

The Kingdom of God has Risen over the Valley of Death

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[0 : 00] Well, it caught me off guard when I went into town yesterday and saw the Christmas lights and got the Christmas tunes. If you've not been in already, be prepared for that. I don't know about how you feel about Christmas in November. I used to complain. I think the older I get, the more I appreciate it, the lights coming on in the dark and the gloom of this month.

But Matthew is way further out than us, isn't he? I wonder what you make about Matthew's timing when it comes to Christmas. Maybe you thought as we heard the reading, maybe you thought as we sung those words or as we heard these words read from verses 15 and 16, he's singing Christmas carols.

Right? These are verses we saved for December. Aren't they the people living in darkness have seen a great light? Because Isaiah goes on to say, to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given.

And we love that, don't we? In the glow of fairy lights, he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But Matthew's got his dates mixed up, hasn't he?

You're 30 years too late, pal. All this happened back in chapter 1, right? Shouldn't it have been, she gave birth to a son and they gave him the name Jesus, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light? So what is he doing? What are these verses doing in chapter 4? Well, Matthew is helping us to see that Christmas is not the end of the story, but the beginning. To us, a child was born. To us, a son was given. But if nothing else, Matthew wants us to know that the government now rests on his shoulders, that of the greatness of his kingdom and peace, there will be no end, because he will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom from that time on and forever. Matthew's been at pains, hasn't he, in his gospel to show us that Jesus is next in line to the throne of God's kingdom. He is the promised king from God because he's the son of David and he is the son of God. And he's come to take our place on the stage of world history, to take our sins, to give us his rightness, because he is the savior from sin we've been longing for. That's been the big burden of this gospel so far, isn't it, to show us who it is who has stepped into our story and why. The promised king from God to save us from our sins. And all of that comes together in these verses in front of us this morning, because as Jesus goes to live by the Sea of Galilee and begins to preach the good news of the coming of God's kingdom. Matthew sees the fulfillment of everything God promised Jesus would be and bring.

[3 : 30] Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond 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. The kingdom of God has dawned in the valley of death because God's promised King Jesus has stepped into the darkness. And today, Matthew rounds off his introduction and shows us what it all means for us, for me and for you as we go from here. So we'll take a bit of time to see this light shining in the darkness before we consider three things we need to do now that it's daytime.

Firstly, then, let's see the dawning light of the gospel. Now, I'm sure some of you here have done this. Possibly this time of year is best, or maybe the spring. You've set your alarm very, very early.

You've got up and you've gone out to a hill or a mountain, maybe, to watch the sunrise. There's something about watching light spread over the land, light chasing away the darkness that just touches something in us, isn't there, that draws us out to want to see it for ourselves.

And maybe you haven't done that. Maybe you've not got up at dawn and gone out to a hill, but I'm sure you have had sleepless nights, nights that seemed like they would never end, nights of worry or sickness that have kept you up. And you have waited because you couldn't wait to see what you knew was coming, but that you longed for. You counted down the hours, you counted down the minutes to see what? The light creeping through the curtains. The light that seems to change everything, the light that creeps into our very soul, because the day has come. It's as if God has baked into creation the hope of a new day that we delight in, the promise of light that comes after darkness, that brings us relief. And it's a hope and promise that Isaiah captures in his prophecy. The coming of the promised King from God would be like people living through an arctic winter, seeing the sun rise over the hills for the first time. It's a hope and the promise that Matthew says came true when Jesus began his ministry on earth. That is what it was like. This is Jesus' first sermon. It's the opening act of his debut tour. And it was as if the sun had risen, said Matthew, over the valley of the shadow of the shadow of the earth. And now those words from Isaiah are sandwiched between two important details that help us see why the start of Jesus' work on earth was so life-changing and wonderful.

Two details, where Jesus goes and what Jesus says. Now see where Jesus goes in verse 12. When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. So John has set the stage, remember, for the coming of the true King. Now he's left the stage. It's time for the show to really begin. But far from giving us an all-singing, all-dancing opening number, Matthew says Jesus withdrew to Galilee. Now I can show you that on a map, I think. You can see Galilee is way up there at the top.

[7 : 20] If you can make it out, it's that color, I think it's a kind of pink maybe at the top. It's far from Judea at the bottom with its capital in Jerusalem. And it's way too small to see on the screen. But if you could see, you could see that Capernaum from Nazareth is even deeper into Galilee. So if Nazareth itself had a reputation for being a backwater, well, Jesus was never going to find the big lights and fame in Capernaum. Now I guess if you were keeping an eye out for the promised King, you would imagine that he would begin his work in the halls of power, right? That he would march straight down to Jerusalem to sort it all out. That he would go to the temple and take away everything wrong and help people to worship God. That he would start in the middle and work his way out. But that is not how this King sets up his kingdom. He doesn't march further in. He retreated further out, says Matthew. He withdrew to

Galilee. Now that doesn't sound like a strategy that is going to take over the world. He's not doing what we think God's King should be doing. So is he really the King we're waiting for, or are we waiting for someone else? Well, Matthew helps us see, doesn't he, by reminding us of what God had actually said through the prophet Isaiah, that the shores of the Sea of Galilee should be expecting him.

That it would be Galilee of the Gentiles, the bad lands outside of the kingdom, that would see and hear him first. In the past, the Lord humbled the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, says Isaiah, but in the future, he will honor Galilee of the nations by the way of the sea beyond the Jordan. Now, humanly speaking, we would hold it against him that he would base his ministry in Galilee. But God has said that that is precisely where his kingdom would first be proclaimed. That's where the first flag would be planted, because there the king would begin his work on earth, of calling people in darkness and under the shadow of death into the light and life of his kingdom. You know, Jerusalem was a dark place, but all people could see was the big lights. Galilee, however, Galilee, anyone could see that Galilee was a dark place. Nobody would be surprised to hear Galilee described as a land under the shadow of death. So, what better place for Jesus to begin to make exactly clear exactly what kind of king he is? He's not a king for the bright lights. He's not a king who goes chasing the spotlight.

He is a king who is himself the light. He doesn't need to chase the spotlight, because he is the blazing sun in all his majesty and beauty and love and power and grace, and he goes to rise over the very darkest and most desperate and obviously dead corner of his kingdom to bring the light and life of God's kingdom into the lives of those under the shadow of death. And friends, that is still where King Jesus goes.

He goes to cold, dead, dark people who know that they are cold, dead, and dark.

[11 : 25] That is where he begins. In the deepest and darkest corners of our hearts that weaker lights do not reach.

Friends, he does not run from our darkness. The darkness in our lives flees from him. We've seen before it was those who knew that they lived in the shadow of death who searched most carefully for him like watchmen waiting for the dawn. Is that ye?

It was those from Jerusalem, from the big lights, who didn't care. Why do we need a light, they said. It's like people huddled around the dying embers of a fire saying, we don't need the sun to rise.

We've got light. We've got heat. We don't need the daytime. They couldn't see their darkness, so they couldn't see the need for the lights. But friends, that is ridiculous, isn't it? Without the sun, everything dies. Without Jesus, we are living in an arctic winter. We are our hearts, a frozen wasteland.

But if you know that that's what you are without him, hear these words. These words are for you. The people living in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, the light has dawned for you. Night is over. Day has come because his kingdom has risen.

[12 : 54] So turn, turn to the sun. Bask in his light. Drink in his warmth. Receive his life. It is for you. He comes to you and me, to us. And what does he say? From that time on, Jesus began to preach what?

Repent, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. The kingdom of God has risen over the valley of death because I, the king, am now here. So what? Turn, turn to me. Turn your life over to me.

If you watch the daisies in the summer, maybe it's a distant memory now. But in the summertime, you watch the daisies. Which way do the daisies face? If you watch a time-lapse video, you'll actually see that the daisies turn from one side to the other. They follow the sun across the sky.

And what happens at the end of the day? The sun sets and they just close up. And the sun rises again. And what do they do? They open up and they follow the sun across the sky again. And when the sun sets, they close up again. Friends, Jesus says, be like those daisies.

Turn to the sun. Turn to his life-giving light. Open your life to him and turn towards him and keep turning towards him. Follow him. Drink him in. You know, some people, they see the sun, don't they? And they have to be outside. They just have to go because the sun is out. Why miss it? What an opportunity.

[14:30] Can't stay indoors. Other people, they see the sun out and they can't bear it, can they? They hide away. Don't want to see. Too bright, too hot. Too much hassle. It was the same when Christ came back then. It is the same now. Some of us will run out to him. Some of us will hide. And perhaps you're here this morning and his presence is uncomfortable, threatening even. Light is threatening, isn't it? It shines on things that we don't want to see. It shines on things that we don't want other people to see. It shines on things we don't want God to see. And so we run for cover. And in our hearts, we pull the curtains shut and we shrink from him. But Jesus doesn't stop at just letting us know that he's here, does he? He calls us to come out. Repent, he says, turn, come out, come to me, open up to me, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.

He knows that we are spiritual agoraphobics. He knows that we do not want to turn. We do not want to open up. He knows our instinct is to run from him. But today he calls us out of hiding, to open up to him, to turn our hearts to him, to turn to him, to turn to him, and keep turning to him, to follow him, and drink in the life-giving rays of his life. He's stepped into our darkness and called us to come out. And when and where he does that, even today, for you today, this morning, it is sunrise in the shadow of death.

And the dead rise when the warmth and the light of his life spreads over us, and we come alive to him in a new way. Friends, that was his very first sermon. And let me tell you, he started as he meant to continue. That is still what he does today. That is still who he is. He comes to you today to call you out of darkness into his marvelous light. So turn and bask in him, and drink him in, and receive him.

Now, what does that look like for me and you? It's one thing to say, it's one thing to paint it in pictures, isn't it? But what does that look like for me and you? Well, the rest of our chapter puts flesh on the bones for what it looks like for us to turn to the Son. Three things for us to do now it's daytime. Number one, follow him. Now, Jesus takes a walk by the Sea of Galilee. It's the place from Isaiah's prophecy, and sees two pairs of brothers, Simon, known as Peter and Andrew, then James and John.

They're both fishing families, both sets of brothers. They're hard at work, and Jesus goes to them and says, what? Come, follow me. Come, follow me. Now, if somebody had turned up at your work tomorrow and found you and said, come and follow me, you probably wouldn't, would you? You'd probably wonder what this guy was doing in your office or at your work or in your house. And maybe if you were polite, you'd say, maybe, like, come back tomorrow, right? If you weren't polite, you'd just say, get lost.

[18:12] It's unlikely that you would follow him. Jesus speaks to Simon and Andrew, and look, Matthew says, verse 20, at once, at once they left their nets and followed him. Then James and John, verse 22, immediately, immediately, they left their boat and their father and followed him, immediately.

You know how these guys had generations of fishers in their families. This wasn't a world where you got to choose your career or your lifestyle. It was given to you by your father and his father and his father before him. They would know nothing else. Jesus turns up on the beach one day and says, come, follow me. And suddenly, generations of fishing and fishing nets and fishermen and boats and the sea are dropped. They leave that where it is, and that day they follow Jesus. I hope we can see that that's not natural or normal. There's something supernatural going on. When they hear Jesus call them into his kingdom, his invitation is irresistible. When the life-giving words of the sun land on our cold, dead hearts, we immediately leave our life where it is, and we must go and follow him.

And we realize that we cannot go on without him, whatever it costs us to leave behind to do it. And now in the new year, I'm going to give this a break. In the new year, we're going to come back to Matthew. We're going to pick up in chapter 5, and we're going to look at Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. And he teaches us there how to live in his kingdom. In lots of ways, that's what this whole gospel is designed to teach us to do. But before we get there, we need to have resolved in our hearts to follow him. There's no point listening to Jesus only to pick and choose what we're going to do next, or what we're going to believe, or what we're going to obey.

There's no point trying to live in God's kingdom under our own command or in our own strength. We can only really live in his kingdom if we are following, not freestyling. And like these brothers, it is not for us to say to Jesus, later, Jesus, it's not a good time for me right now.

Okay, when I'm settled down, when I'm less busy, when I've had my fun, when I'm retired, Jesus, come back, then I'll follow you. And only then, if you let me hold on to my nets, my way of life, my family traditions, what makes me me, my identity, whatever that is, only if you let me keep that, Jesus. Friends, it is not for us to bargain with Jesus. He says, come, follow me. He gives us his terms. The only right response is for us to turn and follow. Turn, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Come, follow me, he says. Those are his terms. That is his call. So what will you do?

[21 : 37] Could it be said of you, like these brothers at once, immediately he, she left his or her life behind to follow the Lord Jesus? Let that be said of you. There is no time like the present.

The king is calling. Come, follow him. And secondly, bring others with you. And it is the promise that comes with Jesus's call there in verse 19. Come, follow me, said Jesus, and I will send you out to fish for people. Come to me and I will send you back out. So not only do we have a new identity in Jesus, we have a new vocation. No longer is my life's work my life's work. Now my life's work is Jesus's work. I am no longer to be a fisherman, but an evangelist.

I noticed that that wasn't an option once Simon and Andrew and James and John had decided to follow. It wasn't the follow-up, right? He didn't give them a spiritual gifts test, didn't give them a list of ways they could serve in his kingdom, and they had to pick one. No, the task is included in the call.

The vocation comes with the invitation. To follow him at all is to be a fisher of men. Now that doesn't mean we don't serve him in other ways, or we all have to be naturals at pointing people to Jesus. In this room, we'll have different temperaments and personalities, different gifts, different abilities, different time that we have available, different sets of skills, different confidence and comfort in sharing the gospel. There are many gifts, there are many members of the body, but whatever we're good or best at, bringing others in is our Christ-given vocation.

Alongside what we do to serve each other as Christians, which is wonderful, Christ himself has given us one way, one big main way to serve other people in our lives who are not Christians, Christians. And that is to share the news and bring them in and bring them to see Christ.

[24 : 04] It's such an evocative image, isn't it? As these guys would have done hundreds of times before, they were to leave the solid ground of the shore and set out on the choppy and the dark and dangerous waters to cast their nets wide in the hope of bringing in whatever they could. Sometimes the waters would be rough and dangerous, sometimes there'd be nothing for them to catch. Sometimes the catch would get away before they were able to bring the nets in. But that was their vocation, and day and night they did it because that was their life. And so now they've traded in their nets and fish for the good news of God's kingdom, and Jesus says they're to do exactly that now with people and the gospel.

And the reality is, brothers and sisters, that is just as risky and just as dangerous and just as hard work as fishing and more. That's the image that Jesus chooses, but that's the vocation of every Christian. If Jesus wasn't interested in making followers, he wouldn't have come. He wouldn't have preached about life in his kingdom if he wasn't fussed about anyone coming into it. We wouldn't have the gospels. It wasn't important for us to know him personally. But Jesus came and preached and worked and lived and died and rose again to make disciples of all nations. Verse 25 tells us he gathered people from all across that land, not just Jews, but people from Syria and Galilee and the capitalist. News of him spreads to them all, and he welcomes them all as they come in. And that is the task he's given each of us and all of us together, to spread the good news about him, that they might come in. That's not my job.

That's our job. So what opportunities do you have this week to help someone take a step closer to the kingdom of Jesus? How are you playing a part in the gospel reaching people who either have not heard it or who haven't yet responded rightly by turning and following him? In a month's time, it will be our carol services again. Who are you planning to bring? It's a great opportunity. It's an obvious opportunity.

How are you fishing for people? If you're not, pray. Pray that the Lord would send you out again afresh with his gospel to bring people in. Pray for opportunity to do that, for people to see the light of Christ and come into his kingdom. Follow him, bring people in, and finally, now that it's daytime, hope in him. Matthew rounds off his introduction with a beautiful summary of Jesus's first phase of ministry. We're told he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News of him spread all over Syria. People brought to him, all who were ill with various diseases, suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, having seizures and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Life transforming, isn't it? We're going to see lots of healing miracles up close and personal as we go on in the gospel. But at this point, Matthew just wants us to know that this Jesus is the real deal. The king wouldn't only bring us back into a right relationship with God, he would put the world right again. His kingdom is not a kind of spiritual fortress in a broken world. His kingdom is to be the whole world altogether. And certainly, Jesus' priority was preaching the good news so that now people could be right with God. If anything, the miracles just back up the authenticity, the certainty of his message. He really is the Messiah. He really is the Savior.

But they also point, don't they, to the long-term project that God is doing by sending his king and his kingdom. A restoration project of the whole cosmos. People are brought to Jesus, carrying the wounds of a broken world. Life under the curse, illness, chronic pain, paralysis, demon possession, seizures from near and far. And what did he do? He healed them. He made it right. It's a wonderful taste of what's to come in the gospel, but also in our world. What we're seeing is the architects step into the ruined remains of a building and begin to wipe the dust off the cracked plasterwork. Begin to lift the dirt of the gauges up off the floor. It's not finished yet. But know, says Matthew, that the architect is at work. The restoration project has begun. One day it will be finished, and the world will be better than it has ever been for him going in.

[29 : 45] And for that day, we hope. We hope because we've seen him going in. We hope because we know that he has begun his work. We know and we hope because he's promised to bring it to completion. And so as we follow and as we bring others in, we hope in him to bring his kingdom to bear on every corner of reality, to renew the cosmos, to heal our broken bodies, to restore our broken minds, to mend our broken hearts, and fill all the world with his kingdom and peace.

So friends, turn to him and set your heart on him. Follow him, trust in him, and take his word out to a dying world, that more and more. Let's pray and ask his help together.

Father, we thank you.

Lord, we pray that you have a right heart to respond to it. Lord, for those who are running, stop us in our tracks, we pray, and turn us back. Lord, for those who do not know what to do, pray, Lord, that your invitation and call to them would be irresistible. Lord, pray that we all, each one of us would immediately leave what we are doing, leave our old life behind to follow King Jesus, because he is life and light and healing and forgiveness. Lord, help us, we pray. In his name we ask. Amen.