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Jesus Is: The Light You Need

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TEXT: Matthew 4:12-17 (ESV)

Now when He heard that John had been arrested, He withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth He went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

Dear friends:

When I was a little boy my family visited the Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park out in Montana where I’m from. Of course, we wanted to do a tour of the limestone caverns, which are considered the largest and most spectacular in the northwestern part of the United States. Now what I remember about the tour, first of all, is that I was a little nervous and scared at the thought of going down deep into these underground caves. It was scary enough seeing the bats flying around at the entrance to the cave as we prepared to go in. Then we descended deeper and deeper and deeper into the earth. It got chillier, and damper, and darker. The guide at one point turned off the lights just to show us how dark it could get. We couldn’t see anything - you couldn’t see your hand

in front of your face! The blackness was disorienting and paralyzing. We didn't move, and I was scared. Then suddenly he turned on his flashlight. One tiny flashlight lit up that huge cavern. The tour group let out a big sigh of relief as this one small light dispelled the darkness. We went through the rest of the tour and I breathed a sigh of relief when it was all over and we stepped back out into the warm, beautiful, Montana- "big sky country" sunlight. I don't know about you, but I prefer light over dark.

Matthew, in our passage for today, talks about light and darkness. He tells us that as Jesus made His headquarters for His ministry in the village of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, that this was actually a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. Listen to his words again:

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.

This passage comes from Isaiah 9. In Isaiah's time God's chosen people were living in the darkness of their sin and God's judgment. They had turned to idols for their security instead of the God of Israel. Darkness prevailed. In fact, all of God's commandments were being brazenly broken by His people, again and again. And now God's judgment was looming upon them - a world power was about to take away their land. They were looking for answers in the wrong places, and now are stumbling around in the dark trying to fix things, according to Isaiah, who spoke on God's behalf. They were lost! The future looked bleak for them. They would be invaded, deported, and live in exile as punishment, Isaiah told them. But in Isaiah 9, there's a great announcement from Isaiah about a hopeful future for them. There would come light! God's saving light. Isaiah goes on to describe the promised one from God - a King - coming Who would be their Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Their light would be given them. As Isaiah predicted, as you know, they lost the land just as he said and they were exiled. God's punishment was carried out, and they lived in exile for many, many years. Eventually they were allowed to return home, thanks to God's help. But after they returned to their land, there was still no Messiah King yet to rule over them. They lived under the domination of various world powers, so they looked forward to the day when the Messianic King God promised would arrive and make things right for Israel, just like was described in Isaiah 9.

Now, in today's story Matthew announces:

The time you've been waiting for has arrived! Here is that light that Isaiah was talking about. It's Jesus! He has come to overcome the darkness of the world. A new day is dawning, even in the region of the shadow of death itself.

We learn in this statement that Jesus is a light for all kinds of people, not just Jewish folks. This area, where Jesus was beginning His ministry, was Jewish and pagan. It lay aside the international trade routes, with all kinds of people with all kinds of beliefs and religions walking around. Jesus, you see, had come for all people sitting in the darkness of this world. Everybody needs the Light. It's worth noting also that the rabbis back then used "Light" as a name for the Messiah that was promised to come, and "Light" was used to describe God Himself. For instance, Psalm 27 begins with the line "the Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" And God's glory is described as a great light.

So now we have this announcement: the Light has come. Old Testament prophecies fulfilled, and Matthew finishes this text "so from that time on Jesus began to preach saying 'repent for the kingdom of Heaven,'" Matthew's way of saying the kingdom of God, "'is at hand.'" In other words, God's promised Light of salvation has arrived. "Turn to me," Jesus says, "and enter into the kingdom of God's light." You see, God did not create you and me to live in darkness, but in His light. Darkness is talked of negatively in this passage for very good reason.

Everyone knows that we need light physically. Without the sun we'd freeze to death in the darkness. In the darkness, crops can't grow, plants can't go through the process to give off oxygen for us to breathe. We also know that we need light emotionally. We human beings become depressed when we're living in darkness, when it's gray out, in the gray and darkness of winter. Many of us have a "sad lamp" to try to overcome the depression. And isn't it interesting that when things are bad or feeling bad we talk of them as "dark times". Fear comes with that darkness as well, as we think of children being afraid of the dark. Light gives confidence. And we need light from an intellectual standpoint as well. We talk about it in that way. Light shows us the truth. For example, it shows us the bend in the road when we're driving at night so we don't go off the road or hit something that's in the roadway. And we talk of then being "enlightened by the truth" in books and in science and so on. When something is revealed to us, we discover something, we talk of "the light goes on in our head" and how good that feels.

So that's why darkness serves as such a good metaphor for humanity's spiritual predicament. And it shows how important light is for us. Darkness represents (in the Bible) evil and ignorance and helplessness and hopelessness and lostness and death itself. When we live apart from God we're living in the dark. We're operating under the Prince of darkness, Satan. We stumble around in the darkness of sin and death, and we cannot get ourselves out of it even if we try. We are totally in the dark, ignorant, about how to fix it. Oh, we try artificial means to bring some light into our personal lives: money and possessions and relationships and success and doing good and being good,

moral people and earning God's favor. But these attempts don't really work. They're only temporary, fleeting, and they fall short. And when we look into our world and we see how dark it has become some days, we might turn to the government, or to economics, or education, or technology for the light, but they fall short as well.

As human beings created by God we need real Light, we need God's Light to survive and live spiritually. That's how we're wired. Without His Light, we're in a mess. We're in a terrible predicament. And Matthew's gospel announces to us "Light has arrived, His name is Jesus!" One day later on this Jesus will even refer to Himself as the "Light of the world", that whoever comes to Him will not need to stumble around in the darkness. Jesus, you see, is the Light we need. His teaching and healing brings light. His suffering and dying and rising will give light and life to all who come to Him. You get around Jesus and His light exposes the truth of our sinfulness. It's like sitting under the dentist's lamp when going for a checkup: all the flaws in our face show up. His light turns us and leads us to the truth, not only about ourselves, but about God and God's heart. He tells us when you've looked into His face you look into the face of God. And he talks to us of our need for God; that we're incomplete without God in our lives. His light reminds us of what is good and true. It can be trusted for what is safe and what is unsafe. What is hard for us, what is good for us, life-giving. His light brings us a steady stream of joy, even in the midst of darkest circumstances, because His presence is with us and also in us.

Think about this: when Jesus died on the cross for our sin, darkness fell over the land, didn't it? He was descending into darkness at that time so that we could be brought into His marvelous light, God's eternal light. Someone once said "without Christ we're like a ship lost in the open sea in a dense fog, groping around for the eternal shore, waiting with beating hearts for someone to dispel the darkness with the light of salvation." And this is what Christ has done for us: He's our light. The apostle Paul in Colossians describes believers in Christ as "saints who live in Christ's light" and he says "Christ has delivered us from the domain of darkness. He's transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son in Whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Delivered, transferred from darkness into light. Christ is that Light.

I have a personal question for you today: are you living in the darkness or in the light? Have you been delivered and transferred out of darkness into the marvelous light of God? If your answer is "no, I'm in the dark," there's no need for you to sit in the darkness any longer. Let me assure you of that. There's no need to be away from God and His Light. There's no need to go through life fearful and scared and nervous and lost and hopeless, because the good news that's announced to us today is "the Light has come!"

And how do we get in on the gracious gift of this light? Jesus tells us in his first sermon that was read in the passage: repent. To repent is basically to admit you can't save yourself and come to the light of Jesus Christ. Turn to Him and believe in Jesus and what he's done for you at the cross and the tomb. Don't just come the Light though - walk in the Light. Follow Him the rest of your days. Listen and obey Him. You do that by daily opening those Gospels to let Him speak to you, to teach you. It's the way to go. It's a wise way to live, Old Testament scripture tells us, "God's word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." And share the Light with others. He shone the light of His love on you, now reflect His love to others with your own kind words and actions. And, of course, tell people about what He's done for all of us; let that Light shine so that others might come to the saving light of Jesus Christ.

Oh friend, Jesus is the Light every one of us needs. God wants to light up your life and give you a brand new day. God wants to put this old gospel song in your life:

I wandered so aimless, life filled with sin
I wouldn't let the dear Savior in
Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night
Praise the Lord! I saw the light!
Oh, I saw the light, I saw the light
No more darkness, no more night
Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight
Praise the Lord! I saw the light!
Praise the Lord! I saw the light!

Come to the Light of Jesus Christ! Come now!

Amen.