“THE PEOPLE LIVING IN DARKNESS HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT”

Matthew 4:12–25

Key Verse: 4:16

“. . . the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

When Jesus resisted all the devil’s temptations, he was ready to shake the kingdom of darkness and bring people into the kingdom of light. Matthew’s description of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is different from the other three Gospels. While there are many similarities, Matthew tells us how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, that Jesus’ message was the same as John’s, and Matthew emphasizes his healing ministry and the crowds that came from non-Jewish areas. Today’s passage contains three main parts: first, Jesus begins to preach (12–17); second, Jesus calls disciples (18–22); third, Jesus heals the sick (23–25). All three parts illustrate Matthew’s main theme in this passage, that Jesus is a great light. His coming is like the dawn of a new day in human history. May the light of Jesus come into our hearts through this study.

I. Jesus begins to preach (12–17)

Look at verse 12. It says John the Baptist “had been put in prison.” The verb here means to be “handed over” or “betrayed.” Matthew is again telling us that John was like Jesus. As we saw earlier, so many people had gone out into the wilderness to hear John preach, repent and be baptized by him. People knew John to be a holy man of God. But when he rebuked King Herod for the sin of taking his brother’s wife, John got arrested and put in prison (14:3–5). It tells us that it was a dark time. A righteous man could be imprisoned by a powerful king’s family, simply because he told them the truth. Jesus had just been in the same wilderness nearby, tempted by Satan, but when he heard that John was put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee, at least 100 miles away. Look at verse 13. Luke’s Gospel tells us that when Jesus went to Nazareth, his hometown, people rejected him, so he left there as well (Lk4:14–30). Verses 12,13 show that Jesus was avoiding places hostile to the gospel. It wasn’t because he was afraid; he was trying to get his ministry started. Later, he taught his disciples, “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another” (10:23a). Look at verse 13 again. It’s about a 40-mile walk from Nazareth to Capernaum. Capernaum was one of the largest fishing villages in Galilee, right on the shore of the lake of Galilee. It was the hometown of Jesus’ disciples Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Matthew. It had a large fish market, a Roman army outpost, and tax collectors, and many Gentiles came in and out of the city. Jesus chose Capernaum because it was a humble, open-minded place. And it shows how he wanted to reach all kinds of people.

Matthew gives another reason why Jesus chose Capernaum. Read verses 13–16. Among all the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah predicted Jesus’ coming the most. During his lifetime Isaiah saw several kings of Judah come and go, and his nation become corrupted. But God inspired him to see Jesus’ coming as the hope of God for the whole world. In Isaiah 9:1,2 the prophet predicted that the Messiah would come to the land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali. They were two of the humblest of the tribes of Israel, located in the northern half of the kingdom. They had been invaded and conquered by the Assyrian Empire centuries before. They had been forced to intermarry with other peoples in the empire, so that they lost their racial purity and cultural identity. They were oppressed, humiliated and hopeless.

Look at verse 16 again. The people of Capernaum are described as those “living in darkness and in the shadow of death.” Why were they living like that? Psalm 107:10,11 says, “Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness, prisoners suffering in iron chains, because they rebelled against God’s commands and despised the plans of the Most High.” These people were not just victims of a bad situation; they brought it on themselves due to their sin. Basically, they were living in hopelessness. In darkness we can’t see the truth. We don’t know what we’re really doing or where we’re really going. In darkness, fear starts to grow in us; in the shadow of death, despair and fatalism set in. People may look fine outwardly, but fear, despair and fatalism can be gnawing at their souls. We can’t get out of this fearful hopelessness on our own.

Read verse 16. Some people have been “lights” to their generation. After two World Wars, Albert Schweitzer the medical missionary to Africa was inspired to write about “Reverence for Life,” which led to his receiving the Nobel Prize in 1952 and being called “the light of the 20th century.” The animal rights movement began because of him. Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity in 1950 which spread worldwide and serves people dying of HIV/AIDS, leprosy and TB. Mother Teresa inspired people to live in poverty and purity, and she was definitely a light in an increasingly selfish, materialistic world.

But Jesus is called the “great light.” Why is his light so great, so profound? It’s because he came to save us from our sins (1:21b). It’s because he’s Immanuel, “God with us” (1:23). It’s because he humbled himself to obey God’s will, and especially, because he defeated all the devil’s temptations. Jesus the great light represents truth. His great light shines on all our darkness, exposing our sins and all the falsity of this fallen world. His great light reveals all the truth about God. His “great light” also represents hope. Just as the sunrise at dawn is the symbol of hope for a new day, so Jesus’ coming to this world is like the dawning of hope. It’s not like flicking on a switch and floodlights come blazing on; it’s like a gradual dawning that awakens and brings new life, joy and hope.

His great light can save even the darkest person, if only we turn to God, just as we are. Matthew himself is a good example. When he sold out as a tax collector in order to have money, he found that the exchange was too costly; he lost even his identity and humanity. He used people and did so many things he knew he should never do, but he just gave up and did them. Guilt took over his soul. He became so lonely. Nobody liked him. But Jesus the great light invited him to follow him, and he humbly accepted. When he did, the light of Jesus drove out all his darkness, healed his soul and filled him with hope. When we come to Jesus, his great light can do the same thing for us—drive out all our darkness, heal our souls and fill us with hope.

As the great light, what did Jesus do? Look at verse 17. Jesus gave the same message as John. Some misunderstood he was starting a new kind of religion, without any shackles from the past. But he came in the stream of God’s history and delivered God’s message to the people of his time. God’s message in every generation is the same: the kingdom of heaven has come near. Because the kingdom of heaven has come near, it’s time to repent. “The kingdom of heaven” means God’s rule in human beings’ hearts and lives. Many people don’t want to live under anybody else; they want to be their own person. They don’t feel like they’re living under the devil’s rule or in darkness. They convince themselves that with money or a great relationship they can be happy. But without God life is never really happy. Jesus is telling us, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” When we repent and believe him, we’re saved from our sins and from living in darkness. We experience God’s forgiveness. We’re healed from the wounds and damage of sin. Our human dignity is restored, and we gain true peace and inner freedom. Most of all, we have the glorious hope to be with God. Revelation 21:3,4 describes our hope in his kingdom: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” This glorious hope of heaven became real for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. All we need do is repent of our sins and believe in Jesus. In this world we’re bombarded with so many self-help messages, so many false promises, so many vain hopes. Amid all the confusion and darkness, the message of repentance and the kingdom of heaven is our only true light.

II. Jesus calls his first disciples (18–22)

Jesus not only proclaimed God’s message; he also raised disciples. His disciple-making ministry was also the light of God in this dark world. After he was gone, his disciples would carry on his message of light. It all started with calling people to follow him. What kind of people did Jesus call? Read verses 18–20. Jesus didn’t call highly educated or already religious people; he called ordinary, hard-working people. It was because they would be able to understand the people of their times. Also, they would not be just talkers, but real workers. What did he call them to do? He gave them a very clear direction, “Come, follow me.” It has deep meaning. It means to leave behind our old life of sin. It means to learn from Jesus and imitate him. He called ordinary people because they’d be humble enough to learn from him. What did he promise them? He said, “And I will send you out to fish for people.” Until now, Simon Peter and Andrew were trying to catch fish in order to survive. But through following Jesus, they’d learn to bring people to live under God’s gracious rule and to the kingdom of heaven. They had no particular ability to fish for people. But when they followed Jesus, he promised to enable them to do so. Read verses 21,22. They were also fishermen. But these verses stress their response to Jesus’ calling. They left their boat and their father and followed immediately. Being a disciple of Jesus requires total commitment and simple obedience. No doubt their father Zebedee was furious when they up and left him in the boat, with no explanation. He didn’t realize it, but God was blessing him with the greatest blessing.

III. Jesus heals the sick (23–25)

These new disciples had a lot to learn from Jesus. Mostly, they witnessed his hardworking shepherd’s life. Read verse 23. Jesus focused on teaching the word of God, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing people. He didn’t wait for people to come to him; he went to where they were. He focused on the word of God, believing the word of God would bring people out from under the devil’s evil rule and under God’s gracious rule. His healings were audio/visual demonstrations that the kingdom of heaven is near. Read verse 24. This reveals the compassion of Jesus. It’s what all his followers should mainly be learning. He not only taught the word of God; he also alleviated people’s suffering. In verse 25 Matthew emphasizes that large crowds of many Gentiles followed Jesus.

Today we learned that Jesus is the great light. His message of the kingdom of heaven, his disciple-raising and teaching and healing ministry were the light of God for all the people of the world. May God bless us to receive the light of Jesus and follow him.