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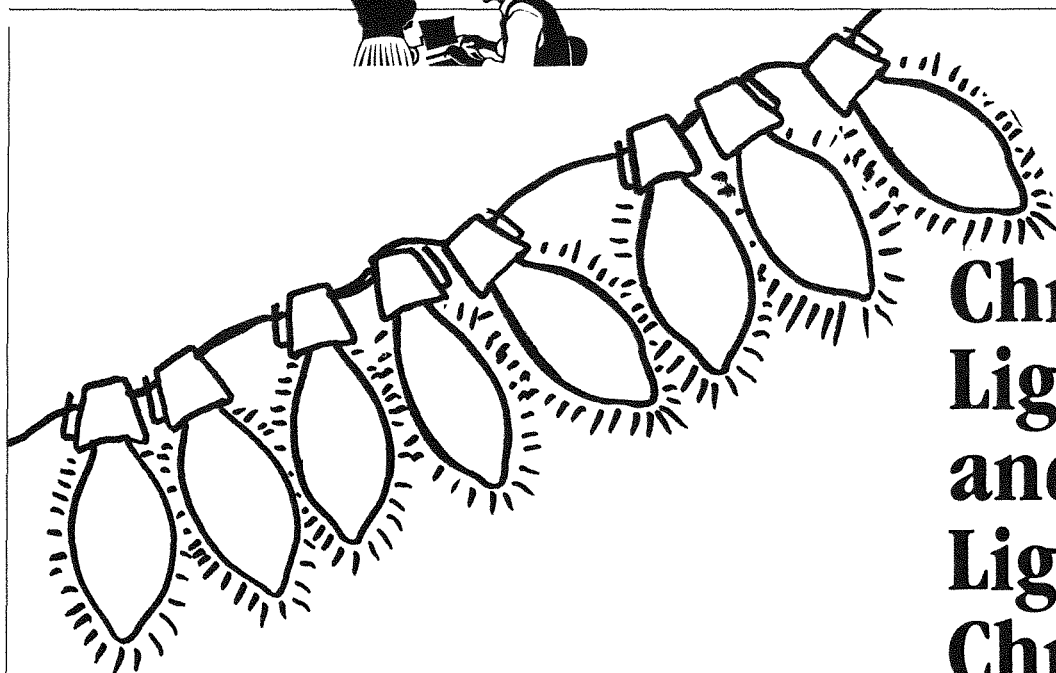
# Christmas Lights... and the Light of Christmas

Paul N. Anderson

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## Christmas Lights . . . and the Light of Christmas

BY PAUL ANDERSON

**M**Y VIEWS ON the meaning of Christmas have undergone two major changes. The first came as a six-year-old when I realized that Santa Claus, reindeer, and Frosty the Snowman were different from baby Jesus, donkeys, and manger scenes. After all, Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth, not just a worldwide holiday filled with festivities and lights.

The second change came when as a young pastor, preaching an Advent series on John 1:1-18, I came to see that Christmas is not confined to manger scenes, babies, and shepherds dressed in bathrobes. Christmas also celebrates the awesome realities that Light overcomes darkness, we can become children of God, and we now behold the glory of the Father through the coming of the Son. In other words, John portrays Jesus' coming as a world-changing event that transforms our lives. The Son sets us free, and He reveals to us who God is.

Light provides a striking image of how all this takes place. According to John 1:5, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (RSV) The word for "overcome" has several meanings in Greek. It combines two words, *kata* (down) and *ballo* (to put, cast, or throw), and means to overcome or to triumph over, as well as to comprehend or to understand. In terms of light, the darkness cannot *extinguish* it. In fact, light "extinguishes" darkness.

No matter how black the darkness, it is eradicated by the mere striking of a

match. Darkness is simply the absence of light. Nothing more. And God's Word-become-flesh replaces the void of darkness with the fullness of God's healing and saving presence. This is the core of the Gospel's good news—the power of Easter, as well as Christmas. In the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the powers of death and darkness are overcome by the coming and triumph of the Son. The Light of Christ overcomes the darkness of the world, and this reality touches our lives.

Since making this connection, I see Christmas lights with new meanings. Their shining stands as a sign that Christ has come to expose darkness and to liberate—to set us free from its grasp. Sin, deception, fear, shame, self-centeredness all lose their power because of God's decisive acting in history. Indeed, good news for the world, and good news for each of us!

The other sense in which the coming of the Son "extinguishes" darkness has to do with our understanding what the Father is like. John 1:18 declares, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." (NIV) While virtually all cultures and religions possess some notion about what God is like, Jesus Christ reveals God's character uniquely. In Jesus we see that God is not vindictive, but forgiving—not cruel, but loving.

Sometimes darkness exists in our minds. We fail to understand what God

is like and how the Son sets us free.

When we use our minds to seek an understanding (*logos*) of who God (*theos*) is, we do "theology." In other words, theology is reflecting and thinking about the most important part of our lives as Christians: who God is and what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

However, we are not simply left to our own devices, trying to fathom the infinite with mere human reasoning. The Light of Christ also transforms our thinking and leads us into God's truth by His Spirit. When this happens, we not only gain new understandings of God's ways, but Christ also "opens" to us the conditions of ourselves and those around us. We come to see acute needs in the world, and we become sensitized to precisely how God's healing/saving love can make a difference in it.

Christmas is not about mangers and babies. Rather, mangers, babies, and wise men are about Christmas. The Christmas story is significant precisely because it points to the good news that, in the coming of the Son, light overcomes darkness, and He reveals to us what God is like. The Light of Christ sets us free indeed: free from the bondage of outward darkness in the world, and free from the inward darkness of our minds. May the lights of Christmas remind us that the True Light still enlightens the world . . . at Christmas, and always. **EF**