

THE GREAT LIGHT DAWNS (Jesus Begins His Messianic Ministry)

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.”

In this passage Jesus begins his earthly messianic ministry. Jesus’ main work is preaching the good news of the kingdom, calling disciples, and healing the sick. In doing so, Jesus reveals God’s love and saving grace to people suffering under the power of sin and death. Jesus’ coming is the dawning of a great light. This light has continued to shine to the present time. May Jesus’ light dawn in our hearts today.

First, Jesus’ messianic ministry was exact obedience to God (12-14).

In Matthew 4:11, Jesus was in the desert after winning victory over the devil’s temptation. In verse 12, Jesus hears that John had been put in prison. This did not happen immediately after Jesus’ victory in the desert. It is likely that the events of John 1:29-4:42 took place in the interim. However, Matthew passes over this to show that Jesus’ victory over the devil was the basis for beginning his messianic ministry.

Look at verse 12. “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee.” Jesus had won a great victory over the devil in the desert. But Jesus did not begin his work as the Messiah right away. Jesus waited for God’s time to come. When Jesus heard that John was put in prison, he accepted it as the divine signal to begin his work. To human ears, John’s imprisonment was dreadful news. Matthew 14 says it happened when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch to repent his sin of adultery, for he had taken his brother’s wife. Herod got mad and imprisoned John; in fact, Herod wanted to kill John. It seemed that the power of evil was in control. It seemed to be the worst time to begin messianic work. But Jesus did not think so. Jesus saw God’s purpose behind Herod’s evil act. Jesus saw that God was removing John from center stage in his work. Soon, John would seal his testimony in blood. It was to make way for Jesus. Jesus must begin his earthly ministry.

Returning to Galilee meant going into Herod’s territory, for Herod the tetrarch ruled Galilee. Yet, Jesus was not intimidated by Herod’s wickedness. Jesus marched straight into Galilee. Jesus had a spirit of conquest, believing that the kingdom of heaven must advance and the darkness of the world must recede before it. For this, Jesus gave his life to God, believing that nothing can hinder the Lord from advancing.

Look at verse 13. “Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali....” Nazareth was Jesus’ hometown. He had spent his childhood and adolescence there in relative privacy among family and friends. Considering Jesus’ humanity, it must have required a decision of faith and a struggle to leave Nazareth, overcoming his emotional attachments. In the past, he had probably celebrated the Passover with his mother and brothers, as we Americans celebrate Thanksgiving with our families. From now on, Jesus would celebrate the Passover with his disciples, often on the run. In the past, Jesus had probably enjoyed doing carpentry work and the peace and quiet of having personal time. Perhaps Jesus played touch football with neighborhood friends after a day of hard work. From now on, he would be fully dedicated to God’s holy mission until his life was consumed as a ransom sacrifice for sinners. Perhaps Jesus took one last glance at his home, his mother and his carpentry shop and thanked God for his life in Nazareth. But Jesus had no time to be sentimental. According to Luke 4:14-30, Jesus was rejected in his hometown before going to Capernaum. In any case, with a resolution to obey God’s calling, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum.

Look at verse 14. “...to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah....” Matthew continues to emphasize that Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus. Yet, now Jesus is not guided merely by his parents or circumstances to obey God’s word. Jesus made a conscious decision to obey God’s word. Jesus lived by every word that came from the mouth of God. Jesus moved by God’s word. Jesus worked according to God’s word. Jesus located his ministry according to God’s word. There may have been many practical reasons for Jesus to move to Capernaum; however, Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ obedience to God’s word. Jesus’ messianic ministry was precisely his obedience to God.

Second, Jesus’ great light shines in the darkness (15-17).

In verses 15-16, Matthew quotes Isaiah's prophecy. These verses say, "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—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." These poetic verses teach us that God sent Jesus as a great light into the world of darkness. Let's think about why this is so.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob's sons. They were not firstborn like Reuben, or favored by promises like Judah, or favored of beloved Rachel like Joseph. They were ordinary members of the clan. Later they became two of the tribes of Israel. After the conquest of Canaan, they received land in northern Palestine. This land is loosely referred to as Galilee. After the kingdom was divided, it was part of Northern Israel, which fell into idolatry. God called them to repent many times through the prophets. But they refused to listen to God's word. Finally, God punished them. The Assyrians invaded, conquered the land, and scattered its inhabitants. They resettled Galilee with many foreigners (2 Ki 17). From that time, its pure Jewish identity was lost. Jews and Gentiles lived together. It became known as "Galilee of the Gentiles."

According to the historian Josephus, at the time of Jesus, Galilee contained about 3,000,000 inhabitants in over 200 cities. A favorable climate and fertile soil made it rich in agriculture. Major trade routes ran east and west, as well as north and south; thus it was known as "the way to the sea along the Jordan." Modern geographers have compared it to the Carolinas or Virginia in the United States. Having been influenced by Greek thought, Roman government, and Jewish law, there was a cultural blending that made it open to new ideas. At the same time, Galileans were known to take religion and politics seriously—enough to fight bloody battles over them.

Verse 16 says the people there were living in darkness. It was spiritual darkness that comes from living without God. They did not know where they came from or where they were going. They had no identity, no direction, and no meaning of life. They had no hope. They were just existing in the flesh, toiling hard for three meals a day. Thus dissatisfied in their souls, they were prone to do dirty things in the darkness. When they confronted hardship, especially the wages of their sins, they blamed God. They were not seeking God. They did not deserve God's presence. Jesus' coming was the one-sided grace of God to them.

North American campuses may be like Galilee. Many were founded to train Christian leaders. But they were infected with secular humanism and fell into the darkness of godlessness. They abandoned God. Then they abandoned truth. Now many students live in terrible spiritual darkness. They have become sexually immoral. This week, the Loyola newspaper showed two girl students who want to start a club on campus promoting "safe sex." They are blindly doing the devil's work, and they are sinning terribly against God. Many live in the darkness of despair. In their despair they abuse alcohol and drugs. Yale University announced this week a new ban on tailgate drinking parties at football games, especially when they play Harvard. Why do top American college students drink so much? Like the intellectuals of Isaiah's time, they are living in the darkness of despair. Many live in the darkness of idolatry. One student was named after a rock star. According to statistics, many rock stars die young from a drug overdose, AIDS, suicide, etc. Did this person's parents want their child to live in utter corruption and die young? Of course not. Still, they named their precious child after a rock star. What darkness! As if this darkness was not bad enough, there is also the shadow of death. This robs people of any kind of joy they may find while living in this world. Last weekend, in two separate events, one in Minnesota and one at Northwestern, students died in the celebrations following football games. Winning is no comfort when a young person dies. There is a darkness on our campuses, rooted in godlessness.

Look at verse 16 again. "...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." The great light refers to Jesus. Jesus has power to drive away the darkness. Jesus is like the rising sun that burns away the darkest darkness to reveal the bright dawn of a new day (Lk 1:78). Jesus reveals to us the love of God, the forgiveness of sins, the living hope of the kingdom of God, and the restoration of man's mission and fellowship with God. Jesus can enable anyone to live a most meaningful, joyful, and fruitful life for the glory of God.

How does Jesus do this? Look at verse 17. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" This was the same message as that of John the Baptist. It is the timeless message that God has given men. In essence it means to turn away from sin and self to the living God. It is to admit that the life of sin is

wrong and to cry out to God for help to live a new life. Jesus never overlooks a penitent cry. Jesus is waiting for us to come back to him. When we repent sincerely, Jesus gives us the kingdom of heaven.

The coming of the kingdom of heaven is good news to everyone who believes. The kingdom of heaven is equivalent to Jesus' reign. When Jesus reigns in our hearts, the kingdom of heaven comes within us. Jesus drives out the devil and the power of sin and death. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit, who works in us to make us like Jesus, bearing good spiritual fruit. Galatians 5:22-23a says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Jesus' reign exalts God's greatness in us and also brings true happiness from deep within our soul.

When Jesus reigns in our communities or in our fellowship, the kingdom of heaven comes among us. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus says, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Sometimes God brings people together who have no human elements in common at all. We may well wonder at first why God did this. But when we gather in Jesus' name and pray together, something truly remarkable happens. Jesus comes to live among us. Jesus reveals his holy purpose and fills us with divine love. When the love of Jesus burns in our hearts we become one. Wherever two people are united in the love of Jesus, there is the kingdom of heaven.

Someday Jesus will reign over all creation as he now reigns in heaven. Jesus will turn over the kingdom to God the Father and God will be all in all (1Cor 15:24,28). The Apostle John saw a vision of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, the coming kingdom of heaven. In Revelation 21:22-27, he says, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." Jesus' great light will shine until all darkness vanishes and the kingdom of heaven comes.

Third, Jesus calls the first disciples (18-22).

Look at verse 18. "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen." These ordinary fishermen were working to support their families. However, Jesus saw them with great vision. Perhaps Jesus stood looking at them for several minutes, then said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (19). Through Jesus' words we can learn his mind and understand his vision for the kingdom, and for two fishermen.

As Jesus watched the fishermen casting and retrieving their nets, it reflected his vision of the kingdom. In Matthew 13:47-50, Jesus tells the parable of the net: The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. In the same way, God will catch all men in his net, even the most slippery among them. He will bring the righteous to his everlasting kingdom and throw the wicked into the fiery furnace. Jesus' vision was worldwide. Jesus vision stretched across the generations and into eternity. Jesus saw the restoration of God's righteous reign over the lives of men and throughout the whole world, forever. As Jesus watched Peter and Andrew cast their nets and pull them in, he saw the whole world coming before God, person by person, generation by generation. Jesus was the greatest visionary who ever lived.

With this great vision in mind, Jesus called two fishermen who stood before him, Peter and Andrew. Jesus said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." At the moment, they could not grasp the magnitude and depth of what Jesus was talking about. But they were moved by the spirit of Jesus. They could taste the life that awaited them, a life of meaningful work that had true and everlasting glory. It was what their souls craved. They were tired of working hard to catch fish, eating the fish to gain strength, using their strength to catch more fish, and so on, and so on. They found in Jesus hope of a dynamic new life that would bear everlasting fruit. Look at verse 20. "At once they left their nets and followed him." They had no second thought.

Jesus did not begin with religious professionals. Jesus called ordinary fishermen. They knew how to work hard and faithfully. They knew how to adapt strategies and methods, according to the changing appetites and habits of fish. Most of all, they were humble enough to learn. So they could grow. They needed to learn the contents of the gospel

and the kingdom vision. They needed to learn how to preach the gospel in a way that honored God and reached people. They needed to learn God's heart for those lost in darkness. They needed to learn and live by the holy standards of the kingdom. In essence, they needed to learn the character and spirit of Jesus until they became like Jesus. Jesus was promising to train them until they did so. Those who have received Jesus' glorious calling have a great promise from him. We must not only despair over ourselves. We must follow Jesus and learn from him until he makes us glorious servants of God for world mission.

Fourth, Jesus heals every disease and sickness (23-25).

Look at verse 23. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Jesus resumed his preaching ministry. But now, he was accompanied by four men who had made commitments to follow him and learn from him. Jesus' heart was burning with God's vision and God's love for the lost. Jesus wanted to fill all Galilee with the message of the kingdom. There were many people in Galilee, as many as in Chicago. Jesus wanted to reach them all, preaching in their synagogues. The disciples' hearts pounded with excitement as they watched and learned. Jesus also healed the sick. In fact, Jesus healed "every disease and sickness among the people." There was nothing that Jesus could not heal. We must not downplay Jesus' healing ministry. We must bring the sick to Jesus for healing.

Look at verse 24. "News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them." Jesus' healing ministry was fantastic. Jesus healed sinsick minds. Jesus healed tormented souls. Jesus healed afflicted bodies. We must believe this Jesus. Jesus can heal mental illnesses, cure cancer, and drive out demons of lust, laziness, vanity and so on. Jesus can make us whole and healthy members of his kingdom.

Look at verse 25. "Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him." These places are demographically diverse and geographically widespread. The people coming to Jesus were secular Jews, orthodox Jews, Greeks and other Gentiles. They came from every direction and province around Galilee. Galilee seemed to become the center of the world. It was because Jesus was there. Jesus' great light drove out darkness, drawing the sick and needy to him. People tasted God's love, saving grace, and healing.

Jesus' great light is shining today. Jesus drives out the darkness on our campuses and brings salvation and eternal life. Let's follow Jesus and let his light shine through us. Shine, Jesus, shine!