Lighthouses are situated in *high-risk danger zones* like rocky headlands or unstable beaches where every wave threatens to undermine the foundation. For that reason, a lighthouse is always a message to a ship’s captain that the vessel is entering treacherous water. The sole purpose of a lighthouse is to be *an aid to navigation.* Sailors need to “see the light” to avoid danger. A lighthouse exists to facilitate navigation by broadcasting light in a sweeping beam across a wide and restless sea. If one can safely navigate through the dangers revealed by the lighthouse, it can mean the preservation of life and property.

The lighthouse metaphor is applicable in three directions: Israel as a light to the nations. To Jesus, who described himself as the Light of the World. To us, followers of Jesus, who are charged with keeping our lamps lit and shining.

**Israel: A Light to the Nations.** In Isaiah 49, Israel is identified as the “servant.” Here, Israel is depicted here in “before” and “after” shots. There is the former downtrodden and disobedient Israel, and there is a renewed, rejuvenated Israel who will be “a light to the nations.” The writer is exuberant: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6). In other words, not only will a renewed Israel lead the lame and limping Jacob (i.e., Israel) to a place of restoration, but Israel will also be a light to all nations, thereby securing their salvation! It is an enormous boast, but Isaiah totally believes it. The exaltation of downtrodden Israel is for the purpose of drawing all the nations of the world, not just Israel, to the Lord.

Of course, the prophet initially has doubts. Judah suffered at least three invasions by the Babylonians. How could a defeated and exiled people possibly recover their national identity, let alone be a light to the nations? The answer lies in the recovery of Israel’s mission even before Israel existed (“before I was born”), in the call to Abraham to be the agent by which “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). Simply reasserting their national sovereignty was not enough for a divinely called people; Israel would be restored “as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6).

Lest one get too giddy, the prophet writes, Israel’s elevation from “one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers” (v. 7) to its new place as “light to the nations” is the work of “the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you” (v. 7). God alone redeemed Israel and raised her up with a special purpose: *God chose this people to bless the world.*

**Jesus: The Light of the World.** This salvation that comes to the entire world is fulfilled by another servant, whom Isaiah will describe as the Suffering Servant, and whom we know as Jesus. The child whose birth we just celebrated at Christmas and whose baptism we noted only last Sunday, himself made this assertion: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

To say that Jesus is the Light of the World sounds nice, but it is a meaningless cliché unless we genuinely make Jesus *our* light and salvation. Unless *we* see the light, it does not really matter whether the saving power of Jesus extends to the world. Christians acknowledge Jesus as the Light of the World. We know that lighthouses keep watch 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. A lighthouse light is never switched off. The light constantly rotates, casting its light for all to see. It is a reminder that Jesus, as our personal lighthouse, as our special light, is casting his watchful and guiding light over us as we journey through life.

This may be why Ronny Hinson’s song resonates so much with us:

*There’s a lighthouse on the hillside that overlooks life’s sea.*

*When I’m tossed it sends out a light that I might see.*

*And the light that shines in darkness now will safely lead me home,*

*If it wasn’t for the lighthouse, my ship would sail no more.*

*Chorus*

*And I thank God for the Lighthouse, I owe my life to him.*

*Jesus is the Lighthouse and from the rocks of sin,*

*He has shown the light around me, so that I might clearly see.*

*If it wasn’t for the Lighthouse, where would this ship be?*

*Everyone that lives around us, says tear that old lighthouse down,*

*The big ships don’t sail this way anymore, ain’t no use in it standing round.*

*But then my mind goes back to that stormy night, when just in time I saw the light,*

*With the light from that old lighthouse, that stands there on the hill.*

David uses many metaphors to describe God’s reality in his life. God is a rock, a refuge, a defense, a strong habitation, a fortress, a shelter, a strong tower, a shield, and a deliverer. For Ronny Hinson, the Lord is a lighthouse, and David agrees: “The Lord is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27). Jesus is our Lord, our Saving Light, and our Guiding Light.

**We, Too, Are the Light.** Once we *see* the light of Jesus for ourselves, we need to *be* the light for others. Jesus made this clear in his Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

Ships seeking safe harbor look for signs of land. When a light is spotted on the horizon, there is cause for excitement. A lighthouse is a warning that danger lies ahead, but it is also a beacon of hope, signaling the end of a long journey and guiding ships through safe channels. For this reason, many lighthouses are perched near a safe port.

So, how can we be beacons of hope for those seeking a port in the storm? Many things come to mind. Among the treasures we found at my mother-in-law’s home after her passing, was a small scrap of paper with some helpful “life lessons.” It began with a Bible verse: “Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these…” (Matthew 25:40), and it went on: Speak you love, speak it again, speak it still again; Keep a promise; Mend a quarrel; Seek out a forgotten friend; Dismiss suspicion and replace it with truth; Write a love letter; Share some treasure; Encourage youth; Find the time; Forgo a grudge; Listen; Express gratitude; Think first of someone else; Appreciate; Laugh.

Some lighthouses are retired and no longer serve as an official “aid to navigation.” Yet they still stand as a solitary reminder that we may be the only light that someone might see, the only book that someone might read, the only picture someone might admire. It is a sad thing when the light goes out, when we become that person who does more harm than good. Let’s not be people of darkness. Let’s keep the light shining.

Prayer: Thank you, God of Light and Life, for always being a light in the dark places of the world and in the dark places of our lives. Our hope is in you, God, for you are the light of the world, and you call us to be lights for others. May your light and love blaze in and through us for all the world to see. We pray as disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Sources:**

* GMA (Gospel Music Association). “The Lighthouse classic song takes on a new life with Ronny Hinson.”
* gospelmusic.org, September 9, 2021. Retrieved June 22, 2022.
* “Statue of Liberty lighthouse.” lighthousefriends.com. Retrieved June 22, 2022.

**A Light to the Nations**

Sunday, January 15, 2023 [Isaiah 49:1-7](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+49%3a1-7&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN 2 Timothy 1:3-7

*And I thank God for the Lighthouse, I owe my life to him.*

*Jesus is the Lighthouse and from the rocks of sin,*

*He has shown the light around me, so that I might clearly see.*

*If it wasn’t for the Lighthouse, where would this ship be?*

That is the chorus of Ronny Hinson’s song, “The Lighthouse,” which has been recorded by the Happy Goodmans, J.D. Sumner and the Stamps, The Oak Ridge Boys, the Gaithers, and many others. The song was once on the charts for more than 40 weeks.

There is something romantic about a lighthouse. It is hauntingly picturesque, standing tall against the elements, offering a beacon of hope in the darkest night to a lone ship seeking safe harbor. A lighthouse is a symbol of hope against all odds. Even in the hour of one’s most desperate need, a light on a distant shore signals safety and salvation. But, did you know, that early lighthouses were not “houses” at all. They were simply piles of timber set ablaze on hilltops to guide three-masted sailing ships safely into harbor.

Hundreds of lighthouses dot the coastline of the United States. Portland Head Light is perched on Cape Elizabeth in Maine and has beamed its light since the fledgling U/S government commissioned it in 1791. Perhaps the most famous beacon of hope and promise of new life, The Statue of Liberty, is not remembered as a lighthouse at all. According to one source, “The lighted torch in Lady Liberty’s right hand had, and still has, great symbolic significance, but at its beginning, it was also used as a navigational aid for ships entering New York Harbor.…Liberty’s torch, 305 feet above sea level, contained nine electric arc lamps that could be seen twenty-four miles out to sea,” and it was the tallest lighthouse in the United States when it was built.

**The Lighthouse Metaphor.** A lighthouse has one function: *to be a light in darkness*. If it cannot do that, it is as useless as a flashlight without batteries. A lighthouse cannot do anything but shed light. It has no emergency tools or equipment, no life vests. In fact, modern lighthouses are largely mechanized, no longer inhabited by keepers.