The language of verse 17 — 'that the world might be saved through him' — reminds us that the preaching of the gospel is the appointed means by which God gathers his elect. The Westminster Confession affirms that God is pleased, by the foolishness of preaching, to save those who believe (cf. 1 Cor. 1:21). The preaching of the Word is a means of grace — not a mere communication strategy but the Spirit-empowered instrument through which the effectual call goes out. This does not make our witness anxious or manipulative; it makes it confident. We are not trying to persuade people by the force of our arguments or the warmth of our personalities to make a decision for Christ. We are faithfully proclaiming the light, trusting that the Spirit who regenerates before faith will open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears according to God's decree. We plant and water; God gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6).

Third, for those who find themselves still in the darkness — who recognize in the language of verse 19-20 a description of their own hearts — the application of this text is not a call to try harder to love the light. That is moralism, and it is precisely what this passage forbids. The application is to look at the light. To look at the Son who was given. To look at Christ the Mediator, crucified and risen, who bore the condemnation that is yours. The Reformed tradition has always insisted that faith is not a work we perform but a gift we receive — the instrument by which we are united to Christ in whom all the fullness of God's redemptive purpose is concentrated. The Spirit who illuminates does not ask you to generate love for the light out of your own fallen affections. He creates that love. He opens the eyes. He draws the heart. And the evidence that he has done so is precisely that you find yourself drawn to the light of Christ rather than repelled by it.

[John 3:21](#), [John 6:39](#), [1 Peter 2:9](#), [1 Corinthians 1:21](#), [1 Corinthians 3:6](#), [Romans 12:1-2](#), [Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1](#)

Illustration: The Surgeon's Light

A patient being wheeled into an operating theater does not shrink from the brilliant surgical lights overhead — not if she trusts the surgeon. She knows that the light is not there to expose her to shame but to enable the healing work. The darkness of the anesthetic, paradoxically, is what she surrenders to so that the surgeon can work. There is a moment in the *ordo salutis* that feels exactly like this: the Spirit brings a person to the end of their own resources, into a kind of spiritual darkness regarding their own ability and merit, precisely so that the light of Christ can do its saving work. The light of John 3:16-21 is not the harsh light of a courtroom; it is the precise, healing light of the Great Physician who has come not to condemn but to save.

Source: Original pastoral illustration

Doxological Conclusion: Soli Deo Gloria — The Light That Will Not Be Extinguished

The Westminster Shorter Catechism opens with the question: 'What is the chief end of man?' And the answer, which every child in the Reformed covenant community should know by heart, is this: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.' This is where John 3:16-21 ultimately leads us — not to a to-do list, not to a set of spiritual disciplines, not even to a more rigorous theology, but to the worship of the God who so loved that he gave. The sermon does not end with our response. It ends with his action. *Soli Deo gloria*.

Consider what this passage reveals about the character of God. He is not a God who waited for us to find our way to the light. He is the God who sent the light into the darkness. He is the God who, before the foundation of the world, purposed in his eternal decree the salvation of a people who would, in time, be brought from darkness to light through the gift of his Son. The love of verse 16 is not a reactive love — a love that arose when God observed our pitiful condition and felt moved to do something about it. It is the eternal, sovereign, covenantal love of the triune God, purposed in the counsels of eternity and executed in the fullness of time. This is what Geerhardus Vos called the 'eschatological' character of the gospel: the end-time realities of judgment and salvation have broken into the present through the coming of Christ. The one who believes is not condemned — already, now, in the present — because the final verdict of the last day has been rendered in advance in the resurrection of Christ.

And this means that the light of John 3:16 is not a flickering candle that darkness might yet overcome. John told us in the prologue: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:5). The verb *katélaben* — 'overcome' or 'comprehend' — carries both meanings simultaneously: the darkness has neither understood the light nor extinguished it. Every attempt of the powers of darkness to snuff out the light of Christ — from Herod's slaughter of the innocents to the cross itself — has failed. The cross, which looked like the victory of darkness, was in fact the decisive defeat of darkness. Christ absorbed into himself the full weight of condemnation, of divine judgment against sin, and emerged on the third day as the firstfruits of the new creation — the first beam of the eternal light that will one day flood the new heavens and the new earth.

So we end here, in this covenant community, gathered around the means of grace — the preaching of the Word, the waters of covenant baptism, the bread and cup of the Lord's Table — as people who have been brought from darkness to light by sovereign grace alone. We did not find our way here. We were carried. We did not choose the light; the light chose us. And the appropriate response is not congratulation or self-satisfaction but the deepest, most sustained doxology the redeemed soul can offer. 'To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen' (Rev. 1:5-6). *Soli Deo gloria* — to God alone be the glory, now and forever.

Illustration: The Light of the New Jerusalem

John, the same apostle who wrote 'the light shines in the darkness,' is also the one who in Revelation 21 describes the consummation of all things: 'And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb' (Rev. 21:23). The story that began with God speaking light into primordial darkness ends with the Lamb himself as the eternal light of the new creation. The light of John 3:16 is not a temporary remedy for a temporary problem — it is the beginning of an eternal dawn that will never give way to darkness again. Every time we gather as the covenant community, every time the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered, we are receiving advance beams of that eternal light. We are, as Calvin loved to say, being lifted up by the Spirit to where Christ is — sursum corda, hearts upward — tasting already the light that will one day be our everlasting portion.

Source: Adapted from John Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper and Revelation 21:23

Applications

- Examine your affections honestly before God: do you find yourself drawn to the light of Christ in Scripture and in the means of grace, or do you find yourself manufacturing excuses to remain in the comfortable darkness of self-sufficiency? This is not a call to manufacture feeling, but to bring your honest condition before the one who searches hearts.
- Make diligent use of the means of grace — the preaching of the Word, the Lord's Supper, corporate prayer, and the fellowship of the covenant community — as the Spirit-appointed instruments through which the light of Christ continues to illuminate and transform the redeemed soul. Do not neglect the assembly (Heb. 10:25).
- Parents and covenant members: catechize your children in the doctrines of grace. Teach them the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Let them know from their earliest years that they were brought into the covenant community not by their own choice but by the sovereign grace of God, and that the light of Christ shines for them in the promises sealed in their baptism.
- In your engagement with the watching world — in your workplace, your neighborhood, your civic life — let your conduct be the conduct of people who have nothing to hide from the light, whose lives are lived coram Deo, before the face of God. This is not performance; it is the natural overflow of a heart transformed by sovereign grace.
- When you encounter those who are still in darkness — friends, family members, colleagues who have not yet been brought to the light — resist both the despair that says 'they will never change' and the manipulation that tries to engineer a conversion. Instead, pray for the Spirit's effectual work, and faithfully, lovingly, clearly proclaim the light of the gospel, trusting that God's decree will be accomplished through his appointed means.
- For those who are struggling with assurance: your confidence does not rest on the strength of your faith but on the object of your faith — Christ the Mediator, who has borne your condemnation and whose resurrection is the Father's public declaration that the debt is paid. The one who has been effectually called will persevere, not because of native spiritual resilience, but because God's sovereign grace is irresistible and his covenant faithfulness is unshakeable.

Prayer Suggestions

- Confess corporately the FCF of this passage: that we are by nature lovers of darkness, that our minds, wills, and affections have been corrupted by sin, and that apart from sovereign grace we would never turn toward the light. Ask God to give us honest sight of our condition so that the grace of the gospel might appear all the more glorious.
- Give thanks for the specific manner of God's love — that he gave his only-begotten Son, that the eternal Word took on flesh and dwelt among us, that Christ the Mediator bore the condemnation that was ours so that we might stand before God not condemned but justified. Linger here. Let

gratitude be specific.

- Pray for the effectual work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who are still in darkness — family members, friends, neighbors — asking God to do what only he can do: open blind eyes, unstop deaf ears, and draw hearts to the light of Christ through the faithful preaching of the Word.
- Pray for the covenant community — for parents catechizing their children, for elders shepherding the flock, for all who gather around the means of grace — that the light of Christ would illuminate every dimension of our common life together and that our witness to the watching world would be credible and compelling.
- Close in doxology: pray the language of Revelation 1:5-6, giving glory to the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. Ask that every aspect of our lives — our work, our families, our intellectual labor, our civic engagement — would be lived soli Deo gloria, to the glory of God alone, as those who have been brought from darkness into his marvelous light.