

Deuteronomy 16:13-15 (NRSV)

¹³You shall keep the festival of booths for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press. ¹⁴Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. ¹⁵Seven days you shall keep the festival to the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate.

John 8:12-20 (NRSV)

¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, **“I am the light of the world.** Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” ¹³Then the Pharisees said to him, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” ¹⁴Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵You judge by human standards; I judge no one. ¹⁶Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. ¹⁸I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” ¹⁹Then they said to him, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” ²⁰He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Matthew 5:11–16 (NRSV)

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“**You are the light of the world.** A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, **let your light shine before others**, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Ephesians 5:6–21 (NRSV)

⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷Therefore do not be associated with them.

⁸For once you were darkness, but now **in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— 9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.**

¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³**but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 for everything that becomes visible is light.** Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among

yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Jesus is the light. We must be the light, reflecting the light of Christ across the world.

This week, in our series, *Words*, we turn to the word “light,” a word so often expressed in opposition to the darkness throughout the Bible. Prayer should shape our lives but, too often, we find ourselves spiritually stuck, squeezing prayer out of our daily routines. (Note: At the end of the study, you will find a portion of the Lexham Theological Wordbook entry for “light and darkness” by Donald Mills.)

Light . . . and darkness

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).¹

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).

A festival of light

The festival of Booths (aka Tabernacles; see the p. 3 textbox and also Leviticus 23:39-43) 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.

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

Major Jewish Festivals¹

This week's passage from Deuteronomy prescribes the Festival of Tabernacles, aka Feast of Booths. It is one of five Jewish festivals.

The three major Jewish festivals were intimately connected with agriculture (**Passover**, with the barley harvest; **Pentecost**, with wheat harvest and the bringing of first-fruits to the Temple; **Tabernacles (Booths)**, with the grape harvest). They symbolically celebrated the blessing of Israel's God upon his Land and his people, and thereby drew together the two major covenantal themes of Temple and Land. In addition, Passover celebrated the exodus from Egypt; Pentecost, the giving of Torah on Sinai; and, Tabernacles, the wilderness wandering on the way to the promised land. All three, therefore, focused attention on key aspects of Israel's story, and in the retelling of that story encouraged the people once again to think of themselves as the Creator's free people, who would be redeemed by him and so vindicated in the eyes of the world. This theme was amplified in the prayers appointed for the different occasions.

Two other festivals made substantially the same point, though without the agricultural connection. **Hanukkah**, commemorating the overthrow of Antiochus Epiphanes by Judas Maccabeus and his followers, underlined the vital importance of true monotheistic worship and the belief that when the tyrants raged against Israel her God would come to the rescue. **Purim**, celebrating the story found in the book of Esther, re-enacted the reversal of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews in the Persian empire; it drove home the same message.

Together, the five feasts ensured that any Jew who made any attempt to join in (and by all accounts participation was widespread) would emerge from the festivals with the basic Jewish worldview strengthened: one God, Israel as his people, the sacredness of the Land, the inviolability of Torah, and the certainty of redemption.

¹ This material on Jewish festivals was taken and adapted from the study guide to a series by N.T. Wright, *Jesus: The New Way*. The guide was prepared by Denise George and is copyrighted by the Christian History Institute.

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.

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).

The Light of the World

Beginning in John 7, we find Jesus in Jerusalem for the fall festival of Booths. As a Law-keeping 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.²

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.

Anyone with ears to hear would understand the weight of Jesus’ words. Indeed, those who would charge him with blasphemy would be right in doing so, unless Jesus is the One whom he is claiming to be.

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 (Philippians 2). It is a love that both gives and receives, lover and beloved. It is a love that is genuinely mutual.

In Christ, love is expressed in mutuality, being servants of one another. This is the light that overcomes the darkness. It really isn’t more complicated than that.

Light and Darkness (from the Lexham Theological Wordbook)

DONALD MILLS³

Physically, light and darkness exist in metaphysical opposition. Light as an energy source provides illumination, leading to the ability to make visual distinctions among colors and physical objects. Darkness is the absence of light and color, whether as a place or condition, which results in disorientation, distortion, and confusion.

Concept Summary

Beyond the literal sense of physical illumination or its absence, both light and darkness have broad figurative applications—often in conceptual oppositions such as light symbolizing knowledge or understanding and darkness symbolizing ignorance or confusion. In the NT, the physical sense of “light” (φῶς, *phōs*) and “darkness” (σκότος, *skotos*) is often used in contexts where a spiritual comparison is being made (2 Cor 4:6; Matt 17:2).

²This story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery is one of the most familiar, memorable, and arresting stories in the gospels. Yet, the story is not found in the earliest manuscripts of John’s gospel. It seems to have been incorporated into the gospel in the third century or so. Nonetheless, it has the ring of authenticity and seems well placed in chapter 8.

³Daniel DeWitt Lowery, “[Prayer](#),” in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

The physical opposition of light and darkness provides a versatile template for depicting moral, spiritual, and theological oppositions. This metaphorical versatility resulted in the light/dark duality becoming a major symbolic motif in both OT and NT (and more broadly in the language and literature of many cultures). In the Bible, light frequently indicates people or things are righteous, pure, godly, or good. Darkness indicates the opposite—wickedness, impurity, immorality, and evil. Light is associated with life, especially a life of blessing and prosperity; darkness is associated with suffering, death, and decay (Psa 36:9; 56:13; Job 10:21; 17:13; 18:18; 33:30).

Light frequently symbolizes God as an attribute of his glory, essence, and royal splendor (Psa 4:6; Hab 3:4; Jas 1:17). Many of the terms for light or sources of light appear in Isa 60:19–20, where Isaiah declares that God’s glory and everlasting light will eventually replace all of them (using אור, *’ôr*, “light”; אור, *’ûr*, “to give light”; שמש, *šemeš*, “sun”; ירח, *yārēah*, “moon”; and נגה, *nōgah*, “brightness”).

The opposition of “light and darkness” is fundamental to the creation account of Gen 1. God creates light (אור, *’ôr*) to pierce the darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ, *hōšēk*) of the primeval chaos (Gen 1:3) to distinguish light and darkness as day (יוֹם, *yôm*) and night (לַיְלָה, *laylā*; Gen 1:4–5). When God created the “luminaries” (מְאֹרֹת, *mā’ôr*), their purpose (Gen 1:18) was to “give light” (אור, *’ûr*) to the earth. Although the terms sun (שמש, *šemeš*) and moon (יָרֵחַ, *yārēah*) do not occur in the Genesis account of creation, they are frequently referenced in connection with providing physical light on earth (Psa 8:3). Jeremiah declares that Yahweh is the one “who gives the sun (*šemeš*) for light (’ôr) by day and the regulations of the moon (*yārēah*) and the stars (כּוֹכָב, *kôkāb*) for light (’ôr) by night (*laylā*)” (Jer 31:35). Although the physical states of light and darkness are created by God (Isa 45:7; Psa 104:20), in the ancient world, physical darkness was a dreaded state. For example, in the early chapters of Exodus, God brought various judgments upon the Egyptians, including three days of utterly thick darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ, *hōšēk*; אֶפְלָה, *’ăpēlā*), which made it impossible for them to leave their homes (Exod 10:21–23).

Although the night (*laylā*) is an occasion for displaying the glory of God (Psa 19:1–2), the Scriptures sometimes portray the state of darkness (*hōšēk*) and the night (*laylā*) as opportunities for evil activities (Ezek 8:1; Prov 7:8–9). Darkness is the opposite of everything associated with light. Darkness is often associated with divine judgment (Lam 3:1–3; Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) and disaster (Isa 45:7). The concept describes humanity alienated from God, held in the grip of darkness (Isa 42:7; Psa 107:10, 14), with acute spiritual, intellectual, and moral deficiencies.

The power of darkness ensnares them in sin and self-deception (1 John 1:6; John 12:35; 12:46). Those who are in this condition are utterly ignorant of God and his truth (Eph 4:18; 5:8; Rom 1:21–25). Such people are lost, confused, and disoriented (Prov 4:19; John 11:10). The result is a distorted view of reality where darkness becomes light and light becomes darkness (Isa 5:20).

This frightful condition is characterized by adversity, despair, loneliness, languishing, and hopelessness (Isa 59:9–10; Jer 4:22–26; 13:16; 23:12). Without light, there can be no life and no prosperity (Job 10:21; 15:23, 30; 20:26–29). The end result is death, the grave and eternal judgment (Job 18:18; Psa 49:19; 2 Pet 2:17; Jude 13).

The prophet Isaiah summarizes by declaring, “If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.... And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ, *hāšēkâ*), the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness (אֶפְלָה, *’ăpēlā*)” (Isa 8:20, 22 ESV; compare Prov 4:19; Isa 29:18). God’s judgment at the day of Yahweh is associated with darkness (*hōšēk*; Joel 2:2, 31; Amos 5:18; Zeph 1:15), and in Matt 8:12, the “sons of the kingdom will be thrown out into the outer darkness (σκοτός, *skotos*) [where] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In both contexts, darkness is a symbol of divine wrath and judgment.

In addition to the ordinary meanings of light and dark in the physical realm, the biblical terms for light and darkness are frequently employed to depict moral or theological concepts. For example, biblical passages frequently use “light” as a metaphor representing someone is under divine favor, while darkness signals separation from God’s presence and pending divine judgment. The phenomena of natural, physical light and darkness are applied ethically or theologically in three main ways—referring to God’s nature and essence, describing positive or negative morality, and indicating understanding or ignorance of a truth or knowledge.

The manifestation of God’s presence on earth is closely associated with light. In Revelation 21:23, the new Jerusalem has no need of physical light sources like the sun or moon (σελήνη, *selēnē*) because “the glory of God illuminates (φωτίζω, *phōtizō*) it, and its lamp (λύχνος, *lychnos*) is the Lamb” (compare Isa 60:19–20). Similarly, in Psalm 104:2, Yahweh covers himself “with light (אור, *’ôr*) as with a garment,” and Paul states that God “lives in unapproachable light (φῶς, *phōs*)” (1 Tim 6:16; compare Rev 21:24; 22:5).

The association of light with God’s presence or glory is also evident from the shining of Moses’ face that resulted from the time he spent in God’s presence or glory (Exod 35:29–35; 2 Cor 3:7). Similarly, after the transfiguration, Jesus’ “face shone (λάμπω, *lampō*) like the sun, and his clothing became bright as light (*phōs*)” (Matt 17:2). Jesus also appears to the Apostle Paul as a light from heaven (Acts 9:3).

The association of God with light also connects light to the concepts of holiness, purity, goodness, and moral perfection. According to John, “God is light (*phōs*), and there is no darkness (σκοτία, *skotia*) in him at all” (1 John 1:5).

God’s ability to bring salvation and reveal his knowledge, wisdom, and truth may also be pictured as being a light or bringing light to the world. One way God provides light to the world is by revealing truth through his written word, which the psalmist describes as light, both in the sense of being able to see where to go and in the sense of understanding (Psa 119:105, 130). In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares, “I am the light (*phōs*) of the world! The one who follows me will never walk in darkness (*skotia*), but will have the light (*phōs*) of life” (John 8:12). The symbolism of light and darkness is a key theme in the Gospel of John and the Letter of 1 John. John uses the light and dark opposition to express how the coming of Christ brings spiritual light and life to a dark, sinful world (John 1:4–9; 3:19–21; 9:5; 12:35, 46; 1 John 1:5–7). Continuing in darkness means one has rejected or opposed the spiritual light represented by faith in Christ (1 John 2:8–11).

This theme of light as spiritual blessing, truth, and righteousness is a fundamental metaphor for salvation in both OT and NT. The psalmist pleads with God to “send your light (’ôr) and your truth” to lead him to God’s holy mountain (Psa 43:3). Isaiah 9:2 announces the arrival of God’s salvation in terms of light, saying the “people who walked in darkness (*hōšēk*) have seen a great light (’ôr); light has shined (נָאָה, *nāgah*) on those who lived in a land of darkness.” In a likely echo of Isa 42:6, the infant Jesus is called “a light (*phōs*) for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:32). The link between light and life is also applied to the true spiritual life represented by God’s salvation (Psa 36:9; John 1:4; 8:12).

The light and darkness motif also expresses the moral contrast between purity and impurity, or between godliness and wickedness (Matt 6:22–23; Luke 11:34, 36; 1 John 1:5). Immoral or wicked living is described as walking “in the ways of darkness (*hōšēk*)” (Prov 2:13), and the prophet Isaiah urges the people of Judah to repent and walk “in the light (’ôr) of Yahweh” (Isa 2:5). Sometimes the contrast between light and dark as godly versus wicked behavior blends with the imagery of salvation as a light dawning on the dark, sinful world (see John 3:19–20; Rom 13:12; Eph 5:8, 11). The association of darkness with wicked behavior also ties into the motif of darkness as a symbol of secrecy, but even sins committed under cover of darkness will eventually be brought to light (Matt 10:27; Luke 12:3; John 3:20; Eph 5:11–13).

Those in right relationship with God exhibit godly, moral behavior, so Paul can call them “children of light (*phōs*)” (Eph 5:8–10; 1 Thess 5:5; compare 1 Pet 2:9). “Walking in the light” means to live or conduct one’s life in accordance with God’s truth (1 John 1:7; Isa 2:5). Those “who walk in the light of [God’s] presence” (Psa 89:15) experience all the benefits and blessings of his favor (compare Psa 4:6). Conversely, walking or being in darkness is associated with making false claims of fellowship with God (1 John 1:6) or of being in the light (1 John 2:9) when the opposite is actually the case (1 John 1:6–10; 2:9–11).

Since the dichotomy of light and darkness can express the distinction between salvation and judgment, righteous and wicked, and God’s presence or absence, the light/dark imagery is also extended to apply to the domains ruled by God (light) or forces of darkness opposed to God (Luke 22:53; Eph 6:12; 1 Thess 5:5). The NT portrays light and darkness not just as binary opposites but also as antagonistic power spheres or domains for which there is no neutrality or compromise. In Colossians 1:12–13, Paul thanks God that believers are part of the “saints in light (*phōs*),” rescued by God “from the domain of darkness (*skotos*).” Especially in the NT, several aspects of the light and darkness motif blend in expressing the reality that salvation has come into the world through Christ but that many people preferred wickedness and chose to remain in darkness (John 1:4–14; 3:19; 8:12; 1 John 2:8–11). Ignorance or spiritual blindness leads to the perpetuation of wicked, sinful behavior that displeases God. This state of wickedness, ignorance, and rebellion against God characterizes the present era of darkness, but it will eventually fully give way to the dawning of the new age of life inaugurated in the advent of Christ.⁴

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Current series: *Ten Bible Passages I wish Christians Knew . . . Well*

This week – Ezekiel 34 with John 10

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

⁴ Donald Mills, [“Light and Darkness,”](#) in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).