

John 1:4 Commentary

PREVIOUS

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NEXT

JESUS' RISE FROM OBSCURITY FOLLOWED BY OPPOSITION IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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THE LIFE OF JESUS AS COVERED BY GOSPEL OF JOHN (shaded area)

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John 1:4 In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men: en auto zoe en (3SIAI) kai e zoe en (3SIAI) phos ton anthropon:
([NASB: Lockman](#))

- **Him was life:** John 5:21,26 John 11:25 John 14:6 1Co 15:45 Col 3:4 1Jn 1:2 1Jn 5:11 Rev 22:1
- **life:** John 1:8,9 John 8:12 John 9:5 John 12:35,46 Ps 84:11 Isa 35:4,5 Isa 42:6,7,16 Ps 49:6 Ps 60:1-3 Mal 4:2 Mt 4:16 Lu 1:78,79 Lk 2:32 Ac 26:23 Eph 5:14 1Jn 1:5-7 Rev 22:16

Wuest - In Him life was existing. And this aforementioned life was the light of men.

LIFE IN THE WORD

"In Him was (continually) life" (Jn 1:4) and "believing you may have life in His name." (Jn 20:31-note) So in a sense we see John's Gospel begins and ends with an emphasis on **LIFE**. Real life, supernatural life requires a supernatural Source and John says this quality of life has forever been present in Jesus.

In Him was life - Remember that John has just explained that the Word created everything without exception, and everything would include physical life. So from the context it would make sense that one meaning of "life" is physical life. But John's ultimate purpose is not for men to have physical life (everyone born has that attribute), but for them to have life in His Name (the Word, the Logos, Jesus) by being born a second time! So surely life in Him has a double meaning which is a common motif of John. See discussion below by Boice.

James Montgomery Boice sees a double meaning for the term **life in Him** in John 1:4 - (1) **Physical life** - But what does it mean to say that Jesus is the source of life or that he is the life? The first answer to that question is one that takes us back to the opening pages of the Book of Genesis and therefore to the role of the Lord Jesus Christ in giving life to all living things in the world. We have already seen in our previous studies that the writer intends a reference to the first chapters of Genesis in his introductory verses; this is also the case here...."Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life" (John 1:3, 4), every Bible student should think instantly of the life that went forth out of God to bring life to inanimate matter at the beginning of the creation of the world. In other words, John is saying that our physical life comes from God through the Lord Jesus.....(2) **Spiritual Life** - However, this is only the beginning of our understanding of what John intends by the use of the word "life" in the Gospel. He is speaking of Christ's role in creation, in one sense. But this is only the groundwork for the spiritual interpretation of the word that he unfolds in the pages of the Gospel. It is true that John speaks of physical life here, but as the book goes on he speaks increasingly of spiritual life. And the point is that just as Jesus is the source of physical life, so is he the source of the spiritual life that we receive when we believe on Him....(and) the life that God gives through Jesus Christ is not merely an earthly life or a life of such quality that it can be lost, but eternal life. It can never be lost....(and) he has also given us a life that is meant to be abundant even in our present circumstances...It is unfortunate that many Christians, though they have eternal life, nevertheless do not have life abundantly. This was not meant to be. Instead of living a miserable life and always complaining, Christians are

meant to live lives of such joy and exuberance that their lives will be a blessing to others....Oh, the joys of living out the abundant life of Christ! They are the joys of increasingly finding him to be the bread of life that satisfies all our hunger and the water of life that quenches our deepest thirst. ([Gospel of John](#))

In Him - "He was the fountain of life—**physical, moral, and eternal**—its principle and source." (Vincent) Notice that John does not say (as with the Creation by the Logos) that life is "through" Jesus but is **in Him**. (cf Jn 3:15, 16, Jn 3:36, Jn 6:40, Jn 11:25) Paul takes this a step further in Colossians 3:4 (**note**) when he describes "**Christ [Who is] our life**" (literally "Christ our life").

John explains later that "just as the Father has life **in Himself**, even so He gave to the Son also to have **life in Himself**." (Jn 5:26)

Was ([1510](#)) ([eimi](#)) means to be and is the usual verb for existence. In the metaphysical sense as in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word," meaning it had been before there was any beginning or existed before the beginning of anything; John 8:50, *estín*, in the pres. tense indicating." ([Zodhiates](#)) Notice John does not say Jesus became life but that He was always life.

Was is in the **imperfect tense** which speaks of continuous action in the past. In a word, the Word was continually life! This means that "from all eternity and throughout the entire old dispensation, life resided in the Word." ([Leon Morris](#))

William Barclay - IN a great piece of music the composer often begins by stating the themes which he is going to elaborate in the course of the work. That is what John does here. **Life** and **light** are two of the great basic words on which the Fourth Gospel is built up. They are two of the main themes which it is the aim of the Gospel to develop and to expound. ([John Commentary- Daily Study Bible](#))

Steven Cole - John uses "**life**" 36 times in his Gospel, more than any other New Testament book. D. A. Carson ([The Gospel according to John -The Pillar New Testament Commentary](#)) argues that in light of Jn 1:1-3, "the life inhering in the Word is related not to salvation but to creation." The next phrase, "**the life was the Light of men**," then either points to the fact of man being created in the image of God or to the way in which God's invisible attributes, eternal power and divine nature are revealed in creation (Ro 1:20). But since John goes on to develop the truth that Jesus came to earth to bring **spiritual life** to those who are dead in their sins and **spiritual light** to those who live in darkness, Jn 1:4 may have a dual meaning, pointing back to creation, but also ahead to the salvation Jesus brings. So the application is, those who are spiritually dead in their sins (**Ed**: This includes everyone ever born = Ro 5:12, Eph 2:1) need life and Jesus is the Source of that life (**Ed**: This truth permeates the Gospel - Jn 5:24, 5:39-40, Jn 6:35 = "I am the Bread of Life", etc). They are spiritually in darkness, but when they are born again, the light goes on. As Paul puts it (2Cor. 4:4-note, 2Cor 4:6-note), referring to those who are perishing, "in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.... For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." ([John 1:1-5 Jesus: Revealer of God](#))

Hendriksen asks "But what is meant by the term **life**, as used here? Does it refer directly to every kind of life,**physical** as well as **spiritual**, the life of the butterfly as well as that of the archangel? Physical life, however, does not reside in the second person of the Trinity (**Ed**: I might argue that it did when Jesus became a Man). God is not physical in any sense (cf. Jn 4:24). Besides, it is a good rule in exegesis to see whether a term is explained when one reads on and on (**Ed**: While I agree, the rule of **context** also goes to what was previously written and in John 1:3 John taught that the Word was the Creator of everything which would include physical life -- so in that sense Hendriksen actually is "breaking" his own rule of accurate exegesis -- in my humble opinion). When that rule is applied in this case, the result is as follows: The **life** is characterized as the **light** of men (Jn 1:4b). This **light** shines in the darkness and is not appropriated by sinful men (Jn 1:5). With reference to this **light**, the Baptist bears testimony (Jn 1:6, 7). The latter was not the original and perfect **light**, in whose radiance all other lights seem dim, but he came to bear testimony with respect to the **light** (Jn 1:8, 9). This **light** is now identified with the One who is rejected by the world but accepted by God's children (Jn 1:10–13). From this context it is clear that the terms **life** and **light** belong to the **spiritual sphere**. (**Ed**: I absolutely agree with his conclusion based on paying attention to the **context**!) Moreover, both in the Fourth Gospel and in the First Epistle the term **life** (*zoe*) always (54 times) moves in that realm. At times it is interchanged with the expression "everlasting **life**" (Jn 5:24). When one really possesses this **life**, he experiences close fellowship with God in Christ (Jn 17:3). The meaning is similar in the book of Revelation (book of life, water of life, tree of life, crown of life). From all this it would seem to be evident that basically the term (life) refers to the fulness of God's essence, His glorious attributes: holiness, truth (knowledge, wisdom, veracity), love, omnipotence, sovereignty. This full, blessed **life** of God is said to have been present in the Word, and this from all eternity and throughout the entire old dispensation: "**In Him was life**."...Here, in the present **context** (John's Prologue) the life of God in Christ, to which all things and all men owe their existence (creation and preservation), is represented as the Source of men's illumination regarding spiritual matters and of the everlasting salvation of God's children (**Ed**: e.g. Jn 8:12). ([New Testament Commentary Exposition of the Gospel According to John](#))

MacDonald on **in Him was life** - [Not *through* Him but *in* Him.] This does not simply mean that He possessed life, but that He **was** and **is** [and has always been] the Source of life. The word here includes both physical and spiritual life. When we were born, we received physical **life**. When we are born again, we receive spiritual **life**. Both come from Him. ([Believer's Bible Commentary](#))

A T Robertson on in Him was life - That which has come into being (Jn 1:3) in the Logos was life. The power that creates and sustains life in the universe is the Logos. This is what Paul means by the perfect passive verb [ektistai] (stands created) in Col. 1:16. This is also the claim of Jesus to Martha (John 11:25). This is the idea in Heb. 1:3 "bearing (upholding) the all things by the word of his power." Once this language might have been termed unscientific, but not so now after the spiritual interpretation of the physical world by Eddington and Jeans. Usually in John *zōē* means spiritual life, but **here the term is unlimited and includes all life**; only it is not bios (manner of life), but **the very principle or essence of life**. That is spiritual behind the physical and to this great scientists today agree. It is also personal intelligence and power. ([John 1 Word Pictures in the NT](#))

W E Vine on "In Him was life" - This statement, the truth concerning which is developed throughout the Gospel, predicates, not simply that **life** existed in Him who is the Word, the Son of God, but that it was unoriginated and eternal in respect of, and by reason of, His self-existence as One in the Godhead. In this sense **life** is the very essence of Godhood. The implication of this is that He is the Author, Source and Cause of **life**. The statement is **retrospective**, looking back to the fact of creation (Jn 1:3), and **prospective**, in that "the life was the light of men." Physically **life** and **light** are distinct; **light** ministers to **life**. Spiritually the **principle of life** and the **principle of light** are indissociable. **Life and Light**, essential in the Son of God, are together communicated to those who believe upon Him.

The communication of **life**, spiritual and eternal, comes with the new birth, and that by faith, so that those who believe on His Name become there and then "children of God" (Jn 1:12). As the **Light** He reveals to us the nature and the will of God. He discloses to us ourselves, our sins and errors; He reveals the remedy for our fallen condition and the salvation provided for us in Himself. He makes us glad with His countenance. Through what He has undertaken for us as the Son we are brought into relationship and union with Him as children of God.

Accordingly, in the first three chapters we are shown (1) the *provision* of life through the coming of the light, Jn 1:9; (2) the *means* of life through the acceptance of the light, Jn 1:12; (3) the *necessity* for life, in that without the light men abide in darkness, Jn 3:15–19; (4) the *evidence* of life, in coming to the light, Jn 3:20, 21. ([The Collected Writings of W. E. Vine](#))

Milne on in Him (the Word) was life - The fruit of the Word's activity in mediating creation was not just the coming into existence of the world 'in the beginning', but the emergence of life within it (Jn 1:4). We are driven beyond the initial act of creation to the Word's ongoing sustenance of the universe; the Logos is the life-giver. Finally considered, all life derives from him (Acts 17:8, 'For in him we live and move and have our being'). 'There is no such thing as a godless person; he is too near every one of us' (Brunner). ([The Message of John - Bible Speaks Today](#))

A W Pink on in Him was life - This follows logically from what has been said in the previous verse. If Christ created all things He must be the Fountain of life. He is the Life-Giver. We understand "life" to be used here in its widest sense. Creature life is found in God, for "in him we live and move and have our being"; spiritual life or eternal life, and resurrection life, are also found "in Him." If it be objected that the Greek word for "life" here is "zoe," and that *zoe* has exclusive reference to spiritual life, we answer, Not always: see Luke 12:15; Luke 16:25 (translated "life-time"), Acts 17:25, etc., where, in each case, "*zoe*" has reference to human (natural) life, as such. Thus, "*zoe*" includes within its scope all "life." ([John 1:1-13 Christ the Eternal Word](#))

Guzik - The Word is the source of all **life**. The ancient Greek word translated **life** is *zoe*, which means "the life principle," not bios, which is mere biological life.

Matthew Poole on in Him was life - in this Word was life corporal, spiritual, eternal; it was in him as in the fountain. Some understand this of corporal life, both in the first being and preservation of it; it is certain that this is in Christ, for He upholds all things by the word of his power, Hebrews 1:3 Acts 17:28; and thus it is another demonstration of the Deity of Christ. Others think that here is rather a transition from creation to redemption; you hath he quickened, Ephesians 2:1. Others understand it of eternal life, because our evangelist most generally takes the term life, as a benefit flowing from Christ, in this sense, as Ephesians 3:16, and Ephesians 4:14, and in a multitude of other texts. I know no reason why we should not understand it of all life; all life being in Christ, as God equal with the Father; and spiritual and eternal life flowing also from Him in a more peculiar consideration, as Mediator. ([John 1 Commentary - English Annotations](#))

Life refers to that supernatural life which includes a fullness of life which alone belongs to God the Giver of life and is available to His children now (Ro 6:4-note, Ep 4:18-note) and forever, amen (Mk 10:30, Titus 1:2-note on Eternal Life).

John frequently associates **life** with **Jesus**...

John 5:21; 26 "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them **life**, even so the Son also gives **life** to whom He wishes. 26 "For just as the Father has **life** in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have **life** in Himself;

John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the **life**; he who believes in Me shall **live** even if he dies,

John 14:6 Jesus *said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the **life**; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.

Life (2222)(**zoe**) speaks of "life in the sense of one who is possessed of vitality and animation. It is used of the absolute fullness of life, both essential and ethical, which belongs to God. The ethical and spiritual qualities of this life which God is, are communicated to the sinner when the latter places his faith in the Lord Jesus as Saviour, and this becomes the new, animating, energizing, motivating principle which transforms the experience of that individual, and the saint thus lives a Christian life." (Wuest)

See also William Barclay's discussion below on Life

W Hall Harris on **zoe** - Regarding John's use of **zoe**: John uses the term 37 times. 17 times it occurs with (eternal), and in the remaining occurrences outside the Prologue it is clear from context that 'eternal' life is meant. The 2 uses in Jn 1:4, if they do not refer to 'eternal' life, would be the only exceptions. ([Prologue John 1:1-18](#))

Richards adds that **zoe** "is used to designate the life which God gives to the believing sinner, a vital, animating, spiritual, ethical dynamic which transforms his inner being and as a result, his behavior." In classical Greek refers to natural life--the principle that enables living things to move and to grow. In the NT, **zoe** focuses on the theological meaning rather than on the biological. From the perspective of the NT, in every respect life is the counterpart of death. Each book of the NT speaks of **zoe**. In each, the principle of life lifts our vision beyond our earthly existence to reveal a unique quality of life that spans time and eternity and that has its roots in God."

In his first epistle John writes - And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternall**life**, and this **life** is in His Son. He who has the Son has the **life**; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the**life**. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal **life**. (1Jn 5:11-13)

Marvin Vincent - In Him was life (ν α τ ζω ν). He was the fountain of life—physical, moral, and eternal—its principle and source. Two words for life are employed in the New Testament: **bios** and **zoe**. The primary distinction is that **zoe** means existence as contrasted with death, and **bios**, the period, means, or manner of existence. Hence **bios** is originally the higher word, being used of men, while **zoe** is used of animals (**zoa**). We speak therefore of the discussion of the life and habits of animals as zoology; and of accounts of men's lives as biography. Animals have the vital principle in common with men, but men lead lives controlled by intellect and will, and directed to moral and intellectual ends. In the New Testament, **bios** means either living, i.e., means of subsistence (Mark 12:44; Luke 8:43), or course of life, life regarded as an economy (Luke 8:14; 1 Tim. 2:2; 2 Tim. 2:4). **Zoe** occurs in the lower sense of life, considered principally or wholly as existence (1 Pet. 3:10; Acts 8:33; 17:25; Heb. 7:3). There seems to be a significance in the use of the word in Luke 16:25: "Thou in thy lifetime (en te **zoe** son) receivedst thy good things;" the intimation being that the rich man's life had been little better than mere existence, and not life at all in the true sense. But throughout the New Testament **zoe** is the nobler word, seeming to have changed places with **bios**. It expresses the sum of mortal and eternal blessedness (Matt. 25:46; Luke 18:30; John 11:25; Acts 2:28; Rom. 5:17; 4:4), and that not only in respect of men, but also of God and Christ. So here. Compare John 5:26; 14:6; 1 John 1:2. This change is due to the gospel revelation of the essential connection of sin with death, and consequently, of life with holiness. "Whatever truly lives, does so because sin has never found place in it, or, having found place for a time, has since been overcome and expelled" (Trench).

Zoe (37 of 135x in John) - John 1:4 (2x); Jn 3:15-16, 36 (2x) Jn 4:14, 36; 5:24 (2x) Jn 5:26 (2x) Jn 5:29, 39-40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47-48, 51, 53-54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2-3; 20:31

John 1:4 In Him was **life**, and the **life** was the Light of men.

John 3:15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal **life**. 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal **life**.

John 3:36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal **life**; but he who does not obey the Son will not see **life**, but the wrath of God abides on him."

John 4:14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal **life**."

36 "Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for**life** eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.

John 5:24 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal**life**, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into **life**.

26 "For just as the Father has **life** in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have**life** in Himself;

29 and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of**life**, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.

39 "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal **life**; it is these that testify about Me;

40 and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have **life**.

John 6:27 "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal **life**, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal."

33 "For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives **life** to the world."

35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of **life**; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.

40 "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal **life**, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day."

47 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal **life**.

48 "I am the bread of **life**.

51 "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the **life** of the world is My flesh."

53 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no **life** in yourselves.

54 "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal **life**, and I will raise him up on the last day.

63 "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are **life**.

68 Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal **life**.

John 8:12 Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of **life**."

John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have **life**, and have it abundantly.

28 and I give eternal **life** to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.

John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the **life**; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,

John 12:25 "He who loves his **life** loses it, and he who hates his **life** in this world will keep it to life eternal.

50 "I know that His commandment is eternal **life**; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me."

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the **life**; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

John 17:2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal **life**.

3 "This is eternal **life**, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

John 20:31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have **life** in His name.

Eternal life - This phrase occurs 41 times in the NAS with 15 of the uses being in John's Gospel and 6 more uses by John in his epistle, so that over half the NT uses of this phrase are by John (Mt 19:16, 29; 25:46; Mk 10:17, 30; Luke 10:25; 18:18, 30; Jn 3:15-16, 36; 4:14; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:50; 17:2-3; Acts 13:46, 48; Rom 2:7; 5:21; 6:22f; Gal 6:8; 1Tim 1:16; 6:12; Titus 1:2; 3:7; 1John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20; Jude 1:21)

W H Griffith Thomas on life - Another characteristic word of John's Gospel is **life**. It expresses the ultimate element of his purpose in writing. As the result of believing, the readers of this Gospel are intended to have **life**. The word (**zoe**) always refers in this Gospel to the principle of **spiritual life** as distinct from the earthly manifestation or principle of natural life (**bios**). This latter word is not found in the fourth Gospel and only twice in all of John's writings (1John 2:16; 1John 3:16), where the meaning is quite clear. The word **zoe** occurs thirty-six times in the Gospel of John as compared with seven in Matthew, four in Mark, and six in Luke. This

again shows the prominence given to it and the important place it occupies in the teaching of this Gospel. The idea is found as early as John 1:4, and then almost chapter by chapter various aspects of the life are seen and various relationships to it are borne by our Lord. **The meaning of this life is perhaps best given in the words of our Lord's prayer: "This is life eternal, to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent"** (John 17:3). It consists, therefore, not in any mere existence whether here or hereafter. Its essence lies in the experience of fellowship with God. **Quality, not duration, is the predominant thought of life in this Gospel.** ([Ibid](#))

THE WORD: THE LOGOS THE LIFE: THE LIGHT OF MEN

Guzik - This life is the light of men, speaking of spiritual light as well as natural light. It isn't that the Word **"contains"** life and light; He **is** life and light. Therefore, without Jesus, we are **dead** and in **darkness**. We are lost. Significantly, man has an inborn fear towards both **death** and **darkness**.

Jesus sums up His public ministry declaring "For a little while longer the **LIGHT** (referring to Himself) is among you. Walk while you have the **LIGHT**, that darkness may not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the **LIGHT**, believe in the **LIGHT**, in order that you may become sons of light." These things Jesus spoke, and He departed and hid Himself from them (Marking the end of His PUBLIC ministry)." (Jn 12:35-36) This Scripture is an excellent illustration of the meaning of John's description that **"the LIFE was the LIGHT of men"** (Jn 1:4) and this same **"LIGHT shines (continually) in the darkness.** (Jn 1:5) For three and one-half years Jesus' **LIFE** had been walking among the Jews as the **LIGHT** shining into their SPIRITUAL DARKNESS (cp Mt 4:16, Lk 1:78-79), the **LIGHT** in Whom they must believe in order that they might have spiritual life, new life, His **LIFE** in them (cf Col 3:4).

Boice commenting on **the LIFE was the LIGHT of men** writes "Several years ago an old woman in the bush country of southern Rhodesia in Africa said to a missionary, "You have brought us the **LIGHT**, but we don't seem to want it. You have brought us the **LIGHT**, but we still walk in **DARKNESS**." She was speaking only of the life she knew in Africa. But her words aptly describe the reaction of people everywhere to the light of Jesus Christ when he first shone upon the world. He was the light of the world. In one sense he had always been the light of the world. Yet, when he appeared the world rejected him because it preferred darkness. This great image—the image of Christ as the light of the world—is the second theme that John the evangelist introduces in the fourth and fifth verses of his opening chapter. Later we are told quite pointedly by Jesus, "I am the light of the world" (8:12). Here we read, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." **What does John mean when he declares that Jesus Christ is the light of men?** By this title, Jesus is revealed as the One who knows God the Father and who makes him known. Light is a universal image for the illumination of the mind through understanding. Before Christ came into the world, the world was in darkness. The world did not know God. Christ came. His light shone before men. Then men had light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The context for the significance of this image lies in the fact that God is pictured as light throughout the Old and New Testaments. David writes in one psalm, "The LORD is my light and my salvation" (Ps. 27:1). Psalm 36:9 says, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."....How perfect the image seems to be! And how appropriate as a term for the One who makes the Father known! **E. M. Blaiklock**, former professor of classics at Auckland University in New Zealand, makes these comments: "God is light. The image is satisfyingly complete. Light penetrates the unimaginable depths of space, far beyond the limits of human vision. In all the vastness of the great globe of vanished millennia into which the telescope can probe, the gleaming galaxies float, or tell in light how once they floated, when the effulgence which we see today began its endless journey. "Without light there is no vision, no view of reality, no confident journeying, no growth save of chill and evil things, no health, no life. The hand shrinks from the cold and slimy life which survives sluggishly in dark caves. When some plant of the open day strikes root in such places, it becomes a pale and flaccid thing distorted beyond recognition, as it reaches for a gleam through some chink or crevice in the rock. "But light, like God, exists by itself, apart from that which it illuminates. ... Light on earth is a medium, a means by which we see this and that object. It picks up and reveals the loveliness of shape and color. But light exists by itself and apart from that which it gilds and glorifies. It is an environment, a condition, a wonder which fills and floods the whole immensity of space." Blaiklock is right. The image is rich, and it is totally appropriate to describe the Lord Jesus Christ. God the Father is light. So also is Christ the Son. He is the image of the invisible God, the One who fills all in all. In him we see and know the Father. ([The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary](#))

Bruce Milne - John says three things about this Logos-Light. It offers illumination to every person—that life was the light of men (Jn 1:4); it shines in the context of darkness (Jn 1:5); and the darkness has not overcome it (Jn 1:5, NIV fn.).

A T Robertson on **the life was the light of men** - Later Jesus will call himself the **Light** of the world (John 8:12). John is fond of these words **life** and **light** in Gospel, Epistles, Revelation. He here combines them to picture his conception of the Pre-incarnate Logos in His relation to the race. **He was and is the Life of men and the Light of men**. John asserts this relation of the Logos to the race of men in particular before the Incarnation.

Leon Morris asks "What is the meaning of **'that life was the light of men'**?....It is more likely that we should think of Old Testament passages that refer to God as the source of **light** and **life**, for example: "For with you is the fountain of **life**; in your **light** we see **light**" (Ps. 36:9). It is this kind of thing that the writer has in mind. But he is writing about the Word, so his meaning will be that the Word, himself the **life**, is also **"the light of men,"** John is preparing the way for the thought that he will develop throughout his Gospel, that **Jesus is the life-bringer and light-bearer."** ([The Gospel of John The New International Commentary on the New Testament](#))

Milne has a slightly different interpretation of how **the life was the light of men** - Traditionally this has been seen as a pointer to God's general revelation (so Calvin, for example, 'referring to the common light of Nature' [Ps 19:1-6-note; Acts 14:17; 17:27; Ro. 1:19-21-note; Ro 2:14-note]). John is alluding here to the Word's participation, in God's revealing himself universally to all people through conscience and in creation; a revelation which leaves them without excuse for their ignorance of God (**Ed:** Ro 1:20-note, cf Ro 2:1-note).

John MacArthur on **the life was the light of all men** - While it is appropriate to make some distinction between life and light, the statement the life was the Light halts any disconnect between the two. In reality, John is writing that life and light cannot be separated. They are essentially the same, with the idea of light emphasizing the manifestation of the divine life. The life was the Light is the same construction as "the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). As God is not separate from the Word, but the same in essence, so life and light share the same essential properties. The light combines with life in a metaphor for the purpose of clarity and contrast. God's life is true and holy. Light is that truth and holiness manifest against the darkness of lies and sin. Light and life are linked in this same way in John 8:12, in which Jesus says: "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." The connection between light and life is also clearly made in the Old Testament. Psalm 36:9 says: "For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light." "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2Cor 4:4) is nothing more than the radiating, manifest life of God shining in His Son. Paul specifically says: "God ... is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (Jn 1:6). So light is God's life manifest in Christ. ([John 1-11 MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#))

John Piper on **the life was the light of all men** - This means that the light that shines in the darkness is the light of LIFE (John 8:12). The life of the Son IS the light of the world. The first reason the light will triumph over the darkness is that it is life. It is living light. What does that mean? Well, if the life of the Son of God IS the light that shines in the darkness (which is what verse 4 says), then there are at least four things we can say about this light.

First, the light of life has energy and power because the life of the Son has energy and power.

Second, the light of life has purpose and motion. It is not static like a lamppost or a lighthouse on the shore. It plans and moves. It shines now here, now there. It is alive with the life of the Son.

Third, the light of life grows and expands. That is the way the life of the Son of God is. His life is a fountain of life (Psalm 36:9). Once the rays start coming out of this light, they extend farther and farther and farther.

Fourth, the light of life begets offspring. John 12:36, "Believe in the light, that you may become sons of the light."

So the first reason the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it is that this light is living—it has energy and purposefulness and growth and reproduction. It is not a static thing, like a stoplight that might be ignored. The light that shines in the world today is the very life of the Son of God. ([Triumphant Light - Desiring God](#))

A W Pink has an interesting explanation of the **life was the light of men** - What are we to understand by this? Notice two things: this statement in Jn 1:4 follows immediately after the declaration that **"all things were made"** by Christ, so that it is creatures, as such, which are here in view; second, it is **"men,"** as men, not only believers, which are here referred to. The **'life'** here is one of the Divine titles of the Lord Jesus, hence, it is equivalent to saying, **"God was the light of men."** It speaks of the relation which Christ sustains to men, all men—He is their "light." This is confirmed by what we read in Jn 1:9, "That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." **In what sense, then, is Christ as "the life" the "light of men?"** We answer, In that which renders men accountable creatures. Every rational man is morally enlightened. All rational men "show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness" (Ro 2:15, **Ed:** I would add also Ro 1:19-21 = the natural revelation). It is this "light," which lightens every man that cometh into the world, that constitutes them responsible human beings. The Greek word for "light" in John 1:4 is "phos," and that it is not restricted to spiritual illumination is plainly evident from its usage in Matthew 6:23, "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness," and also see Luke 11:35; Acts 16:29, etc. ([John 1:1-13 Christ the Eternal Word](#))

Matthew Poole on **the life was the light of men** - But though as God He distributes life according to their degree to all His creatures, yet He is the peculiar **light of men**, enlightening their minds with light of which vegetative and sensitive creatures are not capable; so as by **light** is not here to be understood the emanations of any lucid bodies, as that of the sun or stars, for other

creatures as well as men are capable of that; nor is it to be understood of the light of reason, though that be the candle of the Lord in the soul; but that light by which we discern the things of God; in which sense the apostle saith, Ephesians 5:8, You were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Albert Barnes on the life was the light of men - "**Light**" is that by which we see objects distinctly. The light of the sun enables us to discern the form, the distance, the magnitude, and the relation of objects, and prevents the perplexities and dangers which result from a state of darkness. Light is in all languages, therefore, put for "knowledge" - for whatever enables us to discern our duty, and that saves us from the evils of ignorance and error. "Whatsoever doth make manifest is light," Ephesians 5:13. See Isaiah 8:20; Isaiah 9:2. The Messiah was predicted as the "**light**" of the world, Isaiah 9:2, compared with Matthew 4:15-16; Isaiah 60:1. See John 8:12; "I am the light of the world;" John 12:35-36, John 12:46; "I am come a light into the world." The meaning is, that the Logos or Word of God is the "instructor or teacher" of mankind. This was done before his advent by his direct agency in giving man reason or understanding, and in giving his law, for the "law was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator" Galatians 3:19; after his advent by his personal ministry when on earth, by his Spirit John 14:16, John 14:26, and by his ministers since, Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:28. ([John 1 Commentary - Albert Barnes' Notes](#))

Hendriksen explains "**life was the light of men**" - When **life** is manifested, it is called **light**, for it is characteristic of **light** to shine forth. Since the fall, which is implied already here in the last clause of verse 4, that **light** was proclaimed to men. Mankind was characterized by darkness, evil, and hatred, which are the antonyms of **light**. To them (especially to Israel; see the explanation of Jn 1:10, 11) throughout the old dispensation the truth and the love of God in Christ were proclaimed. Truth and love are the synonyms of **light**. (For both antonyms and synonyms see Jn 3:19-21; 1 John 2:8-10.) Of course, one should not limit the meaning of the term **light** to just these two attributes (truth and love); rather, they represent all God's attributes. In the work of salvation all the divine attributes were displayed. They were proclaimed to sinful men. ([New Testament Commentary Exposition of the Gospel According to John](#))

MacDonald on **light of men** - The same One who supplied us with **life** is also the **light** of men. He provides the guidance and direction necessary for man. It is one thing to exist, but quite another to know how to live, to know the true purpose of life, and to know the way to heaven. The same One who gave us life is the One who provides us with light for the pathway we travel. ([Believer's Bible Commentary](#))

R Kent Hughes agrees with **MacDonald** - In clearest terms, Christ is described as **light**: "In Him was life; and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness" (Jn 1:4-5). There is ample Scriptural evidence that Christ is **light** in a physical sense, for He appears as such in His glory (see Mt 17:2; Mk 9:2-3; cf. Jn 17:5). But the emphasis here is on His being **spiritual, life-giving light to a dark world**. Jn 1:9 reveals that all humanity benefits from his light: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." Ro 1:19-20 explains that this happens through nature and conscience. ([John- That You May Believe - Preaching the Word](#))

John writes in the next section "There was the true **Light** which, coming into the world, **enlightens** (present tense) every man." (Jn 1:9)

Ryrie - "**Light**" in John implies revelation that discloses the "**life**" that is in Christ and brings into judgment those who refuse it (John 3:19). "**Life**" denotes salvation and deliverance, based on Christ's atonement.

Vincent on the **Light of men** - Passing from the thought of creation in general to that of mankind, who, in the whole range of created things, had a special capacity for receiving the divine. The Light—the peculiar mode of the divine operation upon men, conformably to their rational and moral nature which alone was fitted to receive the light of divine truth. It is not said that the Word was light, but that the life was the light. The Word becomes light through the medium of life, of spiritual life, just as sight is a function of physical life. Compare Jn 14:6, where Christ becomes the life through being the truth; and Matt. 5:8, where the pure heart is the medium through which God is beheld. In whatever mode of manifestation the Word is in the world, He is the light of the world; in His works, in the dawn of creation; in the happy conditions of Eden; in the Patriarchs, in the Law and the Prophets, in His incarnation, and in the subsequent history of the Church. Compare Jn 9:5. ([John 1 Commentary - Vincent's Word Studies](#))

Light (5457)(**phos** from **pháo** = to shine) is defined by many lexicons as that which contrasts with darkness. Light is the medium of illumination that makes sight possible or makes things visible. In Scripture **phos** can refer to literal, physical light (Ge 1:3), but often is used metaphorically or symbolically, the greatest metaphorical use being used to symbolize Jesus as "the Light of the world." (Jn 8:12).

See also William Barclay's discussion below on Light

Zodhiates says figuratively **phos** means "moral and spiritual light and knowledge which enlightens the mind, soul or conscience; including also the idea of moral goodness, purity and holiness, and of consequent reward and happiness. ([Complete Word Study](#))

Men ([444](#))([anthropos](#)) in this context refers to entire human race.

WILLIAM BARCLAY ON THE KEY WORDS: LIFE AND LIGHT

LIFE

The Fourth Gospel begins and ends with **life**. At the very beginning we read that in Jesus was life; and at the very end we read that John's aim in writing the gospel was that men might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). The word is continually on the lips of Jesus. It is his wistful regret that men will not come to him that they might have life (John 5:40). It is his claim that he came that men might have life and that they might have it abundantly (John 10:10). He claims that he gives men life and that they will never perish because no one will snatch them out of his hand (John 10:28). He claims that he is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). In the gospel the word life (*zōē*) occurs more than thirty-five times and the verb to live or to have life (*zēn*) more than fifteen times. What then does John mean by life?

(i) Quite simply he means that life is the opposite of destruction, condemnation and death

God sent his Son that the man who believes should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). The man who hears and believes has eternal life and will not come into judgment (John 5:24). There is a contrast between the resurrection to life and the resurrection to judgment (John 5:29). Those to whom Jesus gives life will never perish (John 10:28). There is in Jesus that which gives a man security in this life and in the life to come. Until we accept Jesus and take him as our saviour and enthrone him as our king we cannot be said to live at all. The man who lives a Christless life exists, but he does not know what life is. Jesus is the one person who can make life worth living, and in whose company death is only the prelude to fuller life.

(ii) But John is quite sure that, although Jesus is the bringer of this life, the giver of life is God.

Again and again John uses the phrase the living God, as indeed the whole Bible does. It is the will of the Father who sent Jesus that everyone who sees him and believes on him should have life (John 6:40). Jesus is the giver of life because the Father has set his own seal of approval upon him (John 6:27). He gives life to as many as God has given him (John 17:2). At the back of it all there is God. It is as if God was saying: "I created men that they should have real life; through their sin they have ceased to live and only exist; I have sent them my Son to enable them to know what real life is."

(iii) We must ask what this life is.

Again and again the Fourth Gospel uses the phrase eternal life. We shall discuss the full meaning of that phrase later. At present we note this. The word John uses for eternal is *aiōnios*. Clearly whatever else eternal life is, it is not simply life which lasts for ever. A life which lasted for ever could be a terrible curse; often the thing for which men long is release from life. In eternal life there must be more than duration of life; there must be a certain quality of life.

Life is not desirable unless it is a certain kind of life. Here we have the clue. *Aiōnios* is the adjective which is repeatedly used to describe God. In the true sense of the word only God is *aiōnios*, eternal; therefore eternal life is that life which God lives. What Jesus offers us from God is God's own life. Eternal life is life which knows something of the serenity and power of the life of God himself. When Jesus came offering men eternal life, he was inviting them to enter into the very life of God.

(iv) How, then, do we enter into that life?

We enter into it by believing in Jesus Christ. The word to believe (*pisteuein*) occurs in the Fourth Gospel no fewer than seventy times. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life" (John 3:36). "He who believes," says Jesus, "has eternal life" (John 6:47). It is God's will that men should see the Son, and believe in him, and have eternal life (John 5:24). What does John mean by to believe? He means two things.

(a) He means that we must be convinced that Jesus is really and truly the Son of God. He means that we must make up our minds about him. After all, if Jesus is only a man, there is no reason why we should give him the utter and implicit obedience that he demands. We have to think out for ourselves who he was. We have to look at him, learn about him, study him, think about him until we are driven to the conclusion that this is none other than the Son of God.

(b) But there is more than intellectual belief in this. To believe in Jesus means to take Jesus at his word, to accept his commandments as absolutely binding, to believe without question that what he says is true.

For John, belief means the conviction of the mind that Jesus is the Son of God, the trust of the heart that everything he says is true

and the basing of every action on the unshakable assurance that we must take him at his word. When we do that we stop existing and begin living. We know what Life with a capital L really means.

LIGHT

In him was life and the life was the light of men.

THE second of the great Johannine key-words which we meet here is the word **light**. This word occurs in the Fourth Gospel no fewer than twenty-one times. Jesus is the light of men. The function of John the Baptist was to point men to that light which was in Christ. Twice Jesus calls himself the light of the world (Jn 8:12; 9:5). This light can be in men (Jn 11:10), so that they can become children of the light (Jn 12:36), "I have come," said Jesus, "as light into the world" (Jn 12:46). Let us see if we can understand something of this idea of the light which Jesus brings into the world.

Three things stand out.

(i) The light Jesus brings is the light which puts chaos to flight. In the creation story God moved upon the dark, formless chaos which was before the world began and said: "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). The new-created light of God routed the empty chaos into which it came. So Jesus is the light which shines in the darkness (Jn 1:5). He is the one person who can save life from becoming a chaos. Left to ourselves we are at the mercy of our passions and our fears.

When Jesus dawns upon life, light comes. One of the oldest fears in the world is the fear of the dark. There is a story of a child who was to sleep in a strange house. His hostess, thinking to be kind, offered to leave the light on when he went to bed. Politely he declined the offer. "I thought," said his hostess, "that you might be afraid of the dark." "Oh, no," said the lad, "you see, it's God's dark." With Jesus the night is light about us as the day.

(ii) The light which Jesus brings is a revealing light. It is the condemnation of men that they loved the darkness rather than the light; and they did so because their deeds were evil; and they hated the light lest their deeds should be exposed (Jn 3:19, 20). The light which Jesus brings is something which shows things as they are. It strips away the disguises and the concealments; it shows things in all their nakedness; it shows them in their true character and their true values.

Long ago the Cynics said that men hate the truth for the truth is like the light to sore eyes. In Caedmon's poem there is a strange picture. It is a picture of the last day and in the centre of the scene there is the Cross; and from the Cross there flows a strange blood-red light, and the mysterious quality of that light is such that it shows things as they are. The externals, the disguises, the outer wrappings and trappings are stripped away; and everything stands revealed in the naked and awful loneliness of what it essentially is.

We never see ourselves until we see ourselves through the eyes of Jesus. We never see what our lives are like until we see them in the light of Jesus. Jesus often drives us to God by revealing us to ourselves.

(iii) The light which Jesus brings is a guiding light. If a man does not possess that light he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going (12:36). When a man receives that light and believes in it, he walks no more in darkness (12:46). One of the features of the gospel stories which no one can miss is the number of people who came running to Jesus asking: "What am I to do?" When Jesus comes into life the time of guessing and of groping is ended, the time of doubt and uncertainty and vacillation is gone. The path that was dark becomes light; the decision that was wrapped in a night of uncertainty is illumined. Without Jesus we are like men groping on an unknown road in a black-out. With him the way is clear. ([John 1 Commentary](#))