

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Imagine that you’re in a cave, one that’s deep, dark, completely devoid of light. You’re not sure how you got there, how long you’ve been there, or how to get out. In fact, you’ve been there so long that you’re not even sure what they outside is like; you just have this feeling that it exists.

The cave is all you know. In this cave you wander around, bumping into walls, tripping over rocks and crevices, trying to feel your way around in the utter darkness.

You’re not alone in this cave, though. There are other people, lots of them. You bump into them, talk to them, perhaps become quite close to them. You might follow each other around, listening for the sound of each other’s voices, holding your hands on their shoulders so you don’t get separated, walking together, but still walking in darkness.

Every now and then, someone will call through the cave and say that they’ve found a way to the outside, and everyone scrambles through the darkness to try to get to them. This happens all the time, yet none of them ever turn out to be right. No one ever finds the exit.

The desire to get out is magnified by the realization that it’s not just you and other people in the cave, either. There’s something else there in the dark.

You can’t explain exactly what it is, but you know it’s there because of what it does. It takes people. Those you are traveling through the cave with, every now and then one of them will cry out and then go silent. One moment he’s holding your hand, or has his hand on your back, and then suddenly, you feel nothing.

You grope around in the dark for him, call out his name, but he’s gone. And you know that someday, whatever it is, it’s coming for you.

The fear this brings out causes people to do all manner of things. Many search for the way out all the more frantically, chasing after every voice that claims to have found the exit, crashing into walls and sprawling over rocks to get there, but never getting there and only hurting themselves a lot in the process.

Others try to surround themselves with other people, figuring that whatever it is, it’ll get those on the outside, and if you’re in the middle of the crowd, you’re safe. Yet this causes all sorts of grief and conflict as people struggle to shove their way into the middle of the herd, wrestling others for that position in the center. And as it turns out, that’s not a safe space either, as people from any spot in the mob go missing all the time.

Still other people deal with the fear by denying it, distracting themselves with the things of the cave. One might cling tightly to a stalagmite coming out of the ground, claiming that he’s immovable now. Another might pick up and hoard rocks she comes across, thinking that having more and more of them will keep it from taking her away.

Yet for all the distractions and supposed sources of security, these people are taken as well, their fingers easily pulled from the wet stones, their collections of rocks suddenly heard clattering to the ground in the darkness. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, nowhere to be safe. For you, the cave is a place of crushing despair, sadness, and fear.

But then, on a day completely unexpected, something else comes. Suddenly, a light begins to shine into the darkness of this cave. And not only does it shine, it also is coming nearer and nearer to you, gradually glowing brighter and brighter as it approaches.

It's startling, because you've been in the darkness so long that you'd completely forgotten what it was like. It's also alarming, and even unpleasant in many ways.

For one, you look at the cave around you, and you notice for the first time all the deep pits that you barely avoided falling into, the jagged rocks you narrowly missed impaling yourself upon in the dark.

For another, you see the rock that you've been clinging to for security and how cracked and weak it actually is; you notice that your collection of rocks is really quite unremarkable and useless, only having weighed you down as you walked.

And then finally, you notice yourself. Your clothing has become torn and muddy, ruined from all the trudging around in the cave. Your arms are covered with cuts and scrapes from the rocks. From the light reflecting off a puddle on the floor you see your whole appearance is sickly and pale, really quite repulsive.

You almost wish this light would go away, so you didn't have to realize all this.

Yet you look up from that puddle and the light is right in front of you. You can't make out the shape, exactly, because your eyes have atrophied from all the time you've been in the dark, but it looks kind of like a man.

Suddenly, he reaches out, picks you up, and plunges you into that puddle, which turns out to be quite deep. You thrash and struggle as He holds you under – it feels like a part of you is drowning. Yet before you black out, He pulls you back out and sets you in front of Him.

As you sputter and cough, you suddenly realize several things. For one, you can suddenly see clearly! Your eyes have been restored. You notice that your old ruined clothing is gone, replaced by a wonderfully white, almost glowing, robe. You see that the cuts and bruises on your arms are starting to heal before your very eyes.

When you look up, you see that this light is in fact a man. He shines, not just reflecting light from somewhere else, or holding a lantern or torch for light, but that He Himself is light.

The light that He shines with is not harsh or blinding, though you get the feeling that if He desired, He could appear that way. But the light coming from this man is warm and inviting, bringing comfort and peace that you haven't felt in all your time in the cave. In fact, you could say that his light is life for that dark and dead place.

As you gaze into His face and feel His warmth radiate through your body, you hear a rustling, a hissing, off in the darkness. Turning, you look out into the shadows, and you see for the first time what it is, that unknown that has taken so many people. It's a great serpent, black as the darkness itself.

At first it seems frightening, but the light puts His hand on your shoulder and tells you not to worry. He holds out His other hand, and in His palm you see He holds two fangs, clearly broken out of the serpent's mouth. There are scars where those fangs bit the light, yet as you look closer at the snake you can see that that bite, and the tearing out of its fangs, has mortally wounded it. It doesn't have long to live.

And further, the serpent seems terrified of the light. It hisses angrily and slithers back and forth, but it won't come close to the light, instead hiding in the shadows.

The Light then takes your hand places in it a book. When you open it, light radiates out, showing a path in the cave, the path that the Light took to come to you. The path seems to have come from so far back in the cave that you can't see the beginning.

Yet along the path you see several things. There's a manger filled with straw. There's a cross atop a hill that looks like a skull. There's a tomb cut into the rock, though the stone which had covered it has been tossed quite a ways away. And the path goes on, right to where you stand. "Through all this," says the Light, "I've traveled, to come to deliver you."

It's almost too much to bear, to realize just how far the Light has traveled to get to you, how He arranged the path to come to where you were huddled in the dark. And yet amazingly, you see that this path has intersected countless other people in the cave as well. Somehow, the Light has come forth, not just for you, but for all those in the cave.

You can see that, sadly, many have chosen not to come with Him, but have remained clinging to their rocks or running off into the darkness, claiming they know where they're going, yet heading right for the serpent.

But many others are gathered around the Light, all wearing the same beautiful robe you have on, all bearing scrapes and bruises that are healing, all holding that book in their hands. These people seem to have come from many different places, speaking many different languages, and yet they are gathered together around the Light, shining like sons of God.

The Light then stretches out His hand and points the other way down the path. From the light shining from His hand, you see what you'd been longing for all this time: the way out!

You can't make out exactly what it is, but you see the same light that He shines with shining from that doorway at the far end of the cave. And with your ears, that were remade along with your eyes, you hear songs of praise echoing from there, "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men."

It seems a long ways off, yet your heart is filled with hope and joy. In that book, you have a map, showing the way to that shining doorway. And you aren't traveling alone, but are walking together with that white-robed host down the path. Most especially, the Light, who walks at the front of the shining band, looks back at you and speaks in warm words, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

To that Light, the Word who was made flesh and dwells among us, who shows forth the glory of the Father, full of grace and truth, who shines in the darkness and is not overcome, who makes us children of God, to Him be praise forever and ever, amen.