



TARA BETH LEACH

LIVE IN THE LIGHT

*Radiating the Hope
of the Letters of John*

 A 6-WEEK BIBLE
STUDY EXPERIENCE



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INTRODUCTION

AN INVITATION TO LIGHT

Not too long ago, I was driving my boys to school on the most beautiful fall day. Leaves were starting to turn, I had a pumpkin-flavored coffee in my hand, I had just finished a fulfilling workout, and my boys were happily chatting in the backseat. I had nothing but joy in my heart and my mind, and I found myself thanking God for the gift of my children and the gift of the day. I hugged and kissed my boys goodbye and watched them saunter into the school as they chatted with their friends, when suddenly, fear darkened my heart.

What if . . .

Another horrific mass shooting had happened and the thought of such a scene dampened my joy.

It's the *What if?* questions that lurk around the corners of every joyful day. What-if situations exist for all of us, and they can be downright frightening. On that day, for me, it was a school shooting. Your what-if fear could be job loss, illness, or loneliness. Sometimes, darkness seems to overcome, drown, and penetrate. Click on the news, and despair comes knocking on the doors of our emotions. Even as Christians, we wonder, *What do we do? What is God going to do? Is there any hope? Will the light eventually win?*

At the heart of Scripture is a robust call for the people of God to bear witness to the light of God amid a weary, groaning, and dark world. To be a witness means we are called to be ambassadors of the kingdom of God. To be a witness means we are called to mirror the things of God—



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the goodness of God, the light of God, and the love of God. *Bearing witness* means that we are to resemble the characteristics of God, so that when people look at us they will see what God is like. At the heart of the letters of John in the New Testament is a vision for such a witness—that is, to live light and hope when darkness seems to be looming. In the end, light wins. In the present, light is here. In the now, we are called to live the light.

The apostle John, the author of these three letters—who also authored the fourth Gospel earlier in his life and the book of Revelation later in his life—is referred to as “the beloved disciple” of Jesus. John followed in the footsteps of his rabbi, Jesus. He witnessed Jesus turning water into wine; he stood by as Jesus healed the invalid near the waters of Bethesda; he witnessed the wonder of Jesus feeding five thousand with only a few loaves and fishes; he was there at the transfiguration; he followed Jesus to the cross and cared for Jesus’ mother, Mary; and he was one of the first to hear the news of the empty tomb. In the book of Acts, we see that John became one of the first leaders of the early Christian church.

Some years later, John wrote letters to turbulent churches rife with leadership failures, divisions over theology and practice, church splits, and even an infamous “antichrist” who convinced faithful Christians to revolt.

Maybe that sounds eerily similar. It does to me. It seems as though the church is melting under the heat wave of national politics and conspiracy theories, divisions over race and justice, wars raging in the backyards of innocent civilians (sometimes in the name of Christianity!), and hunger raging in the bellies of infants. Where do we stand as a church? Does the world see the light and hope in *us* amid the darkness?

As a pastor, I feel the weightiness of John’s letters. He writes as one who knows division, church splits, struggle, and ongoing conflict. At the same time, John writes because he believes in Jesus and he believes in the church. John believed the words of Jesus when he said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). We do have trouble in our world today, but Jesus has indeed overcome the world.

For John, the future of the church is not a lost cause. He does not believe his words will be in vain, but instead he recognizes the authority given to him as an apostle, a pastor, a church planter, and an elder. He gives a vision for radiance—that is, as the light of Jesus fills our lives, it exudes and beams out of us and cuts through the darkness. It's the kind of radiance that flows out of our relationship with God and one another—one that is wrapped in light, in which God is the source of all these things.

When I think of things such as these, I can't help but imagine what could happen if Jesus' people took John's clarion call to heart. To live a radiant Christian life is to reflect and emit the truth, light, love, and freedom of Jesus—it is to *glow in darkness*. Thus, the invitation John gives to the reader is an invitation to a life of beaming light.

Over the next six weeks, listen for John's invitations to the earliest Christians and the invitations for us today. The backdrop of the world in which we live is full of bitterness, war, strife, abuse, and misery. We are surrounded by the despairing, hurting, and hopeless. The world needs Jesus, and the world needs to know that Jesus' family is like Jesus. When the church is truly light, others are drawn into the love and truth of Jesus through our fellowship.

This is a six-week study with weekly teachings and group discussions and five days of individual study per week. It walks through the letters of John and also includes other books of the Bible, especially written by John the apostle. It is recommended that group time be a minimum of sixty to ninety minutes so that groups can have plenty of time for prayer requests and fellowship as well as the video teaching and group discussion. Plan to pick five days a week for individual study that should take about fifteen to twenty minutes per day. Days one through four include readings and written reflections, and day five is a guided prayer practice.

My prayer for you is that over the next six weeks, the light of Jesus and his truth would bathe you in his love, light, and forgiveness. I don't know where you find yourself these days; whether you're new in your Christian journey or a mature Christian, I pray that this study would grow you. May the Lord meet with you in every moment, and may Jesus embolden you to truth; may the Spirit empower you to freedom; may the Lord propel you to love; and may the Father impel you to light.

AN INVITATION TO KNOW THE RADIANT ONE

GROUP SESSION INTRODUCTION

Begin group sessions with conversation, prayer, and an opener question. Following this, watch the video together followed by the group discussion.

This week we will unpack 1 John 1:1-4 and supporting passages. The ultimate invitation throughout this study is to accept the call to live a radiant Christian life. But first, we must get to know Jesus, the radiant King.

- Take a few minutes to share introductions if your group isn't already acquainted.
- Discuss the following question: What is the best invitation you've ever received in the mail?
- Read 1 John 1 aloud. As you listen, remember that this is exactly how it would have been received for the recipients of the letter. There would be a reader and the church would sit and listen. As you hear the words, ask the Lord that you would have an open heart and mind to receive these transformative words.



VIDEO

WATCH the opening video.



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GROUP DISCUSSION

In the video, I describe a vacation experience that wasn't the same without my husband. More than anything, I wanted to experience it with *him*.

1. **Recall and describe a time that you have experienced something so profound that you wanted others to experience it with you.**

Have you ever thought about the incarnation of Jesus—that is, Jesus as fully God and also fully human? John echoes his own words found in the beginning of John 1:1-5 and points to the divine and human reality of the incarnation. Jesus is Lord and Jesus is flesh. This is an important theme in the letters of John, as there were those within the church who did not believe in the humanity of Jesus. John pastorally longs to see the churches unified over this important truth. Jesus is divine and Jesus is human. Not only that, but John has seen, heard, and felt this to be true.

2. **Read 1 John 1:3-4 aloud. Notice that John talks about two different expressions of fellowship. What are these different expressions?**

3. The invitation to share in fellowship is both vertical and horizontal. What is the outcome of this fellowship (see v. 4)?

Constantine Campbell writes in *1, 2, and 3 John* (The Story of God Bible Commentary):

Perhaps we need to meditate afresh on what exactly Jesus means to us and what he could mean to others. Perhaps we need the refreshment that God's Spirit can provide so that we are not only filled with joy in our fellowship with Christ, but we are also filled with joy at the prospect of making him known. Above all, let us cherish the precious fellowship we have with God in Christ and allow its benefits to overflow to many.

As Campbell beautifully highlights, precious fellowship with Jesus creates what I call "an overflow effect." When we get to know Jesus, the Radiant One, and we discover the joy of fellowship with him, radiance and joy overflows from our lives and to the world around us.

4. Who do you know that embodies the joy of the Lord?

John's invitation is to personally know or have firsthand knowledge of knowing Jesus, so that we would have a growing relationship with God that produces joy (John 15:11). John writes all of this because he knows this to be personally true.

Take a few moments to discuss what you know to be true about Jesus.

5. How has knowing Jesus shaped your life?

*If the idea of “having firsthand knowledge” of Jesus or even “knowing Jesus” is a new concept for you, consider talking to your group leader or a pastor within your church.

6. Considering these truths about Jesus, does the community around you know these to be true through the life of your local church? How so or why not?

Reflecting the truths of Jesus to our neighbors begins with *fellowship* with Jesus. Much like John experienced firsthand, when we discover for ourselves the truths of Jesus, radiance is a natural outflow of those who abide. That invitation is before you today—to ask, to say, to converse, to fellowship, and to *know*. Will you accept the invitation? The invitation for the next six weeks is to give of yourself to the presence of God each day in reflection, study, and prayer. If you don't already have a daily established time for reflection, decide now when you will carve out that time.

7. Share what you plan to do for your daily time of reflection. If you already have a rhythm, share about that with the group.

8. Take a few moments to share prayer requests as you wrap up.



CLOSING PRAYER

*Jesus, we thank you that you not only invite us to your table,
but you take us by the hand and walk with us to radiance.
To the weary, you say, "Come, my grace is sufficient."
To the hungry, you say, "Come, feast at my table."
To the hurting, you say, "Come and receive my comfort."
To the despairing, you say, "Come, at my table is hope."
To the broken, you say, "Come and be healed."
To the doubtful, you say, "Come, your doubts are welcome here."
To the lonely, you say, "Come to the fellowship at the table."
To that, Lord, we say yes. Amen.*

Notice the similarities? The writer of John's Gospel is—yes, you guessed it—the same writer as the letters of John. The letters were written between c. AD 86 and 88 and were believed to have been written after the Gospel. It is almost immediately noticeable that John is drawing from similar imagery as his Gospel.

John was the fisherman who followed Jesus in the inner circle of twelve other disciples who eventually became apostles. This means John spent time with Jesus and is writing about what he saw, touched, learned, and heard. He writes to draw the readers back to the one and true King, Jesus.

In both the Gospel and this letter, John refers to Jesus as “the Word,” or in the original language, *logos*. This word *logos* carried weight to the readers of the early church. In the book of Genesis, God created the earth, the heavens, and all that has breath through spoken word, or *logos*. In the ancient Greek world, *logos* was a philosophical term that came to mean the force that brought life and meaning to the universe.

John reclaims this word in vivid ways for the earliest readers. The *logos* is King Jesus, the incarnate one—fully human and fully divine. *Logos* is the revelation of God in the Old Testament and the force behind and within all of creation and all that has life. *Logos* is King Jesus, the force, center, ruler, and living embodiment of God's creative power; he was there at the beginning and is actively working even today to create and redeem his creation. *Logos* is the Radiant One.

John not only penned the letters of John and the Gospel of John, but he also is the writer of the book of Revelation. Drawing from powerful and apocalyptic imagery, John envisages seeing Jesus in the glory of the new heaven and new earth. Just as John invited us to discover the fellowship of Jesus in his first few sentences of 1 John, he now draws us to the divinity of Jesus.

3. Read Revelation 19:6-13, and as you read it, underline any descriptions you see about Jesus.

The Jesus we read about is the very same Jesus that John has “heard, seen, and touched.” This is the same Jesus in which he “proclaims” and writes to make his “joy complete.” This Jesus—the *logos*—is who he says he is. He is the creative force behind all that is good and beautiful. He is the revelation of God—God who is love.

4. Finish the following sentences. (This isn’t a quiz, just an exercise. Write what comes to mind. Let your sentences be an act of worship and praise to Jesus!)

- Jesus was present in the beginning, and I can know that because . . .

- Jesus is present today and I've seen him working when . . .

- I thank you, Jesus, for . . .

5. You, reader, are invited to know Jesus in his humanity and his divinity—to know, to marvel, and to worship the revelation of God in Christ. In closing, write a prayer of praise and wonder to King Jesus, the Radiant One.



Day Two

BEGIN WITH THE WORD

Read 1 John 1:3-4

John testifies that he has seen Jesus. In other words, Jesus was more than a doctrine or mere idea. Jesus was a known and experienced reality. Even after his death and resurrection, Jesus *continued* to be an experienced reality, not just personally, but corporately.

1. Reread verses 3-4. What are the pronouns John uses when describing the experienced reality of Jesus?

As we reviewed two days ago, the Greek word John uses for fellowship is *koinōnia*, which means to share things in common. There was great joy in coming together and experiencing the presence of Jesus.

2. What happens when our faith is privatized?

3. Why is it so important for the Christian life to be lived together in community?

Christian community is about experiencing Jesus *together*. As I often tell the people I pastor, “I need you; you need me; we need you; you need us.” In other words, there are days I need to draw on the faith and prayers of others to get through the day. And there are days I need to hear the church sing the songs I don’t have the strength to sing. There are times when my gifts and talents propel others in their faith. Not only that, but when we come together, Jesus is surely there and our light shines brighter.

4. In closing, write a prayer for those in your small group. Thank God for them and their gifts, and pray that you would be able to encourage them in their walk with Jesus.





Day Three

BEGIN WITH THE WORD

Read 1 John 1:5-7

Most scholars agree that the message here is a continuation of John's declaration of Jesus: God is the source of light, and the light is witnessed in the very life of Jesus. Jesus himself said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

The relationship between God and light is woven throughout the entire tapestry of Scripture.

1. Read the following passages:

- And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)
- For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. (Psalm 36:9)
- Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. (Psalm 43:3)
- The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent. (Psalm 104:2)
- His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden. (Habakuk 3:4)
- The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end. (Isaiah 60:19-20)

- When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

2. What did you notice about the connection between light and God?

Take a few moments to reflect on the power of light. Without light in our world, life would not exist as we know it today. Light permeates our everyday reality and floods our days. Whether it's a twinkle, a flame, electricity, a spark, a star, or a burning ball in the sky, light strings all of life together. Light bursts in the morning and illuminates the textures, ridges, mountain tops, and glistening water in the ocean. Light fills every corner of God's very good creation. Consider the infiltrating *power* of light. This kind of infiltrating power is an image of our triune God. Jesus is our beacon, our source, our power, our guide; Jesus is the Radiant One. Jesus asks from us a surrendered life—to be seen, to be known, to be guided, and to be empowered.



3. Take a few moments to reflect and journal about what a radiant life would look like for you.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of light, fill my life;

Permeate my mind, body, and soul.

God of light, heal my strife;

Redeem my hurts, fill this hole.

God of light, penetrate my darkness;

Light your lamp to all the aching places.

God of light, I long for your closeness;

Guide me and drench my life's spaces.



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