

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## THE TRUE LIGHT

*“There is no God in heaven  
and there is no Hell below  
So says the great professor  
of all there is to know.  
But I've had the invitation  
that a sinner can't refuse  
And it's almost like salvation  
It's almost like the blues.”*

*-Leonard Cohen, “Almost Like the Blues”*

Blindness was a cruel irony, on this day of all days. During the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, the Jerusalem temple would be lit up in a blaze of glory. But for a man born blind, the lights were as invisible to his eyes as he was to the celebrating crowds. Even Jesus' disciples were quick to assume that his condition was some type of punishment. But as the celebration reaches its zenith, Jesus declares that the man's condition is nothing less than an opportunity to display his glory. “As long as I am in the world,” he says, “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5).

Six months have passed since the feeding in the wilderness (John 6). The Feast of Tabernacles was fast approaching, which was a celebration that occurred every Fall. The true center of the celebration occurred in the temple, specifically in the place known as the “court of women.” During the holiday, four large stands were placed in the court, each holding four bowls. Each of these sixteen bowls was lit with wicks made from the worn-out garments of the temple priests. Ancient rabbis would tell stories of how the light from the temple was so majestic, so radiant, that it would reflect off the yellow limestone walls to illuminate the entire city. The streets would be packed with choirs and dancers who carried torches of their own and marked the occasion through song. Yet here, in the temple courts, a storm is brewing, a storm that would highlight the collision between Christ and culture — both then and now.

### A RELIGION THAT STAINS EVERYTHING

The temple had long been the center of Israel's civic and ceremonial life. First built by King Solomon, everything about the temple — from its architecture to its ornamentation — was intended to remind the nation that true human flourishing is found in God, and that God is found *here*. When the temple was first dedicated, the Israelites were commanded to pray both “in” and “toward” the temple, not unlike the way Muslims face Mecca for their daily prayers. And when Jonah cried out to

God from the ocean's depths, he spoke of offering prayer "into thy holy temple" (Jonah 2:7). The temple was so significant that when it was destroyed by the Babylonians, it was reconstructed, brick by brick, under the leadership of Ezra.

But now, centuries later, this was no longer Solomon's temple, nor was it the Second Temple built by Ezra. This was *Herod's* temple — the local king who had chosen to consolidate power by remodeling the Jerusalem temple. He tried to smooth cultural sensibilities by training Jewish builders to work on the project, but the people were still wary that their most sacred structure had been snatched from them by their Roman captors. It was so bad that by the time the temple was destroyed in 70 AD, the Jewish leaders wrote that God had forsaken his people long before that.<sup>1</sup>

What we're left with is something of a cultural paradox, and it's one that strangely mirrors our own. The people continued their religious traditions and celebrations, despite having grown weary of "organized religion." Sound familiar? It's the same thing that happens every year at Christmas, when entertainers who decry the oppressive nature of modern religion nevertheless sing carols that celebrate the virgin birth. In his celebrated novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, we find this same attitude at work in the character of Jim Casy. A former preacher, he now performs religious services only upon request, and at other times his "sinful ideas... seem kinda sensible." Ultimately, he rejects the fundamental teachings of his former faith, instead insisting that "there ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say."

Casy's dustbowl spirituality is writ large across the American landscape. Love others. Do no harm. Everything else is a matter of personal choice. In his book *Bad Religion*, Ross Douthat points out that the problem stems, at least in part, from a selective adherence to certain strands of Christian teaching:

"The result is a nation where gurus and therapists have filled the roles once occupied by spouses and friends, and where professional caregivers minister, like seraphim around the throne, to the needs of people taught from infancy to look inside themselves for God. Therapeutic religion promises contentment, but in many cases it seems to deliver a sort of isolation that's at once comfortable and terrible—leaving us alone with the universe, alone with the God Within."<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, is the key point. Western culture hasn't abandoned God — at least not exactly. We've just become experts at looking within ourselves for an encounter with the divine. That's why rock stars like Billy Corgan can speak of having a "punk rock relationship with God,"<sup>3</sup> one unblemished by the stains of organized religion.

It's no wonder, then, that Christianity has such a divisive impact on the American cultural landscape. A generation or so ago, you would have been regarded as eccentric — even dangerous! — if you were not a member of your local church. In today's postmodern, post-Christian, post-everything

---

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller treatment, see Sharyn Dowd, *Prayer, Power, and the Problem of Suffering: Mark 11:22-25 in the Context of Markan Theology*. (United States: Society of Biblical Literature, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. (New York: Free Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kathleen Falsani, *The God Factor*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), 69-71.

world, religion is regarded as the problem, not the solution. And if you commit yourself to the cause of traditional religion, then you too may be viewed as eccentric and dangerous.

Like the festival-goers of Jesus' day, our present culture is comfortable with the external symbols of Christianity, so long as Jesus himself gets left at the door. But this will never do. In Julian Barnes' expansive novel *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, he describes the experience of an atheist who is shocked at how casually his believing friends treat God in the midst of one of their dinner party celebrations. Though not a believer, he declares that "there seems little point...in a religion which is merely a social event...as opposed to one which tells you exactly how to live, which colors and stains everything."<sup>4</sup>

By "stains," of course, he means that faith should influence everything about us. And that's at least a part of what Jesus is getting at when he delivers the "Light of the world" discourse. From a literary perspective, the whole scene functions as a trial scene, with Jesus as the focal point of the Jewish leaders' legal proceedings. It's the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles, and Jesus drives the point home that he is the center of it all. According to Jesus, human beings will never flourish unless three things are in alignment: ultimate hope, genuine freedom, and absolute truth.

## ULTIMATE HOPE

At first, Jesus disputes with his family as to whether he would even attend, given the way his public reputation had grown so divisive. Jesus chooses to attend in secret, though the festival isn't more than halfway finished before Jesus begins teaching (7:14). The reaction is typical, with some believing while the religious authorities are incensed. The hostility continues to rise until the final day of the festival:

<sup>37</sup> On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" <sup>39</sup> Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-44)

To understand Jesus' statement, we have to understand the cultural significance of the feast itself. In an agrarian society, the Fall would bring two things. First, it would bring a drier climate, elevating their need for water. Secondly, the shorter days meant longer periods of darkness. The Feast of Tabernacles was a festival in which the people would look to the promised Day of the Lord. On that day, the people believed that evening "in the evening there will be light" and that "living waters" would flow from the Jewish capital of Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:7-8). And so, the Feast of Tabernacles embraced the varied themes of harvest, drought, winter darkness, the hope of future restoration and prosperity.

So when Jesus announces that he is the source of living water, he's making yet another provocative claim to his deity. The entire festival, radiant in light and song, was about him. Naturally, this prompted further division among his hearers:

---

<sup>4</sup> Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 64.

<sup>40</sup> When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." <sup>41</sup> Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" <sup>42</sup> Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" <sup>43</sup> So there was a division among the people over him. <sup>44</sup> Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. (John 7:40-44)

At first, we might think that Jesus has introduced division into the Jerusalem community. But this is only partly true. For all the festive beauty, the Jewish people had been dissatisfied with the state of national religion for quite some time.

Later, Jesus publicly states: "I am the light of the world. The one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12). Again, these words would have unique resonance amidst the Jewish festivities, with all its glowing walls and festive songs. But Jesus' point is broader than that. John uses the imagery of light a total of sixteen times throughout his biography of Jesus, and initially connects it to the light that God brought forth during creation itself. If you recall the exodus story, God led the Israelites through the wilderness with light, and Israel was taught to sing "The Lord is my light and my salvation" (Psalm 27:1). To be the true light of the world meant that he did far more than illuminate the city during the feast of tabernacles. To be the true light meant that he is the world's only hope.

There's no such thing as a culture with no religion. Political theorist Samuel Goldman says that societies operate under "the law of conservation of religion." Religious conviction can never diminish, he says, only transferred from one sphere to another. That helps us understand why the world of politics operates as its own kind of religious framework — and why our political divides have the tenor of a religious jihad. "Without Christianity, Americans no longer have a common culture upon which to fall back," writes journalist Shadi Hamid. Politics have "to fill the vacuum where religion once was."

"On the left, the 'woke' take religious notions such as original sin, atonement, ritual, and excommunication and repurpose them for secular ends.... Whereas religion sees the promised land as being above, in God's kingdom, the utopian left sees it as being *ahead*, in the realization of a just society here on Earth.... On the right, adherents... find solace in conspiracy cults... that tell a religious story of earthly corruption redeemed by a godlike force."<sup>5</sup>

But political partisanship is doing little to close America's wounds. Helen Fisher, an expert on the modern social justice movement, says that "if we want people to genuinely own their mistakes, they you have to offer the possibility of redemption... [W]hat we have now with social-justice movements is a range of sins, but we don't yet have a good idea of what the mechanism is for confessing, repenting, and being resolved."<sup>6</sup> For all our cultural progress, we can't escape the need for redemption. Jesus is the true light, exposing the darkness of injustice and disbelief, and also lighting the way forward — the way *home*.

---

<sup>5</sup> Shadi Hamid, "America Without God," *The Atlantic*, April 2021.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/america-politics-religion/618072/>

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Isabel Fattal, "Is Politics Filling the Void of Religion?" *The Atlantic*, August 19, 2022,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/08/is-politics-filling-the-void-of-religion-helen-lewis-interview/671198/>

## GENUINE FREEDOM

As you might expect, the Jewish leaders are incensed at the boldness of Jesus' claim. Things come to a head when Jesus addresses the crowd:

<sup>31</sup> So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." <sup>33</sup> They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. <sup>37</sup> I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. <sup>38</sup> I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." (John 8:31-38)

Freedom is perhaps our most deeply-held virtues. But what does it truly mean to be genuinely free? In the landmark case *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey*, the Supreme Court ruled that "at the heart of liberty is to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of life." In other words, truth, freedom, and meaning are individual pursuits. To be truly free is to be free from all restrictions and authority. Perhaps that's why the twenty-first century has been called the "post-truth" era, where truth is simply a matter of one's own perspective. On comedian Stephen Colbert's satirical show *The Colbert Report*, he introduces his audience to the word "truthiness," saying:

"Now, I'm sure some of the 'word police,' the 'wordinistas' over at Webster's, are gonna say, 'Hey, that's not a word!' Well, anybody who knows me knows that I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist....Who's Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I wanna say it happened in 1941, that's my right. I don't trust books—they're all fact, no heart...Because that's where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen—the gut."<sup>7</sup>

Sarcasm aside, Colbert is hitting on a vital point: that "truth" has more to do with feelings than with objective reality. But Colbert's satire also highlights the ultimate absurdity of such a position. To abandon a commitment to truth isn't liberating; it's a recipe for social chaos.

Isaiah Berlin points out that there are actually two kinds of freedom: freedom *from* and freedom *for*. Most of what passes for cultural freedom is of the first type: freedom from the strictures of religious tradition, common virtue, or even the truth itself. But true freedom is freedom *for* something — freedom to pursue virtuous ends as husbands, wives, husbands, mothers, and responsible citizens. Or, as David Bentley Hart puts it, "we are free not merely because we can choose, but only when we choose well. For to choose poorly...is to enslave ourselves to the transitory, the irrational, the purposelessness...[the] subhuman."<sup>8</sup> Hart borrows from Michaelangelo's metaphor, saying that we are not truly free until we are "liberated" by the sculptor.

---

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Kurt Andersen, "How America Lost Its Mind," *The Atlantic*, September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/>

<sup>8</sup> David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*.

That's the heart behind Jesus' statement. We will never experience freedom until we bring our lives into alignment with God's purposes as revealed by the true light of Christ. Jesus' Jewish audience foolishly assumed that they were covered by virtue of their national identity. Instead, Jesus reminds them that to live in sin is a form of slavery regardless of their ancestry.

## ABSOLUTE TRUTH

For Jesus' listeners, Abraham was more than just an historical figure; he was the symbol of their national identity. So when the conversation reaches a fevered pitch, the Jewish crowd insists that Jesus couldn't possibly exceed their ancestor Abraham:

<sup>52</sup> The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' <sup>53</sup> Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" <sup>54</sup> Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' <sup>55</sup> But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. <sup>56</sup> Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." <sup>57</sup> So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" <sup>58</sup> Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." <sup>59</sup> So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. (John 8:52-59)

Elsewhere, Jesus makes a series of "I AM" statements, declaring himself the true bread, the true light, etc. Here, Jesus makes an unqualified statement: "Before Abraham...*I am*." The Jewish crowd would immediately associate this simple statement with the very name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, or the way that God reveals himself to the prophet Isaiah: "from ancient days I am he" (Isaiah 43:13). If Jesus were anything other than the eternal Son of God, this claim would have been blasphemy, which is why the Jews were ready to execute him on the spot.

Modern westerners inhabit a culture with a similar allergy to absolutes. We assume that despite some superficial differences, all religions are basically the same, in that they teach a core philosophy of love and goodness. In such a culture, Jesus' exclusive claim to divinity is intellectually backward, if not culturally dangerous.

Yet for all its noble aspirations, this approach to religious diversity fails to account for the sheer diversity among religious claims. On the surface, it may sound humble to say that all religions teach the basic truths. But how can I respect my Muslim neighbor if I tell him that the things that make his faith distinct aren't important?

More than that, this line of thinking does little justice to the claims of Jesus. More than a social visionary, this was a man who claimed to be God. Harold Netland writes that "no serious discussion of the relation of Christianity to other faiths can proceed...without coming to grips with the towering figure of Jesus." Either Jesus is God himself, or Christianity is utterly false. What Christianity can never be is simply one more faith among many.

## A CLEARER VISION

The healing of the man born blind — happening at the end of the feast — would serve as the exclamation mark to the entire discourse that precedes it. The true light would authenticate himself by opening the eyes of a blind man:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. <sup>4</sup> We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (John 9:1-5)

Notice, initially, that the disciples struggled to make sense of why the man was in his present condition. Was it because of his own sin, or his parents? The modern psychologist Richard Shweder observes that "the desire to make suffering intelligible is one of those dignifying particularities of our species."<sup>9</sup> Like the disciples, some religious communities still see suffering as some sort of karma — you're hurting because of some sin in your life. But nonreligious communities struggle to find meaning at all, seeing all suffering as the result of random chance. Jesus says that the man's suffering is so that "the acts of God may be revealed through what happens to him," which sets the stage for his sixth miraculous sign:

<sup>6</sup> Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud <sup>7</sup> and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. (John 9:6-7)

The whole scene is messy, involving saliva and dirt from the ground. In some ways, it echoes the creation story itself when God fashioned life from the soil. Here, Jesus uses mud to restore the man to sight — and sets him on a trajectory toward belief.

The miracle didn't go unnoticed. The blind man's neighbors were baffled by the healing, of course, but the religious leaders are positively outraged. Some are fixated on the Sabbath violation. Still others wonder how a sinner could perform such a miracle. So, they bring him in for questioning. Not getting the answers they want, they interrogate his parents. Finally, they bring him in a second time, where he repeats his testimony:

<sup>25</sup> He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." <sup>26</sup> They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" <sup>27</sup> He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" <sup>28</sup> And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup> We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." <sup>30</sup> The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. <sup>32</sup> Never since the world began has

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard A. Shweder, *Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for Cultural Psychology*. (Harvard University Press, 2003), 74.

it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (John 9:25-33)

The man's brief testimony is master class in how to share our faith in a hostile world. Rather than get lost in a debate, the man simply lays out his testimony, revealing how the light of the world has changed his life forever. Madeline L'Engle writes:

"We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

Unfortunately, the man's changed life could do little to change the minds of the religious teachers, and they threw him out of the temple (9:34) — an experience that John's readers would have known all too well, as they lived through an era when Christians were barred from traditional places of worship. Later, however, Jesus rejoins him:

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" <sup>36</sup> He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" <sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you." <sup>38</sup> He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. (John 9:35-38)

The man's vision had been restored — in more ways than one. As the true light, Jesus had brought vision to a world full of darkness. But he had also opened the eyes of the man's heart, empowering him to see with vivid clarity the face of God himself. This is the fulfillment of John's earlier promise: that while "no one has ever seen God," Jesus has "made God known" (John 1:18).

The light of the world discourse had functioned almost like court proceedings. Now, Jesus flips the script on his earlier interrogators:

<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." <sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" <sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains. (John 9:39-41)

Jesus is the true light, he is the true judge. He is the one whose verdict truly matters, and right now he minces no words in declaring that the most esteemed teachers in Israel were the ones who were truly blind.

As the true light, Jesus shines into a world of darkness and disbelief. He exposes the world's sin, but he likewise guides his children home.

## "I NEED GOD"

In Douglas Coupland's postmodern novel *Life After God*, he chronicles the journeys of a group of young people who had sought liberation from the world of traditional religion and values. But the main character remains dissatisfied with his atheist lifestyle. "I think the price we paid for our golden



life was an inability to fully believe in love,” he muses. “[W]e have religious impulses...and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion?” Though his life is far from unhappy, he’s left with the lingering fear that something vital is missing. The novel concludes with the confession of his secret:

“Now--here is my secret:

I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God — that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”<sup>10</sup>

Do you need God? To live with the inability to give, to love, to be kind is its own form of debilitating blindness. Jesus can heal that, too. The true light of Jesus pierces the safely secular prisons of our modern worlds, and invites us instead into a world of radiance and hope. Do you need God? You’ll find him — there, at the end of your search, the end of your doubts, the end of yourself. And when you find him, you’ll experience vision that can never be stolen, only marveled at, as you experience his beauty forever.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ross Douthat, *Life After God*.