

¹²When Jesus heard that John was put in prison, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴He did this to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,

¹⁶the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,
and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned.

¹⁷From that time, Jesus began to preach: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.”

¹⁸As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen.

¹⁹He said to them, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

²⁰They immediately left their nets and followed him. ²¹Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. Jesus called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Because of Israel's history in exile, Galilee was filled with many Jews and Gentiles in Jesus' day. This meant the God of Israel was not unknown in that region, but worship of him had been largely tainted from what God had originally commanded from his people in the Law of Moses. Because of all this, a spiritual darkness had settled over the land, and very few were living in the comfort of God's promises.

This is the dark place Jesus is going to, not Jerusalem. Contrary to many Jews at the time believing the Savior would radiate from the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus' light would shine in this very dark place instead. Today, we see that Jesus does not just bring candles into our lives to make things tolerable. He shines as the rising sun of the world, a light that shines for his people and through his people.

Jesus settles in Capernaum, a bustling port city and trade route. This also meant that many ideas, both good and bad, traveled through this city. Jesus chooses the place, not because it brings the most comfort, but it is where his work will have the most impact. Of course, Jesus has another reason. God had chosen this backwater region of Israel to be the epicenter of the Savior's ministry. This, as with so many other things Jesus did, was to fulfill prophecy.

But Matthew makes it clear that there is a problem in the region of Galilee. He describes the residents as “the people dwelling in darkness.” They had sin-dead hearts, clouded by pious traditions rather than God’s word. Their actions seemed to burn for God, but their hearts were void of any love toward him. And so, they lived in darkness, weighted down by sin without any certainty of how to escape it.

We dwell in darkness too at times. We do it because it hides our sin. What sins or temptations hang over your head? Maybe it’s some sin you’ve grown comfortable with. It makes you happy, and though you know it’s wrong, you just refuse to give it up. God won’t know, or at least he’ll understand, you tell yourself in your head. Or maybe you’ve grown so comfortable with a sin that it doesn’t even prick the conscience anymore. You’re a good person, and no God could ever get mad at you for your gossip or the way you mistreat other people in word and action. At least, that’s what you wish to be true.

Sin casts a shadow over us, and that shadow brings destruction “on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death.” Those who live unrepentant of their sins will allow those sins to testify against them when judgement comes. Those who grow comfortable with their arrogance and their thinking that they know better than God will spend eternity in the fires of hell. There will be no way for them to claim that they were a servant of God when they have lived as slaves to sin and Satan. Do not try and water down God’s warnings in scripture. You can bury your head in the sand about the wrath of God that is coming for those who are not sorry over sin, but that will not slow down that day. And who knows when the day comes? Not just Judgement Day, but the day your life on this earth will end. Deadly crashes are not expected. Heart attacks and strokes give little forewarning. “Let me live in darkness today and tomorrow I’ll come out” is a bet only a fool would make.

But don’t let mine be the voice that calls you out of darkness. Listen to Jesus himself: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.” Jesus calls sinners to stop living with their heads in the sand, thinking that if they continue on their way, God will understand or make an exception for them. Instead, Jesus calls them to repent. He calls us to repent. Remember that repentance is both recognition of the true depravity of sin and trust that God washes it away. This even applies to sins that leave a scar, whether it’s consequences of a bad decision, no communication from a broken relationship, or maybe even time incarcerated for a mistake. These sins are forgiven completely, wiped completely from God’s record of debt.

So, Jesus is not calling us to repentance as a threat. He’s offering us the invitation to repent, an offramp that is only available because of Jesus’ sacrifice for the world. The kingdom of heaven is near because the King who rules it is making this declaration.

And repentance is not just a singular event. The word Jesus uses here carries the idea that it is something that is ongoing. So, don’t imagine repentance in the sense of someone going into a

confessional booth with a priest, though private confession can be helpful to those who continue to struggle with the idea of forgiveness from God. Instead, imagine repentance as an identity. At all times, when asked about your sinfulness, you could honestly state, “I am a sinner.” Not “I sin sometimes.” Not “I do some bad and some good.” But instead, “I am a sinner.” At the same time, when asked about your status with God, you could rightly say, “I am a child of God, washed clean of my sins in the blood of Jesus.” This is what repentance is, a continual state of being, not a one-time action.

This is what Christ’s forgiveness brings. Actual forgiveness. Not excuses. Not avenues to wriggle out of responsibility of our sins. Not methods to undo or overturn our sins. This is not a game to be played. It’s a gift to be treasured. Just forgiveness. Complete and total forgiveness.

You have been brought out of darkness in Jesus: “The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Make no place for darkness. Live in repentance. Live in the light of your identity in Christ. But now it was time for the light to spread.

Matthew includes the fewest details of Jesus calling his disciples to follow him of all the Gospel accounts, so we do need to add some context. Jesus had first met Peter and Andrew up to maybe even a year before this. They had heard him preach the gospel and come to believe in him. But now Jesus was coming to them for a different reason. Luke gives the details of Jesus borrowing Peter’s boat to preach out on the water, then giving them seemingly terrible fishing advice that turned into their biggest catch. Matthew skips over that and gets to the point. After this miraculous catch, Jesus says to them, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Jesus was calling them from part-time followers to full-time fishers of souls.

Their response? They immediately drop their fishing business to follow him. This isn’t a testament to the strength of their trust, but it a testament to the power of Christ’s call. These fishermen would follow Jesus for the next two years and witness exactly what the Savior came to do. Then, when the time came, they would go to tell the world what they had seen and heard.

Are we so quick to trust? Are we so swift to follow and share? Jesus has not called you to quit your job, sell the house, and follow him. But are we not still slow to heed that call? Maybe this is mixing metaphors here, but Jesus, the light of the world, calls you to reflect his light to others, to shine on their darkness and gloom. But even that becomes too big of an ask in our minds.

So, we hide behind excuses. We worry sharing the gospel will cost us money or friends. We worry it will create awkwardness and make us the target of ridicule. Or maybe we don’t feel equipped enough to do it, and the fear of failure creeps in. But notice, none of those fears are fears for our life. None are fears that we will be driven out of town or even out of the country for espousing faith in Jesus. No, we let the fear of people saying “no” stop our reflecting of

Christ's light to the world. We feel it's better that we keep a friend and watch them be torn apart by sin than step in and call them to repentance. Because it's comfortable, right?

Peter and Andrew probably felt more comfortable fishing for fish than for men. It wasn't glamorous, but they paid their bills with it. But what would fishing for Jesus bring? They'd watch him be rejected for his message. They'd see him put in far too many hours so that the sick could be healed and the hungry could be fed, not just physically, but spiritually. And they would see him die. But it wouldn't stop there. They themselves would be hunted for preaching Christ. According to Christian tradition, Peter would be crucified upside down and Andrew would be crucified on an X-shaped cross.

But please, tell me more about why you can't tell people about Jesus because they'll roll their eyes at you. Tell me about how there's just too much on the line to tell a hurting friend that Jesus triumphed over sin and death to set them free. Continue to live in fear. Or worse, continue to doubt whether these promises God makes are even true and worth sharing. Put your head down and keep fishing, all while a person you claim to love continues to writhe in darkness.

Or heed Jesus' words. Because he's not calling you to something you can't do: "I will make you fishers of men." Jesus is not asking you to learn how to fish. He's teaching you. He's appointing you. He's going with you as you do the work. Understand, you are not supplying your own light as you go into the world to share the gospel. The gospel is your light. Jesus is the one who scatters the darkness by his word, whether that darkness is pain over sin, fear over sickness, or regret over situations mishandled. He is the light. So, don't fear being underqualified. Don't worry that the world might turn against you or think you are a fool. Their eternal life depends on it.

So, live in the light. And when darkness begins to overshadow your world, let the light of the gospel in to show you both your sin and your Savior's cure to that sin. Then, be light to others living in this shadow of death, that they might not continue in the dead-end hopes of this world, but in the sure hope of eternity with God in Christ. Amen.