

Solar Under the Sun,
An Ecumenical Mission of the
Synod of the Sun, Presbyterian Church (USA),
Presents



The Light Bulb Challenge:
A Bible Study for Adults and
Older Youth

By Jim Freeman

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Introduction:

Light is a common element and recurring theme throughout scripture, which is appropriate. Light makes growth possible, warms the earth, and provides energy. In short, light is essential to life. But light means so much more within the context of God's work through the ministry of Jesus Christ. As the gospel of John tells us, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.**" How crucial it is for us to understand light both as God's good gift to us in creation and as God's salvific work in Jesus Christ!

The Light Bulb Challenge is two things. First, it is a Bible study aimed at adults and older youth. It may be used on consecutive days as part of adult Bible school or over a longer period of time as a Sunday school class or evening Bible study. Each of its four study sessions deals with a passage of scripture in which light plays an important role, providing a context for the passage and a contemporary application. Each session includes information, references, and background material within a lesson guide which can be used by leaders and students together. There is also a brief (humorous) dialogue to be used with each session as a means of breaking the ice and pointing to themes at work in the passage.

But the Light Bulb Challenge is also a call to action and an invitation to join Solar Under the Sun (SUS) in its work helping to provide clean, renewable energy to those suffering from energy poverty in our world. At the end of the study sessions, there is a guide on how to conduct an inventory of light bulbs in use in your home, business, or place of worship, and a request that you contribute financially to the work of SUS so that it may continue to serve those in need.

I'd like to thank the other members of the SUS board for their assistance in this project, and the members and staff of First Presbyterian Church, Jacksonville, Arkansas, for using an earlier version of this study and sharing their critique.

May God bless you in this study, and together may we work to bring the light of God's love to everyone in need.

Jim Freeman

The Light Bulb Challenge
Adult/Older Youth Bible Study



Session One

Genesis 1:1-5—The Light Is Good

Prior to Class:

- Find volunteers to read the opening dialogue and provide them with the script in advance.
- If you like, find a volunteer to read the scripture lesson for Session One and make sure they have the text if they would like to practice in advance. The biblical translation being used in this curriculum is the New Revised Standard Version, but other translations are just as appropriate.
- Make sure to gather necessary resources in the class space, including a whiteboard or newsprint, markers, Bibles, and note paper.

1. Open with prayer:

God of creation, at the very beginning you brought light into being and divided it from the darkness, you established the rhythm of day and night, and you called the light good. As we reflect on your word for our lives, may the light of your truth shine in our hearts giving us guidance for the living of these days. For it is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

2. Explain the use of memory verses with each session. Class participants are invited to commit these verses to memory after each session as another means of understanding God's word and carrying it into the world. This session's verses are Genesis 1:3-4a: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good..." If time permits, recite these verses a few times as a class.

3. Introduce the scripture passage to be considered in this session (Genesis 1:1-5). You or a class member may read it aloud. You may also choose to allow for a time of silent reflection before reading the passage aloud once more. Ask for any initial feedback about the reading from participants. Do any terms or expressions stand out? Do any particular verses draw special attention to themselves? Are there any questions or areas of confusion that arise? Write these on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper for follow-up discussion as needed.

4. Have two class participants read the dialogue for Session One ("Which Comes First?"). Lead the class through the questions associated with the dialogue and allow for feedback and comments.

5. Exploring the Scripture (Use the following material to discuss Genesis 1:1-5 with the class):

The passage that we will consider during this session contains the very first words in the Bible. The book of Genesis is a story of beginnings or first principles. (The title itself comes from the Greek word meaning “origin.” The Hebrew name of the book means “in the beginning.”) A number of themes are at work throughout the book, however. In his commentary on Genesis, Walter Brueggemann says that Genesis 1:1-2 “contains the premise of all biblical faith”¹ and that the first creation narrative in Genesis “proclaims that creation is a source of rejoicing and delight for creator and creation.”² Genesis makes clear that God was the power behind creation and in bringing all things into being.

The manner by which God works to create is through divine speech and the first words spoken by God are “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). This statement is recorded in a type of speech that expresses the desire that a thing should or should not happen, or as a command or request. Those familiar with the Beatles’ “Let It Be” will recognize the same basic intent or meaning.

And when the night is cloudy
There is still a light that shines on me
Shine until tomorrow
Let it be.³

In the song—as in the scripture—there is an expressed desire that something should happen and in each case it involves light. The singer is looking for light in the midst of a cloudy night. It may be for guidance, for comfort, for strength, or for any number of other factors. Whatever the case, the hope is that light may remain throughout the night. This is the singer’s wish. In the biblical account, however, the one speaking is God and it is by God’s voice and according to God’s will that light comes into being. Even the beginning had a beginning and according to Genesis, that first element of creation was light.

Question:

In Genesis chapters 1-2, light is the first act of creation. What does this say about God? What does this say about creation? How do we understand light in our own lives and our own society? If you could say “Let there be _____” and it would happen, how would you fill in the blank? How would it affect your life and the lives of others?

For the purposes of this session, verses 3 through 4a form the heart of the passage. Note that here God speaks the divine desire (“let there be light”) at which point the creative act takes place (“and there was light”). God’s word is the catalyst that brings the various elements of creation into being. But this does

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Series (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ Lennon, John and Paul McCartney. “Let It Be.” Let It Be. LP. Apple Records. May 8, 1970.

not end God's involvement in the work of creation. As Brueggemann calls to our attention, "Throughout the narrative God judges the results of his work 'good.'"⁴ God sees the result of the divine activity—light—to be a good thing. Other ways of interpreting the word "good" are "pleasant," "agreeable," or "excellent." In other words, light pleases God and meets God's intentions. The creation of light is not a random event, nor does it have ambiguous results. And while light can certainly be used for sinful means, such uses would be a perversion of light's original purpose, that for which God as Creator intended it. In its truest form, then, light is good inasmuch as it was created by God.

Question: What does it mean when God calls something "good"? Do you see a difference between "good" and words like "pleasant," "agreeable," or "excellent"? What else has God referred to as "good"? Does the fact that God refers to humanity as "good" make a difference in the way we see ourselves or others? How does God's opinion of us affect our opinion of and actions toward God?

As it is used in this passage, the word light refers to "the light of day" or "light as diffused in nature." This is light that is always present during daytime, so much so that we often forget it is even there. And yet, note that according to Genesis, darkness does not cease to exist during creation. Darkness continues to play a role, paired as "night" with the light's "day." As night, darkness gives creation a time to rest and to renew. Most of us do our sleeping at night when there is less light to keep us awake. But according to Genesis, it is light that offsets darkness and thus is crucial for the created order.

Science tells us that light (specifically sunlight) is essential for life on earth. The heat of sunlight warms our planet, helps plants to grow, and stimulates the cycle of water from rain to soil to evaporation and back to rain again. Light makes colors visible. According to studies, the prolonged absence of sunlight (as in areas near either the north or south poles) can lead to increased depression among residents of those regions. Light is essential, then, to our living and our wellbeing. And according to God, light is good.

Question: What are some of the ways that light might be used contrary to the will of God? Do any such uses make light "bad"? What do you think it means that God did not refer to night as "good"?

One process that light makes possible is that of photovoltaics, the use of sunlight to produce electricity. The English-language term for this process has been in use since the middle part of the 1800's so this is not a new idea. With photovoltaics, light is used to generate an electric current that can then power devices such as water purification systems, cell phones, kitchen appliances, and so forth. This same electricity can also light a house at night so that children can do homework and families no longer need to burn kerosene, field waste, or dung for light and heat.

Through the use of photovoltaics, God's "good" light can be used to create clean, sustainable energy for those women and men who are among the

⁴ Brueggemann, 37.

estimated 25% of the world's population with no access to safe, reliable power. Solar Under the Sun, an ecumenical outreach of the Synod of the Sun, Presbyterian Church (USA), helps to make solar power available to those in need. Over the decades, advances in technology have made it much easier to provide solar power as a means of sharing God's love in the form of reliable electricity.

Over the next three lessons, we will learn more about Solar Under the Sun and its work.

Question: What would it mean for you and your family if you did not have electricity readily available? What things do we generally take for granted that would not work without power of some sort?

5. Summing up:

Are there questions or comments that have been recorded on the whiteboard or sheet of paper that have not been addressed? Are there any other questions that the group would like to consider? Remind participants to reflect on the memory verse until the next class session, or give them a chance to write it down to carry with them.

6. Close with prayer:

Lord God, as we go forth into your creation, may we be reminded of its goodness and beauty, its power and its strength. Guide us as we seek to serve you by serving others. For it is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

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Adult/Older Youth Bible Study



Session One

Dialogue: "Which Comes First?"

One: Hey, what's going on?

Two: Oh, my car had gotten really dirty, so I just finished washing it.

One: (Pause) Why is it still so sudsy?

Two: What do you mean?

One: I mean, why does it still have suds all over it?

Two: Oh. Well, when I started to wash it, it looked like it might rain; so I thought I'd better go ahead and rinse it, just in case. Then I put the soap on.

One: You rinsed it first? Isn't that a little backwards?

Two: It's like I always say, you have to go with the flow on these things.

One: Yeah, but your car is all sudsy.

Two: I know, but it looks a lot better than it did.

One: I guess. So you rinsed it first? And then you put the soap on?

Two: Well, that's not actually true. After I rinsed it, the sun came out, and I wasn't sure how long that would last, so I went ahead and waxed it. Gave it a really nice shine, too.

One: So you rinsed it and THEN you waxed it?

Two: Right.

One: You know there are places that will do this sort of thing for you, right? They're called car washes.

Two: Oh I know. I went to one of those this morning.

One: One of what?

Two: A car wash, first thing this morning, right before I took the kids out to my dad's farm to pick apples. That's where it got so dirty.

One: So you went to a car wash, then you got your car dirty, then you rinsed it.

Two: Right, then I waxed it while the sun was out.

One: And then you put the suds on.

Two: Right. Now I can relax and enjoy our family picnic.

One: Well, at least that sounds like fun. What are you eating?

Two: Burgers and hot dogs.

One: I guess you'd better get them started, huh? It's getting close to dinner time.

Two: Oh, they've been on the grill for quite a while.

One: They have? Is someone else doing the cooking?

Two: No. I am.

One: Well who's keeping an eye on them, so they don't get overcooked?

Two: Nobody. I was afraid it would rain so I haven't lit the charcoal yet. I'm going to do that in just a minute. That way the fire will get good and hot. And we won't have to bother.

One: But you're going to be eating raw meat!

Two: Don't be silly. We had dinner a while back. Fried chicken. It was delicious.

Questions:

What is the first thing that you do when you cook, do homework, leave on a trip, play a game, do yard work, or wash your car? Why is the first step of an activity so important? What does it say about the overall process? Are there things that we do in relation to God that require a certain order? Are there things that God does that require a "first action"?

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Session Two

Isaiah 60:1-3—God's Glory is in the Light

Prior to Class:

Find volunteers to read the opening dialogue and provide them with the script in advance.

If you like, find a volunteer to read the scripture lesson for Session Two and make sure they have the text if they would like to practice in advance.

Make sure there are appropriate resources in the class space, including a whiteboard or newsprint, markers, Bibles, and note paper.

1. Open with prayer:

God of grace, in your light we see light and in your glory we find true joy. Help us to hear and to understand your word to us and then lead us to share your love with all of creation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

2. Ask if there are any other thoughts that have occurred to participants regarding the last session and allow for a brief discussion if necessary.

3. Remind participants of the memory verse from Session One (Genesis 1:3-4a). Introduce the memory verse for this session which is Isaiah 60:1: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." If time permits, recite this verse a few times with the class.

4. Introduce the scripture passage to be considered in this session (Isaiah 60:1-3). You or a class member may read it aloud. You may also choose to allow for a time of silent reflection before reading the passage aloud once more. Ask for any initial feedback about the reading from participants. Do any terms or expressions stand out? Do any particular verses draw special attention to themselves? Are there any questions or areas of confusion that arise? Write these on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper for follow up discussion as needed.

5. Have two class participants read the dialogue for Session Two ("You Didn't Call"). Lead the class through the questions associated with the dialogue and allow for feedback and comments.

6. Exploring the Scripture (Use the following material to discuss Isaiah 60:1-3 with the class):

Show of hands: how many of you are "morning people"? You know the type: folks who can roll right out of bed in the morning, alert and ready to go. Non-morning people (and I speak from personal experience) take a while to get going. For me, it requires a cup or two of coffee and a little time spent standing in the middle of the room wondering what to do next. While there's no reason to believe that the words of Isaiah 60:1-3 were addressed originally to morning

people, it does seem to speak about a new day awash in sunshine and full of God's possibilities.

Based on the Hebrew language in which Isaiah was first written, we might paraphrase or restate the main idea of 60:1-2 this way: "Wake up, get out of bed, and put a smile on your face; it may have been dark before, but now the light of a new day is dawning and God's splendor is all around you." Perhaps my paraphrase sounds a little like the children's song "Frere Jacques," which in English goes: "Are you sleeping, are you sleeping, brother John, brother John? Morning bells are ringing, morning bells are ringing, ding ding dong, ding ding dong." To our ears, these words may seem badly out of place in scripture with the weighty themes and difficult ideas we sometimes find there. But the Bible is mostly about joy, and like "Frere Jacques," the words of Isaiah 60:1-3 are filled with hope for God's people.

This passage is part of what many scholars refer to as "Third Isaiah," or a third section of the overall book of Isaiah written much later than the rest of the book. While the original portions of Isaiah (chapters 1-39) were primarily written during the prophet's lifetime (sometime between the late eighth century and early seventh century BC), later sections called Second and Third Isaiah were probably written during the sixth century BC. Third Isaiah is the section comprised of chapters 56-66 and so was likely addressed to God's people returning from a period of exile or forced absence from their homeland. A certain percentage of those who returned would probably have been born in captivity and have never lived in the land of Israel. Furthermore, they were coming to a land that was very different from when they or their ancestors had left it. The author of Third Isaiah was writing to help fellow people of faith come to terms with their new surroundings and the circumstances they were facing.

Questions: If you have ever moved from one town to another, or from country to country, do you remember how it felt? What were some of the biggest changes you faced? How long did it take you to adapt to your new surroundings? Can you imagine moving to a "homeland" you had never really known or that was much different than when you had left it? What affect might this have on you? How might you deal with you new circumstances?

To the people of God living in a foreign land, it may have seemed as though their entire world had been filled with the darkness of uncertainty. Now many were returning "home," but still there was the darkness of doubt and fear. Indeed, as Genesis 1:1-5 shows us, darkness remained a part of creation even after light was brought into being. But Isaiah 60 offers the promise that God is still at work in the lives of God's people, and the call to "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you..." is almost literally a challenge to get up, to leave behind feelings of grief or uncertainty, and to accept new circumstances as a sign of God's new day. We might go so far as to say that these verses are a call to become God's "morning people," those who are enlivened by a new dawn, who discover the opportunity to rise from slumber and rejoice in renewed activity. The author of the passage certainly believes that God's glory is to be found in the light, the way that a new day arrives with the

rising of the sun. The psalmist has a similar way of understanding this, saying to God, "In your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9b). Light is a profound way of perceiving God's glory in the world. God's light, the dawn of God's new day, allows God's people—whether ancient or modern—to live in hope of the times to come, because God is there and God's presence guarantees that grace will abound.

Question: Have you ever been in a place that was totally dark, like a cave or a photographer's darkroom? How did that feel and how did it feel to have light restored? Those people who do not have vision are fully capable of functioning in the world. What are some of the things they do that allow them to participate in a society made up mostly of people who can see?

The comparison of God's glory to a light that overcomes the darkness of doubt makes Isaiah 60:1-3 an ideal scripture reading for the Season of Advent. Advent, that time in the church calendar when the church awaits the coming of God's Messiah, or Christ, recognizes the darkness of sin and death as the most compelling problem we face. When Jesus Christ is sent into the world to free us, it is God's greatest act of love. It is as though we see the world moving from the darkness of despair into the light of God's grace. A third century Christian hymn, translated in 1899 by Robert Bridges as "O Gladsome Light," captures something of the imagery of Jesus Christ as God's light:

O gladsome light,
O grace of God the Father's face,
Th'eternal splendor wearing;
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our Savior Jesus Christ,
Joyful in Thine appearing.

Questions: Do the words of Isaiah 60:1-3 help us better understand the time of waiting for the Messiah to be born? How might you rephrase the words of "O Gladsome Light" in modern language so that others could more easily understand it? Would your rephrasing sound anything like Isaiah 60:1-3?

One of the most pressing problems facing the world today is what has come to be called energy poverty. One way to define this phenomena is to say that energy poverty is a lack of access to modern energy sources. Emily Fausett, who works with Solar Under the Sun and often speaks to groups about this issue, says that energy poverty means "not having electricity because it is either not available, not reliable, or not affordable." The facts are staggering. According to some sources over 2.7 billion people (or 38% of the world's population) rely on wood, crop waste, kerosene, dung, and other biomasses for lighting, cooking, and heating in their homes. Those same sources suggest that over 1.2 billion people (17% of the world's population) have no access to electricity at all in their

day to day lives.⁵ As a result there are an estimated 3.5 million deaths each year, mainly among women and children, from respiratory illness caused by harmful indoor air pollution. That is more deaths per year than from malaria and HIV/AIDS combined (about 2.7 million). Meanwhile, more than 30% of the health clinics in Sub-Saharan Africa lack power which leaves them helpless to use the most modern treatments and some of the more basic medicines that must be refrigerated.⁶

Solar Under the Sun offers communities the chance to stop using open fires for light by providing safe, efficient, renewable solar-generated electricity. When a home is provided with even a single working light fixture, living conditions improve. When a clinic can use an x-ray machine, health conditions improve. Taken together, these simple steps can do much to help people around the world to “arise, shine,” embracing the grace of God and the opportunity to live more fully.

Question: What would your home be like if you had to burn crop waste for fuel? What helpful activities would you have to curtail if you did not have power in your home? How can providing electric power to those suffering from energy poverty demonstrate the light of God’s new day?

7. Summing up:

Are there questions or comments that have been recorded on the whiteboard or sheet of paper that have not been addressed? Are there any other questions that the group would like to consider?

8. Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, may your light and your glory continue to fill the world, that the darkness of poverty may be overcome and those who suffer from need and want be lifted up. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

⁵ Justin Guay, “Solar Power in a Bottle,” theenergycollective.com, March 20, 2014, accessed November 23, 2014, <http://theenergycollective.com/guayjguay/355861/solar-power-bottle>; Marianne Lavelle, “Five Surprising Facts About Energy Poverty,” www.nationalgeographic.com, May 30, 2013, accessed November 23, 2014, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/energy/2013/05/130529-surprising-facts-about-energy-poverty/>; International Energy Agency, “Energy Poverty,” www.iea.org, 2016, accessed November 23, 2014, <http://www.iea.org/topics/energypoverty/>.

⁶ Gretchen Knoth, “6 Ways Energy Poverty Threatens Health Care for the Poorest,” www.one.org, July 28, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.one.org/us/2014/07/28/6-ways-energy-poverty-threatens-health-care-for-the-poorest/>; Marianne Lavelle.

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Session Two

Dialogue: "You Didn't Call"

One: What happened to you last night? You said you would call me.

Two: Sorry, I didn't get the chance before the lights went out.

One: Your lights went out last night?

Two: Oh, they always do on Tuesdays.

One: Really? That's weird.

Two: Not really. I mean, we turn them off ourselves.

One: Why do you do that?

Two: It's a kind of discipline we started a while back. A way of remembering what so many people in the world go through on a daily basis.

One: No power at all? That's really impressive.

Two: Yeah. It's tough.

One: I would think so.

Two: I mean, if it weren't for the Blu-ray player, I don't know what we would do.

One: What? How can you have a Blu-ray player if you've turned off the power?

Two: Oh, well we sort of added an entertainment exception, you know, once we had heard all of the same jokes and stories over and over again. So we figured a movie would be a good thing.

One: I see. But that means a TV as well, right?

Two: Well of course. A Blu-ray player is useless without a TV.

One: It was pretty cold last night wasn't it? You must have to pile up the blankets.

Two: Oh, we keep the heat on.

One: But that takes power.

Two: Yeah, but we don't want to get sick.

One: I guess not. But doesn't your food spoil in the fridge?

Two: We don't unplug it. That would be wasteful.

One: Right.

Two: But we have cut way back on how much we use the microwave on those nights.

One: Uh-huh.

Two: I mean, what's a movie without popcorn?

One: A real disaster.

Two: Exactly!

One: So you use candles to move around?

Two: No. Flashlights. Candles are too smoky, and we really can't risk tripping.

One: And if you need hot water?

Two: The water heater is gas, so we really figure that doesn't count.

One: So, what power do you really do without on these "no power Tuesdays"?

Two: Well, if you put it that way...

One: You don't go without power on Tuesdays, you just FORGOT to call me last night, didn't you?

Two: It was movie night. I got distracted.

Questions: What causes you the most inconvenience or difficulty when you are without power? What sorts of things do you do while you wait for the power to be restored? What is the longest time you have been without power?

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Session Three

John 1:1-9—Christ is the Light

Prior to Class:

Find volunteers to read the opening dialogue and provide them with the script in advance.

If you like, find a volunteer to read the scripture lesson for Session Three and make sure they have the text if they would like to practice in advance.

Make sure there are appropriate resources in the class space, including a whiteboard or newsprint, markers, Bibles, and note paper. **Note: There is an opportunity in the “Exploring the Scripture” portion of this session to discuss other passages from John’s gospel. You may want to write those additional passages on a board or sheet of paper in advance to aid in the discussion.**

1. Open with prayer:

God of hope, help us to see the work you are doing in the world so that we may become more active as your people, meeting needs and sharing the love that you make known in your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

2. Ask if there are any other thoughts that have occurred to participants regarding the last session. Allow for brief discussion.

3. Remind participants of the memory verses from Session One (Genesis 1:3-4a) and Session Two (Isaiah 60:1). Introduce the memory verse for this session which is John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” If time permits, recite these verses a few times as a class.

4. Introduce the scripture passage to be considered in this session: John 1:1-9. You or a class member may read it aloud. You may also choose to allow for a time of silent reflection before reading the passage aloud once more. Ask for any initial feedback about the reading from participants. Do any terms or expressions stand out? Do any particular verses draw special attention to themselves? Are there any questions or areas of confusion that arise? Write these on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper for follow up discussion as needed.

5. Have two class participants read the dialogue for Session Three (“Have You Got a Light?”). Lead the class through the questions associated with the dialogue and allow for feedback and comments.

6. Exploring the Scripture:

In our first session we talked about light as the first act of creation. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good” (Gen. 1:3-4a). But as we pointed out, the creation of light did not mean the end of darkness. During creation, in fact, God divided the day from the

night. God called the light day and the darkness night. Light, then, stands apart from darkness, but does not replace it completely. That was in the book of Genesis. In the gospel of John we hear another telling of the creation story, one that makes clear that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was very much a part of the creative process. One aspect of creation on which John's gospel focuses is the first thing created: light.

Questions: Thinking back to session one, what differences do we see between the creation story in Genesis and the account from John? What similarities are there? How does John pick up on the idea of God's speech in Genesis, and how does he use that concept in his own writing?

In his commentary on John, Lamar Williamson, Jr. writes, "Light itself is not something seen; it is something by which one sees... The Fourth Gospel itself is given to enable the reader to see Jesus—and Jesus, the true Light, is given so that all may see God."⁷ To understand John's gospel, then, we have to understand Jesus Christ as the light of the world. But Jesus as the light of the world is different than the light that God created on the first day. The light mentioned in Genesis helps us to see *physically*, to perceive the world around us. It helps plants to grow and helps keep our planet warm. Jesus, the light of the world, helps us to see *spiritually*, to perceive the work of the Holy Spirit, God's presence, and life the way God intends it to be.

Williamson points out a play on words in verse 5 in the phrase, "the darkness did not overcome (the light)." The word translated as "overcome" can also be translated as "comprehend," "understand," or "master."⁸ It is as though the darkness can not overcome the light because the darkness can not fathom what the light is all about. This is not *physical* darkness any more than Jesus is *physical* light. This is *spiritual* darkness that keeps one from seeing—or understanding—God's goodness.

In order to better understand the difference between spiritual light and spiritual darkness we need to look more closely at our passage from John. There are at least six things that we can say about the light in John 1:1-9 which help us to understand that Jesus Christ is the light that John is talking about.

1) The light is life. According to John, Jesus is sent into the world so that all may have life and have it abundantly (10:10). If we are going to enjoy life to the fullest, we will live in the light of Christ.

2) The light shines in the darkness. As we have noted above, the light of God in Jesus Christ stands over and against the darkness of sin and death, but...

3) ...the light was not overcome (or understood) by the darkness. Again, as we've noted above, the ability of the light to shine is in no way threatened by the darkness, which did not put it out (3:19-21).

⁷ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), xi.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

4) John the Baptist is a witness to the light, but he is not the light. This is an important point to make because John the Baptist was a very charismatic figure, someone that people were naturally drawn to. He did much to prepare people for the arrival of God's Messiah, like calling them to seek forgiveness. John was a witness to the light, someone who knew how much the world needed the light, but he was not the light himself and he knew it (1:19-20, 29-30).

5) The light enlightens everyone. While the darkness did not understand the light, those who come to the light find understanding because it is in Jesus Christ that they find the light (8:12).

6) The light was coming into the world. This is a crucial point for John's gospel. Jesus, who is the Son of God, is actually in the world in human form, living as you and I live and facing the hardships that we face up to and including death. The light was coming into the world because God was willing to be with us (John 3:16).

Questions: Take a moment to look up the verses cited above with points 1-6. How do these verses help us better understand the points that John's gospel is making in 1:1-9? If it is helpful, write the additional passages on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper and make notes as to how these passages relate to Jesus as the light of the world.

Debra Carl Freeman has written a series of "Blessings in the Celtic Tradition."⁹ The beginning of one helps to make the connection between God's light and the darkness that does not understand it.

Do not darken your light to me, O God
but shine your light
so that even the darkest corners of my life
are beaming bright with your grace.

According to John's gospel Jesus Christ can be understood as God's light shining in the world (even the darkest corners of it) and beaming with grace. This is the light that leads us to life abundant. It is also the light that helps us to see needs among others and to meet them.

As we mentioned in the last session, a large portion of the world's population depends on unhealthy forms of energy in order to provide for basic needs. The result is that by some estimates more people die annually from respiratory illnesses caused by energy poverty than from malaria and HIV/AIDS combined.¹⁰ What can be done? How can Jesus Christ, the light of the world, lead us to help?

Solar Under the Sun (SUS) is just one very small example of what might be done to alleviate the suffering brought on by energy poverty in the world.

⁹ Unpublished manuscript.

¹⁰ Gretchen Knoth, "6 Ways Energy Poverty Threatens Health Care for the Poorest," [www.one.org](http://www.one.org/us/2014/07/28/6-ways-energy-poverty-threatens-health-care-for-the-poorest/), July 28, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.one.org/us/2014/07/28/6-ways-energy-poverty-threatens-health-care-for-the-poorest/>; Marianne Lavelle.

SUS began as an idea among a small group of Presbyterians in mid-2008 but with the assistance of the Synod of the Sun and other concerned Christians it has continued to grow and develop. In May of 2010 SUS held the first “Solar School” designed to train volunteers in how to install solar power systems for those in need, often in conjunction with water purification systems sponsored by sister organization Living Waters for the World. Since its first installations in Haiti, SUS has spread to Kenya, Uganda, Ukraine, and Honduras.

Today, the mission statement of SUS is, “Believing that Jesus Christ is the light of the world, Solar Under the Sun works to alleviate energy poverty in partnership with volunteers by equipping and resourcing them for mission and advocating for those in need.” SUS is one way of sharing Jesus Christ as the light of the world; and in our next session, we will look at ways that you can help SUS in its work.

7. Summing up:

Are there questions or comments that have been recorded on the whiteboard or sheet of paper that have not been addressed? Are there any other questions that the group would like to consider?

8. Closing Prayer:

Lord God, in Jesus Christ we find your true light. Go with us now as we seek to share that light with the world. Amen.

The Light Bulb Challenge
Adult/Older Youth Bible Study



Session Three

Dialogue: "Have You Got a Light?"

One: Excuse me, have you got a light?

Two: You mean like a match?

One: Sure.

Two: Or would you rather have a lighter?

One: I don't care, either one.

Two: Well what about one of those fancy candle lighters you see in church sometimes, with the long snout looking thing?

One: I don't care. I just need a light.

Two: How about two sticks?

One: What?

Two: You could rub two sticks together to get a spark.

One: Are you kidding?

Two: No. I've seen it done, back when I was in the Scouts. Of course it took forever, FOR EVER.

One: No, I don't want two sticks.

Two: So which is it?

One: Just give me a lighter. That would be fine.

Two: Oh, well I haven't got one of those. Sorry.

One: Matches then.

Two: Haven't got any of those either.

One: Then I'll take the fancy candle lighter thing.

Two: Are you kidding? Who would carry one of those around?

One: What? You don't have any of those!?

Two: No. Oh, but I do have two sticks. You could rub them together. Of course it will take you FOR EVER.

One: No! I don't want two sticks!!! I can't believe you put me through all of that! Have you at least got a watch?

Two: Which kind? Analogue or digital?

One: ARGGGHHH!!!

Questions:

Does it sometimes feel like you have too many choices to make in your life, or that you are faced with too many decisions? How do you know what the right decision is? What about your spiritual life? Do you have a hard time making decisions there, too?

The Light Bulb Challenge
Adult/Older Youth Bible Study



Session Four

Matthew 5:14-16—Let Your Light Shine

Prior to Class:

Find volunteers to read the opening dialogue and provide them with the script in advance.

If you like, find a volunteer to read the Bible lesson for Session Four and make sure they have the text if they would like to practice in advance.

Make sure there are appropriate resources in the class space, including a whiteboard or newsprint, markers, Bibles, and note paper. **Note: For this session you may want to make a copy of the “Light Bulb Inventory” for each participant. You may also wish to allow time for the group to take a walk through a part of your facility to see how many light bulbs are installed there. Provision should also be made for collecting future contributions from any participants who accept the challenge in their own homes or businesses. You may also wish to encourage the entire congregation, women’s or men’s group, youth group, Sunday school classes, or church governing body to accept the challenge and share with them some of the information you have learned in this class.**

1. Open with prayer:

God of justice and mercy, show us how to live lives of faithfulness to you and service to others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

2. Ask if there are any other thoughts that have occurred to participants regarding the last session. Allow for brief discussion.

3. Remind participants of the memory verses from Session One (Genesis 1:3-4a), Session Two (Isaiah 60:1), and Session Three (John 1:5). Introduce the memory verse for this session which is Matthew 5:16: “...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” If time permits, recite these verses a few times as a class.

4. Introduce the scripture passage to be considered in this session, Matthew 5:14-16. You or a class member may read it aloud. You may also choose to allow for a time of silent reflection before reading the passage aloud once more. Ask for any initial feedback about the reading from participants. Do any terms or expressions stand out? Do any particular verses draw special attention to themselves? Are there any questions or areas of confusion that arise? Write these on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper for follow up discussion as needed.

5. Have two class participants read the dialogue for Session Four (“Oh, There You Are”). Lead the class through the questions associated with the dialogue and allow for feedback and comments.

6. Exploring the Scripture:

In his commentary on the gospel of Matthew, Douglas Hare of says Matthew 5:14 that the statement, "You are the light of the world" is "presented without justification (why?) or interpretation (how?)." The only real clue we get as to what this means comes in the words, "of the world." According to Hare, we might read this verse as, "You are light, but for the whole world, not for a closed fellowship." Hare also points out that the word "you" as used in verse 14 is plural, in a way like the southern Americanism "y'all." Here "the community as a whole is challenged to fulfill its corporate mission of serving as...light for the world. Such a task cannot be accomplished by independent individuals. It is one we must work at together."¹¹ So, when Jesus says "you are the light of the world," he means that his followers, like you and me, have a responsibility to share our light with the whole world. And that the responsibility is one that we share together. He also means that we are to take this responsibility very seriously.

In the earlier sessions of this study, we have pointed out that God created light and then pronounced it as "good" (Genesis 1:1-5), we have seen how God's glory is found in light (Isaiah 60:1-3), and we have recognized that Jesus Christ himself is the light (John 1:1-9). Now we come to a place where the attention is squarely turned on us and our responsibility to share the light with those around us. But this doesn't mean that we ourselves are the source of the light. As we know, the moon reflects the light of the sun so brightly at times that it can throw shadows. In the same vein, we are, according to Matthew's gospel, "bearers of light." What we are called to do is to reflect the love of God into the world.

Questions: What are some of the ways that reflected light is used? How does reflected light make our lives better or safer? What are some of the ways that we might "reflect light" in the world in order to make it better for others?

What Jesus says in Matthew 5:14-16 is in no way new. Near the very beginning of the biblical account we read that God told Abram, "...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2; see also 18:17-18 and 22:18). God's covenant with Abram (who is later called Abraham) meant that through him God would be blessing others. Abram was not to hoard God's attention, God's goodness, God's love. Abram and his descendants were to share all of that and more with the nations as a part of God's plan for humanity.

Questions: What does it mean to bless the nations? How might we do this today? Is it important which nations we bless? Why or why not?

But it is vital for us to remember that Jesus' words in Matthew are not addressed to one person. They are addressed to a group, and they present a common challenge to all of Jesus' followers. Some sports are individual competitions, like golf or singles tennis or most track and field events. A number

¹¹ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Matthew*, Interpretation Series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 44

of competitors may be part of one team but, by and large, each athlete competes on his or her own at any given time. On the other hand, sports like basketball, football, hockey, and soccer depend on teams working together with many players involved at any given moment in the game.

Gregg Popovich, long-time head coach of the San Antonio Spurs basketball team has said, "It's not about any one person. You've got to get over yourself and realize that it takes a group to get this thing done." Jesus is a good bit more profound than that, but the sense is the same. We, not as individuals but as a community, are the light, not for ourselves but for the world. Still, we can embrace Popovich's sentiment. We as the people of God do need to get over ourselves and realize that it takes a group to share God's love with the world.

Questions: What other efforts require a group working together? What does it take to get a group working as a team? What groups or teams are you a part of? How does this idea apply to the church?

Solar Under the Sun (SUS) is one effort to reflect the love of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ into the world. By working to provide solar power to those without a safe and reliable source of electricity, SUS demonstrates God's concern for all people. But SUS can not accomplish this work alone. It takes a community effort, which is why SUS needs help. Here are a few ways we would like you to consider assisting SUS in its work.

1) Pray for SUS, especially those who travel to other countries in order to install solar equipment. Ask God to bless their efforts to God's will and to let the light of God's love pour forth.

2) Consider attending a session of Solar School to learn how you and others may participate in the work SUS is doing. Solar School is normally held at Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center, a Presbyterian-related facility near Little Rock, Arkansas. (Solar School information can be found on our website at solarunderthesun.org.)

3) Encourage your congregation to support a solar installation project by raising funds to provide for equipment and travel. Help recruit volunteers to do the work. SUS is ready and able to offer support and advice in this effort.

And finally, 4) Support the work of SUS financially by contributing to its work. This can be done by individuals, families, congregations, or larger groups. One way to do this is what we call "The Light Bulb Challenge."

What is "The Light Bulb Challenge?" Most of the people who will participate in this study are blessed not to suffer from energy poverty. They do not depend on crop waste, dung, wood, or kerosene for lighting and heating their homes or cooking their meals. But as we've noted before, there are many people in the world today who are not as blessed. In many cases, the light of a single light bulb shining in a house, clinic, or school would make a profound difference in the quality of life. One light bulb.

But how many light bulbs do you have installed and working in your house, business, or church right now? Have you ever counted them? Have you ever thought about how precious the light from any one of them might be for someone else?

Elsewhere in this class guide you will find a light bulb inventory. Our challenge to you is to pick an amount, like one dollar (or fifty cents, or even a

penny) and pledge to give that amount for every working light bulb you find installed in your home, business, or church as a contribution to SUS. You may be amazed to find out just how many bulbs you have at home in lamps, closets, appliances, seldom used rooms, garages, attics, and so forth, or at your church in the same sorts of places. Take a walk through your house or facility. Mark off the number of bulbs you find installed and make a contribution that will assist others to enjoy a better way of life, awash in the light of God's love. Then plan to do this annually so that the work of SUS may continue and you may remain mindful of one hardship that many in the world face on a daily basis. And share this challenge with your congregation or friends so that others may participate as well.

We began this session by considering some insight offered by Douglas Hare in his commentary on Matthew. Hare suggests that Matthew 5:14-16 is "an anticipation of the missionary imperative" with which Matthew closes his gospel in 28:18-20. There, Jesus commissions his followers to "make disciples of all nations." In order to do that, they will need to carry with them the light of God. We as disciples of Jesus Christ have the same "missionary imperative." Sharing a literal source of light with those in need is just one small way we are able to respond.

7. Summing up:

Are there questions or comments that have been recorded on the whiteboard or sheet of paper that have not been addressed? Are there any other questions that the group would like to consider?

8. Closing Prayer:

Lord God, may we reflect your love for others with such generosity that lives and hearts are opened to your good news. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Light Bulb Challenge
Adult/Older Youth Bible Study



Session Four

Dialogue: "Oh, There You Are"

One: Hello. Is there anyone here?

Two: No.

One: What? Who said that?

Two: No one. No one said anything.

One: Yes you did. I heard you. Where are you?

Two: I'm hiding.

One: Why?

Two: I'm afraid.

One: Afraid of what?

Two: Of being seen.

One: Why are you afraid of being seen?

Two: Because I don't want to disappear.

One: Wait. What?

Two: I don't want to disappear. Every time someone sees me I get a little less visible and I'm scared that soon there won't be anything left of me to see.

One: Are you being serious?

Two: Yes. Very serious.

One: Well that's about the silliest thing I've heard all week, and I've heard a lot of silly things this week, believe me.

Two: It isn't silly to me. It's scary.

One: You don't disappear just because someone looks at you. You aren't like a glass of water that can be poured out. You're a person...I think. At least you sound like one. And people don't vanish that way.

Two: Are you sure?

One: Positive. I've been looked at my whole life, and if anything, there is more of me now than there was before.

Two: Go figure.

One: In fact, I think when people look at you it CAN make you a fuller person.

Two: How's that?

One: If you smile, for example, and it makes other people smile, doesn't that sort of make YOU bigger?

Two: What if you yawn and other people start yawning?

One: Well, yes. I guess that's the same sort of thing. Not quite as positive though.

Two: Maybe not, but I yawn much better than I smile. I'm always worried that I have something caught in my teeth.

One: If you come out of hiding now, I'll check your teeth for you and you won't have to worry about it.

Two: Okay, I guess so.

One: Oh, there you are!

Two: Yeah. (Smiles broadly.) Anything in my teeth?

One: No, but I bet I'll be smiling the rest of the day when I think about this conversation.

Two: Awww. Thanks!

Questions: How can our actions influence others? What are some of the good and bad ways this can happen? What if we work together as a larger group, can that have an even larger positive impact?

The Light Bulb Challenge
Adult/Older Youth Bible Study



Light Bulb Inventory

On the sheet below, mark the number of **light bulbs** of any type you find installed in your home. Then prayerfully consider making a contribution to the work of Solar Under the Sun based on the number of bulbs you find. (You may also use this list to help find and record the number of light bulbs installed in your church building or other facility.)

Entryways: _____

Lights along a sidewalk or steps, decorative lighting on house, by the front door or on the street number, at a back door, on a porch or patio, in the garage (ceiling or automatic garage door opener), in a front hallway, in a "mud room."

Main Living Areas: _____

Hallway lights, lamps in living room or den, ceiling lights, bulbs in a chandelier, closet lights, stairway lights.

Kitchen: _____

Ceiling lights, under-counter lights, lights in appliances (refrigerator, oven, microwave), over the sink, in the pantry.

Utility Room: _____

Ceiling lights, closet lights, light on the vacuum cleaner, light over washer or in dryer.

Bedrooms: _____

Ceiling lights, bedside lamps, closet lights, nightlights.

Bathroom: _____

Ceiling lights, vanity lights, closet lights, lights on a mirror.

Work Room: _____

Ceiling lights, cabinet lights, work lights, under-counter lights, lights on tools.

Attic or Basement: _____

Ceiling lights, stairway lights, closet lights.



About the Author:

The Rev. Dr. Jim Freeman is pastor of the Broadmoor Presbyterian Church, Shreveport, Louisiana where he has served since 2011. He is also a member of the board of Solar Under the Sun. Jim earned his BA from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas and his M. Div. at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. He was ordained to the ministry in the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1990. In 2015 he received his D. Min. from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia in the area of gospel and culture. As a pastor, Jim has served congregations in Arkansas and Louisiana. He has written for Group Publishing, the *Feasting on the Word* commentary series, and the Presbyterian Outlook among others. His play, *Sanctuary (Psalm 84)*, has been performed in congregations in seven states. Jim is married to the Rev. Dr. Debra Carl Freeman. They have two children.



About Solar Under the Sun:

Believing that Jesus Christ is the light of the world, Solar Under the Sun works to alleviate energy poverty in partnership with volunteers by equipping and resourcing them for mission and advocating for those in need. To accomplish this work, Solar Under the Sun:

Trains, through Solar School courses, the mission team leaders needed to help Initiating Partners become effective solar energy providers. These courses include:

Solar 1 – fundamentals of team leadership, partnership development and relationships, site review process, and solar energy development, and

Solar 2 – field testing, assembly of fully functional solar panel units, culminating in the production of solar power, and preparation of Initiating Partners to train Operating Partners to install, operate, and maintain their solar energy system

Equips partners with information for purchasing solar panels and other equipment needed in solar installations.

Links partners, if requested, with a community of need, so that they can begin the relationship-building process.

Supports teams and their Operating Partners by providing network opportunities with other installations in the same geographic area, as appropriate networks are developed.

For more information visit: solarunderthesun.org or find us on Facebook.