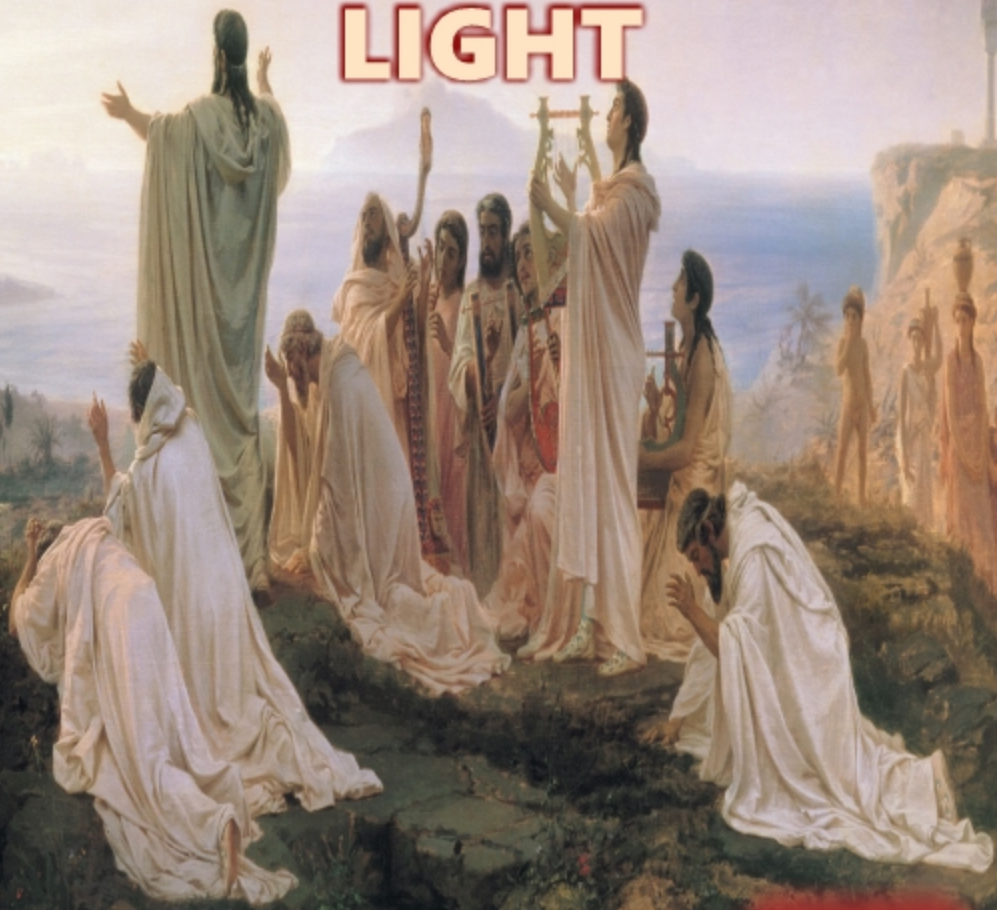




LIGHT



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BY GEORGE MACDONALD

1 John i. 5.

This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

John iii. 19

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light; because their deeds were evil.

We call the story of Jesus, told so differently, yet to my mind so consistently, by four narrators, the gospel. What makes this tale the good news? Is everything in the story of Christ's life on earth good news? Is it good news that the one only good man was served by his fellow-men as Jesus was served cast out of the world in torture and shame? Is it good news that he came to his own, and his own received him not? What makes it fit, I repeat, to call the tale good news? If we asked this or that theologian, we should, in so far as he was a true man, and answered from his own heart and not from the tradition of the elders, understand what he saw in it that made it good news to him, though it might involve what would be anything but good news to some of us. The deliverance it might seem to this or that man to bring, might be founded on such notions of God as to not a few of us contain as little of good as of news. To share in the deliverance which some men find in what they call the gospel for all do not apply the word to the tale itself, but to certain deductions made from the epistles and their own consciousness of evil we should have to believe such things of God as would be the opposite of an evangel to us yea, a message from hell itself; we should have to imagine that whose possibility would be worse than any ill from which their 'good news' might offer us deliverance: we must first believe in an unjust God, from whom we have to seek refuge. True, they call him just, but say he does that which seems to the best in me the essence of injustice. They will tell me I judge after the flesh: I answer, Is it then to the flesh the Lord appeals when he says, 'Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?' Is he not the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world? They tell me I was born in sin, and I know it to be true; they tell me also that I am judged with the same severity as if I had been born in righteousness, and that I know to be false. They make it a consequence of the purity and justice of God that he will judge us, born in evil, for which birth we were not accountable, by our sinfulness, instead of by our guilt. They tell me, or at least give me to understand, that every wrong thing I have done makes me subject to be treated as if I had done that thing with the free will of one who had in him no taint of evil when, perhaps, I did not at the time recognize the thing as evil, or recognized it only in the vaguest fashion. Is there any gospel in telling me that God is unjust, but that there is a way of deliverance from him? Show me my God unjust, and you wake in me a damnation from which no power can deliver me least of all God himself. It may be good news to such as are content to have a God capable of unrighteousness, if only he be on their side!

Who would not rejoice to hear from Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, what, in a few words, he meant by the word gospel or rather, what in the story of Jesus made him call it good news! Each would probably give a different answer to the question, all the answers consistent, and each a germ from which the others might be reasoned; but in the case of John, we have his answer to the question: he gives us in one sentence of two members, not indeed the gospel according to John, but the gospel according to Jesus Christ himself. He had often told the story of Jesus, the

good news of what he was, and did, and said: what in it all did John look upon as the essence of the goodness of its news? In his gospel he gives us all about him, the message concerning him; now he tells us what in it makes it to himself and to us good news tells us the very goodness of the good news. It is not now his own message about Jesus, but the soul of that message that which makes it gospel the news Jesus brought concerning the Father, and gave to the disciples as his message for them to deliver to men. Throughout the story, Jesus, in all he does, and is, and says, is telling the news concerning his father, which he was sent to give to John and his companions, that they might hand it on to their brothers; but here, in so many words, John tells us what he himself has heard from The Word what in sum he has gathered from Jesus as the message he has to declare. He has received it in no systematic form; it is what a life, the life, what a man, the man, has taught him. The Word is the Lord; the Lord is the gospel. The good news is no fagot of sticks of a man's gathering on the Sabbath.

Every man must read the Word for himself. One may read it in one shape, another in another: all will be right if it be indeed the Word they read, and they read it by the lamp of obedience. He who is willing to do the will of the Father shall know the truth of the teaching of Jesus. The spirit is 'given to them that obey him.'

But let us hear how John reads the Word near what is John's version of the gospel.

'This then is the message,' he says, 'which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.' Ah, my heart, this is indeed the good news for thee! This is a gospel! If God be light, what more, what else can I seek than God, than God himself! Away with your doctrines! Away with your salvation from the 'justice' of a God whom it is a horror to imagine! Away with your iron cages of false metaphysics! I am saved for God is light! My God, I come to thee. That thou shouldst be thyself is enough for time and eternity, for my soul and all its endless need. Whatever seems to me darkness, that I will not believe of my God. If I should mistake, and call that darkness which is light, will he not reveal the matter to me, setting it in the light that lighteth every man, showing me that I saw but the husk of the thing, not the kernel? Will he not break open the shell for me, and let the truth of it, his thought, stream out upon me? He will not let it hurt me to mistake the light for darkness, while I take not the darkness for light. The one comes from blindness of the intellect, the other from blindness of heart and will. I love the light, and will not believe at the word of any man, or upon the conviction of any man, that that which seems to me darkness is in God. Where would the good news be if John said, 'God is light, but you cannot see his light; you cannot tell, you have no notion, what light is; what God means by light, is not what you mean by light; what God calls light may be horrible darkness to you, for you are of another nature from him!' Where, I say, would be the good news of that? It is true, the light of God may be so bright that we see nothing; but that is not darkness, it is infinite hope of light. It is true also that to the wicked 'the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light;' but is that because the conscience of the wicked man judges of good and evil oppositely to the conscience of the good man? When he says, 'Evil, be thou my good,' he means by evil what God means by evil, and by good he means pleasure. He cannot make the meanings change places. To say that what our deepest conscience calls darkness may be light to God, is blasphemy; to say light in God and light in man are of differing kinds, is to speak against the spirit of light. God is light far beyond what we can see, but what we mean by light, God means by light; and what is light to God is light to us, or would be light to us if we saw it, and will be light to us when we do see it. God means us to be jubilant in the fact that he is light that he is what his children, made in his image, mean when they say light; that what in him is dark to them, is dark by excellent glory, by too much cause of jubilation; that, however dark it may be to their eyes, it is light even as they mean it, light for their eyes and souls and hearts to take in the moment they are enough of eyes, enough of souls, enough of hearts, to receive it in its very being. Living Light, thou wilt not have me believe anything dark of thee! thou wilt have me so sure of thee as to dare to say that is not of God which I see dark, see unlike the Master! If I am not honest enough, if the eye in me be not single enough to see thy light, thou wilt punish me, I thank thee, and purge my eyes from their darkness, that they may let the light in, and so I become an inheritor, with thy other children, of that light which is thy Godhead, and makes thy creatures need to worship thee. 'In thy light we shall see light.'

All man will not, in our present imperfection, see the same light; but light is light notwithstanding, and what each does see, is his safety if he obeys it. In proportion as we have the image of Christ mirrored in us, we shall know

what is and is not light. But never will anything prove to be light that is not of the same kind with that which we mean by light, with that in a thing which makes us call it light. The darkness yet left in us makes us sometimes doubt of a thing whether it be light or darkness; but when the eye is single, the whole body will be full of light.

To fear the light is to be untrue, or at least it comes of untruth. No being, for himself or for another, needs fear the light of God. Nothing can be in light inimical to our nature, which is of God, or to anything in us that is worthy. All fear of the light, all dread lest there should be something dangerous in it, comes of the darkness still in those of us who do not love the truth with all our hearts; it will vanish as we are more and more interpenetrated with the light. In a word, there is no way of thought or action which we count admirable in man, in which God is not altogether adorable. There is no loveliness, nothing that makes man dear to his brother man, that is not in God, only it is infinitely better in God. He is God our saviour. Jesus is our saviour because God is our saviour. He is the God of comfort and consolation. He will soothe and satisfy his children better than any mother her infant. The only thing he will not give them is leave to stay in the dark. If a child cry, 'I want the darkness,' and complain that he will not give it, yet he will not give it. He gives what his child needs often by refusing what he asks. If his child say, 'I will not be good; I prefer to die; let me die!' his dealing with that child will be as if he said 'No; I have the right to content you, not giving you your own will but mine, which is your one good. You shall not die; you shall live to thank me that I would not hear your prayer. You know what you ask, but not what you refuse.' There are good things God must delay giving until his child has a pocket to hold them till he gets his child to make that pocket. He must first make him fit to receive and to have. There is no part of our nature that shall not be satisfied and that not by lessening it, but by enlarging it to embrace an ever-enlarging enough.

Come to God, then, my brother, my sister, with all thy desires and instincts, all thy lofty ideals, all thy longing for purity and unselfishness, all thy yearning to love and be true, all thy aspiration after self-forgetfulness and child-life in the breath of the Father; come to him with all thy weaknesses, all thy shames, all thy futilities; with all thy helplessness over thy own thoughts; with all thy failure, yea, with the sick sense of having missed the tide of true affairs; come to him with all thy doubts, fears, dishonesties, meannesses, paltrinesses, misjudgments, wearinesses, disappointments, and stalenesses: be sure he will take thee and all thy miserable brood, whether of draggled-winged angels, or covert-seeking snakes, into his care, the angels for life, the snakes for death, and thee for liberty in his limitless heart! For he is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If he were a king, a governor; if the name that described him were The Almighty, thou mightst well doubt whether there could be light enough in him for thee and thy darkness; but he is thy father, and more thy father than the word can mean in any lips but his who said, 'my father and your father, my God and your God;' and such a father is light, an infinite, perfect light. If he were any less or any other than he is, and thou couldst yet go on growing, thou must at length come to the point where thou wouldst be dissatisfied with him; but he is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If anything seem to be in him that you cannot be content with, be sure that the ripening of thy love to thy fellows and to him, the source of thy being, will make thee at length know that anything else than just what he is would have been to thee an endless loss. Be not afraid to build upon the rock Christ, as if thy holy imagination might build too high and heavy for that rock, and it must give way and crumble beneath the weight of thy divine idea. Let no one persuade thee that there is in him a little darkness, because of something he has said which his creature interprets into darkness. The interpretation is the work of the enemy a handful of tares of darkness sown in the light. Neither let thy cowardly conscience receive any word as light because another calls it light, while it looks to thee dark. Say either the thing is not what it seems, or God never said or did it. But, of all evils, to misinterpret what God does, and then say the thing as interpreted must be right because God does it, is of the devil. Do not try to believe anything that affects thee as darkness. Even if thou mistake and refuse something true thereby, thou wilt do less wrong to Christ by such a refusal than thou wouldst by accepting as his what thou canst see only as darkness. It is impossible thou art seeing a true, a real thing seeing it as it is, I mean if it looks to thee darkness. But let thy words be few, lest thou say with thy tongue what thou wilt afterward repent with thy heart. Above all things believe in the light, that it is what thou callest light, though the darkness in thee may give thee cause at a time to doubt whether thou art verily seeing the light.

'But there is another side to the matter: God is light indeed, but there is darkness; darkness is death, and men are in it.'

Yes; darkness is death, but not death to him that comes out of it.

It may sound paradoxical, but no man is condemned for anything he has done; he is condemned for continuing to do wrong. He is condemned for not coming out of the darkness, for not coming to the light, the living God, who sent the light, his son, into the world to guide him home. Let us hear what John says about the darkness.

For here also we have, I think, the word of the apostle himself: at the 13th verse he begins, I think, to speak in his own person. In the 19th verse he says, 'And this is the condemnation,' not that men are sinners not that they have done that which, even at the moment, they were ashamed of not that they have committed murder, not that they have betrayed man or woman, not that they have ground the faces of the poor, making money by the groans of their fellows not for any hideous thing are they condemned, but that they will not leave such doings behind, and do them no more: 'This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men' would not come out of the darkness to the light, but 'loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.' Choosing evil, clinging to evil, loving the darkness because it suits with their deeds, therefore turning their backs on the inbreaking light, how can they but be condemned if God be true, if he be light, and darkness be alien to him! Whatever of honesty is in man, whatever of judgment is left in the world, must allow that their condemnation is in the very nature of things, that it must rest on them and abide.

But if one happens to utter some individual truth which another man has made into one of the cogs of his system, he is in danger of being supposed to accept all the toothed wheels and their relations in that system. I therefore go on to say that it does not follow, because light has come into the world, that it has fallen upon this or that man. He has his portion of the light that lighteth every man, but the revelation of God in Christ may not yet have reached him. A man might see and pass the Lord in a crowd, nor be to blame like the Jews of Jerusalem for not knowing him. A man like Nathanael might have started and stopped at the merest glimpse of him, but all growing men are not yet like him without guile. Everyone who has not yet come to the light is not necessarily keeping his face turned away from it. We dare not say that this or that man would not have come to the light had he seen it; we do not know that he will not come to the light the moment he does see it. God gives every man time. There is a light that lightens sage and savage, but the glory of God in the face of Jesus may not have shined on this sage or that savage. The condemnation is of those who, having seen Jesus, refuse to come to him, or pretend to come to him but do not the things he says. They have all sorts of excuses at hand; but as soon as a man begins to make excuse, the time has come when he might be doing that from which he excuses himself. How many are there not who, believing there is something somewhere with the claim of light upon them, go on and on to get more out of the darkness! This consciousness, all neglected by them, gives broad ground for the expostulation of the Lord 'Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life!'

'All manner of sin and blasphemy,' the Lord said, 'shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the spirit shall not be forgiven.' God speaks, as it were, in this manner: 'I forgive you everything. Not a word more shall be said about your sins only come out of them; come out of the darkness of your exile; come into the light of your home, of your birthright, and do evil no more. Lie no more; cheat no more; oppress no more; slander no more; envy no more; be neither greedy nor vain; love your neighbour as I love you; be my good child; trust in your father. I am light; come to me, and you shall see things as I see them, and hate the evil thing. I will make you love the thing which now you call good and love not. I forgive all the past.'

'I thank thee, Lord, for forgiving me, but I prefer staying in the darkness: forgive me that too.'

'No; that cannot be. The one thing that cannot be forgiven is the sin of choosing to be evil, of refusing deliverance. It is impossible to forgive that sin. It would be to take part in it. To side with wrong against right, with murder against life, cannot be forgiven. The thing that is past I pass, but he who goes on doing the same, annihilates this my forgiveness, makes it of no effect. Let a man have committed any sin whatever, I forgive him; but to choose to go on sinning how can I forgive that? It would be to nourish and cherish evil! It would be to let my creation go to ruin. Shall I keep you alive to do things hateful in the sight of all true men? If a man refuse to come out of his sin,

he must suffer the vengeance of a love that would be no love if it left him there. Shall I allow my creature to be the thing my soul hates?'

There is no excuse for this refusal. If we were punished for every fault, there would be no end, no respite; we should have no quiet wherein to repent; but God passes by all he can. He passes by and forgets a thousand sins, yea, tens of thousands, forgiving them all only we must begin to be good, begin to do evil no more. He who refuses must be punished and punished through all the ages punished until he gives way, yields, and comes to the light, that his deeds may be seen by himself to be what they are, and be by himself reprov'd, and the Father at last have his child again. For the man who in this world resists to the full, there may be, perhaps, a whole age or era in the history of the universe during which his sin shall not be forgiven; but never can it be forgiven until he repents. How can they who will not repent be forgiven, save in the sense that God does and will do all he can to make them repent? Who knows but such sin may need for its cure the continuous punishment of an aeon?

There are three conceivable kinds of punishment first, that of mere retribution, which I take to be entirely and only human therefore, indeed, more properly inhuman, for that which is not divine is not essential to humanity, and is of evil, and an intrusion upon the human; second, that which works repentance; and third, that which refines and purifies, working for holiness. But the punishment that falls on whom the Lord loveth because they have repented, is a very different thing from the punishment that falls on those whom he loveth in deed but cannot forgive because they hold fast by their sins.

There are also various ways in which the word forgive can be used. A man might say to his son 'My boy, I forgive you. You did not know what you were doing. I will say no more about it.' Or he might say 'My boy, I forgive you; but I must punish you, for you have done the same thing several times, and I must make you remember.' Or, again, he might say 'I am seriously angry with you. I cannot forgive you. I must punish you severely. The thing was too shameful! I cannot pass it by.' Or, once more, he might say 'Except you alter your ways entirely, I shall have nothing more to do with you. You need not come to me. I will not take the responsibility of anything you do. So far from answering for you, I shall feel bound in honesty to warn my friends not to put confidence in you. Never, never, till I see a greater difference in you than I dare hope to see in this world, will I forgive you. I can no more regard you as one of the family. I would die to save you, but I cannot forgive you. There is nothing in you now on which to rest forgiveness. To say, I forgive you, would be to say, Do anything you like; I do not care what you do.' So God may forgive and punish; and he may punish and not forgive, that he may rescue. To forgive the sin against the holy spirit would be to damn the universe to the pit of lies, to render it impossible for the man so forgiven ever to be saved. He cannot forgive the man who will not come to the light because his deeds are evil. Against that man his fatherly heart is moved with indignation.

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