

"A Light has Dawned"

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Date: 01 January 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I don't know if you have settled on any resolutions so far this year. Those of you who are here this morning got two ready-made resolutions from the teacher in Ecclesiastes.

If you were here, I wonder if you can remember what they were, first test of the year. No? No? It's fine. Enjoy. It's fine. Enjoy what you can and worship God. Here's Jonathan Edwards again in his own words, resolved that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory and my own good profit and pleasure in the whole of my life without any consideration of time.

And I really hope that's a resolution that we do take as our own this year. Certainly, if you are a Christian, if you call yourself a Christian, the first day of the year is a great opportunity, isn't it, for us to review our priorities, reset our direction if we need to, and recommit ourselves to the pursuit of God's glory and our own and others' ultimate good.

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, or perhaps you're not sure, well, I hope our time this evening gives you a chance to consider your own direction and priorities in light of what God has done and what he is doing in our world. Because tonight, I just want to pull the thread of one of those resolutions back through Scripture and see where it leads us. I don't know if you have a jumper that does that. My Christmas jumper does that. It's got one or two loose threads. When you pull them, you can see the thread pulling much further up the jumper. Well, tonight, I just want to pull the loose thread of God's glory, our worship of him and see more of what that means for us. What color, what texture does our worship, our faith in God have? The teacher said in Ecclesiastes, everything God does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it, nothing taken from it. God does it so people will fear him. So, what has God done that lasts forever? And what is our right response to what he has done for us? Well, Matthew tonight helps us. You may have noticed we've skipped on a bit from where we were last week. Christmas Day, we skipped on to chapter four, but I hope we'll see we're not so very far from

Christmas, as we might think. Because Matthew tells us tonight, the light has come in Christ. And so, we are to recognize and receive the light of the good news of Jesus Christ. Matthew picks up the thread of the story in verse 12. Jesus has heard that John the Baptist has been arrested. Now, if we had read from chapter three, perhaps you will later on, you'll see John the Baptist was just the warm-up act to the one who people were really waiting for. Well, says Matthew, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight. And so, when John leaves the stage, he is making room for the Lord Jesus. And what these verses are describing are the beginning then of Jesus' ministry on earth. It's the opening number, so to speak, of Jesus' long-awaited tour.

[3 : 5 6] And I wonder if you notice, he opens with an old favorite. Do you see that? Verses 15 and 16. You think, where have I heard this before? Land of Zebulun, 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. It's a classic, isn't it? If those verses sound familiar, it's because we often turn to them, don't we, at Christmastime.

The verses from Isaiah that Beth read for us earlier in our service. And we tend to read them at Christmas because further down that promise, Isaiah says that a light has come for, to us a child is born, to us a son is given. Well then, how's Matthew missed the memo? So you not know where these verses fit in the story. He's quoting these verses here, but Jesus is a grown man starting his work. Or has Matthew got it just right? See, when was it that the people who lived in darkness saw a great light? In part, we could say when Jesus was born, of course. But much more, when Jesus began his ministry by preaching good news. By Christmas, we read those verses, as it were, by candlelight.

But at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his first day of work, we read those verses under a floodlight. I don't know how many times I've read Matthew's gospel, a few anyway, but it wasn't actually until our time of family devotions late last year, that I read those verses and saw that for the first time.

And that might say something about me. But I think it says something more really about the Bible, that no matter how much you read it, there's always more treasure to find in it. And so I hope that this nugget, if you like, helps you and encourages you to keep reading your Bible. There's always so much more for us to find. It is never finished with us. There's such obvious connections when you see them between those verses from Isaiah and what Jesus is doing. Isaiah drops a pin, doesn't he, in the region of Galilee, where Jesus is in these verses. It becomes the kind of base for his ministry. But the biggest connection is really between what Isaiah said would happen in that place and what Jesus is doing there.

[6 : 45] Isaiah says the people in Galilee were living in deep darkness. Now, that doesn't mean they had a Scottish winter. I checked today, sunset was somewhere near five o'clock. Luxurious, isn't it? The temperature was around 17 degrees. But spiritually, they were living through an Arctic winter. The days came and went, and the sun never rose. In fact, the last time they had seen the light was not in living memory. So much so, Isaiah says that they were living in the shadow of death. I imagine lots of us will be familiar with that image from Psalm 23. Now, what's the picture that comes to mind when you think of the valley of the shadow of death? David says he walked through that valley. Isaiah is saying that is where these people lived.

And so, how did the light finally dawn into that deep, dark valley? Well, when Jesus went to Galilee, what did he do? Just see in verse 17. It's so key. From that time on, Jesus began to preach, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. The day that Jesus first spoke those words, the sun rose on the dark world. As that message spread, so the light spread across the face of the earth, because God had promised to send a king. Remember that promise from those verses, the government will rest on his shoulders. His rule will never end, says Isaiah. And here, Jesus is preaching what? That the kingdom of heaven, God's kingdom, has come, because he is that promised king of God's kingdom. Isaiah has said that the coming of God's kingdom would bring the forgiveness of sins.

It would give us peace again with God. It would bring God's perfect and loving rule back into the lives of those who had pushed him away and rebelled against him. It would even bring an end to the penalty for that rebellion. Death itself would go away. In short, God's kingdom would shine an everlasting light into our endless spiritual darkness. And Matthew is telling us that that promised light shone at last when Christ came and preached the good news that God's kingdom had come. This is a reminder, isn't it, if we need it, that the heart of our faith, the heart of what we confess as Christians, is the message of what God has done for us, what he has promised, what he has sent in Christ, not what we can offer him, not what we can do for him, not how we can serve him. It is a message about his kingdom.

It's a message from his king. The message that the good news is here. His kingdom has come. And the even better news that we can be part of it. See, this was not just a land of deep darkness. The people who lived there were conspirators with the darkness. They had taken part in the rebellion that had put them in that valley of the shadow of death. And so, Jesus says, they could come out of the dark.

They could live in the light of his kingdom, but only if they, what? Repent. Repent. That is, turn 180 degrees in the other direction and begin walking the opposite way. Only if they turned in their weapons and walked away from their sin and started following Jesus instead, could they live in the light of the light of the king? And that is still his call to us, to every person today.

[11 : 07] What has God done that lasts forever? God has sent his king to bring his promised kingdom. And so, how do we respond? Well, we believe that good news that Christ came to preach.

We turn away from our rebellion and sin and we follow the king. And friends, that is how we begin to glorify God, how we begin to worship him. Until we have done that, we cannot worship God.

We cannot please God. We can't stand, as it were, outside of his kingdom, peering over the wall and saying, God, you are so good and kind and merciful and generous, but your kingdom, it really isn't for me.

Your perfect loving rule is great, but I don't want to live under it personally. That can't be both, can it? We only worship God rightly when we turn and we submit to Jesus, Jesus, his king, and live in his kingdom. And perhaps that is something that you need to do tonight. His kingdom has come and he calls you to come in. So, believe the good news.

Turn to Christ. Walk away from your sin. Follow him, the king. Live for him. Put your trust in him. And once we do, we begin to worship God rightly. Where do we go from there? Well, our response of faith, it always issues, doesn't it? And a desire to share the same good news that we ourselves have believed and received. So, this is our second point. The light goes out through us. If we need a reminder of how strong and compelling the light of the good news is, Matthew tells us Jesus took a stroll by the shore of the lake and told four fishermen, follow me. They immediately drop what they're doing and they follow. First, Simon Peter and Andrew, verse 19. They were casting a net into the lake for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said. At once, they left their nets and followed him.

[13 : 28] Then John and James, verse 20-t, they were in a boat with their father Zebedee. Jesus called them and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him. They heard the voice of the king and they could not help but follow. Turns out, when God's spirit is at work, the good news of Jesus is enough. It is enough. It is enough for people to hear and turn and follow him. And that is vital for us to know because that is just what Jesus sends us out to do and to share. You see that verse 19, I skipped over these words. But what are they? Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out to fish for people. And it's a strange metaphor, isn't it? But the point is obvious. Their vocation as fishermen was to gather fish to shore with a net. Now then, their new vocation as Christ's followers was to gather others to Christ with the same message that Christ had preached. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come.

And that is what Christ calls each of us to do as we follow him in response to what he has done for us. Intentionally, prayerfully, gladly share the good news with others that they too might turn and follow him. You know, there's so much, isn't there, that we can do for God. In fact, the Bible calls us to live our whole lives as a living sacrifice to God. Whatever we do with our bodies, whatever we do at all, says Paul, when we live for God's glory, that is our spiritual worship. But our general obedience and lifelong worship for God is not a substitute for this vocation. It would be like one day we didn't shop at work or maybe we neglected our duties at home and we told our boss, our husband, our wife, well, my calling is just to live a good life generally. You don't have to really do anything specific. As long as I'm doing whatever I do really well, that's fine. Well, your boss, your husband, wife, children might be a bit surprised, might be a bit put out by that.

Well, how does Jesus respond then when we think of our general obedience and worship of him as a replacement for the specific task he's given us as Christians and as a church? You know, there's lots of things Jesus could have said these men were to do, isn't there? Follow me and you will dot, dot, dot, fill in the blank. What could he have said? Feed the hungry, help the poor, obey the law of the land, live holy lives. Instead, he says, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. This is the specific task the Lord Jesus gives to his followers to make more followers of him. And so, our daily obedience, our lifelong worship of the Lord is not an either-or, is it? With our personal evangelism and witness, it is a both-and. As part of our obedience and our worship, he gives us the task of making followers of him. Now, not all of us are equally gifted in sharing the gospel. Not all of us find it as easy as others. But God equips all of us for this task that we share. He gives us his spirit to empower us in the sharing of his good news. He gives us each other to help, to pray for, to support one another as we carry out this calling. And of course, he gives us the good news itself, to invigorate us, to enliven us as we spend time in it, to excite us about sharing with others the same good news we have received. And so, the best preparation then for us, we consider going out into this new year to share the good news of the gospel is what? To pray for God's spirit to be at work, to share with others opportunities that we have, support one another, and to spend time being thrilled by the thought of what

Christ has done for you. And then we will be prepared, won't we, to take whatever opportunities God gives us with the people in our lives to share this wonderful good news. I want to encourage you in that. We had our family service and our carol service two Sundays ago. I know lots of you invited friends, colleagues, neighbors to that. So encouraged by that. And I know not all of them were able to make it to those services. But I wanted to share just a few of those stories briefly of those who did come for your encouragement in your witness. There was a family in the morning he had moved a few months previously from Azerbaijan, practicing Muslims. And the man's colleague, one of our elders, invited them to our family service and they came. And they were the last to leave that morning. In fact, the guy actually said when he came in that you could tell it felt like a family. And we had a great conversation about the gospel and he went away with a copy of Luke's gospel to read at home. There's a woman at the carol service. Get this, she'd seen one of the flyers on her colleague's desk at work and asked if she could come to the carol service. And not only did she come, she brought a friend. And they both loved the service and what they'd heard. There were two girls at the same service, childhood friends of one of our members who are both keen now to do Christianity Explored later in the month. One of them took a copy of the Bible home to read. There's others that I could mention. But I just wanted to illustrate how a simple, faithful offer of the good news can draw all kinds of people in our lives to hear

Christ and be drawn to him. Inviting someone to a service isn't by any means the only way we can reach people with the gospel. But that might have just been the first step for some people towards the kingdom. For others, that was preceded by years of faithful friendship and personal witness.

[20 : 33] And what is the next step for those people? Well, for some, it might be a Christianity Explored course or one-to-one study of a gospel. Or it might be a coffee and a chat about how they found the service, what they thought of, what they heard. Or it might simply be just more opportunities to hear from their friend in daily life what Jesus means to them. A question I found hugely helpful to ask is, given where this person is now spiritually, what might the next step look like for them personally?

For some, the next step might be a really baby step. Just getting to know some more Christians, getting to know another Christian family. Others might be ready to hear more. The next step might be asking them, what do you think about Jesus? Others might be ready to do something like a Christianity Explored, to come more regularly to church. Others might be ready to make that decision, to be called to repent, to put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You find that a helpful question to ask, what is the next step for this person? Because it takes away the sense that the next step for everyone in our life right now is to become a Christian there and then. And if they don't seem likely to, well, there's no point really saying anything at all.

You becoming a Christian might be the next step for some. Others, that might be many steps away. There might be detours en route. Being a faithful friend to that person might look like simply being their friend for a while, talking to them about what you believe about Jesus.

That question also guards us against thinking, you know, something that somebody may have heard, may have picked up, or seen in us once or twice, could one day sort of suddenly, completely and radically change that person's life.

[22 : 37] Now, God could do that, couldn't he? But as a rule, he chooses to work through the gospel being shared clearly and faithfully. And so there are often more steps involved between somebody meeting a Christian and becoming a Christian. The point is, think about the people in your life now. Pray for them. What do they need next? And take every opportunity.

To help them to take one more step closer to the kingdom, whatever that may be. You get others here to pray for those people in your life. Talk about it. Support one another in your witness. But whatever you do, do not leave your vocation as a Christian to share the good news of the kingdom of God. Because that is one key way that we respond to what God has done for us in the coming of Christ, to share his message. Repent, for the kingdom of God is here.

Finally, Matthew reminds us, finally, the hope that the gospel gives us. When God's kingdom comes in full, well, then the light will banish the darkness forever. And so our final response that we'll consider tonight is to put our hope in Christ. Verse 23 tells us Jesus didn't stop with four disciples. Rather, Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. The gospel is for all. And by the end of this section, amazingly, it's not just people from Galilee, but Gentiles in Syria and the Decapolis, as well as Jews from Jerusalem and Judea and the Jordan. They hear of Jesus. And verse 25, large crowds from these places followed him.

And again, that should really encourage us that there is nobody, nobody outside of God's reach, nobody too far gone to hear the good news and respond rightly to the Lord Jesus.

But perhaps you're thinking, you know, it's no wonder people there and then followed him. Look what else he's doing, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and illness among the people.

[25 : 02] You people with various diseases who were ill, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures and the paralyzed, he healed them. So is that part of how we are meant to share the gospel? Is that why our witness feels so weak? Although putting this back in the context of Isaiah, we find that these are the signs of God's kingdom. Isaiah the prophet gave us to look for, to spot the real thing. So these healing miracles authenticate Jesus' message in a unique way. It's a bit like in your passport, the kind of holographic image or the company letterhead on an official document. These miracles are the signs that nobody can forge or replicate, that back up Jesus' claim to be God's authentic king, bringing God's authentic kingdom. But unlike a company letterhead, these signs are also a showcase of what is to come in the kingdom of God. Because God promises through Isaiah not simply that some people would be healed as they were back then, but that in fact all illness and all disease, all pain, all cause of hurt in our world, all crying and mourning, all death would be taken away in the kingdom of God.

And so we could think of Jesus' miracles here a bit like a show home. If you drive through a new housing development, you'll see the kind of mounds of earth, the big craters, and the noise, the diggers, the muck, the mess. And in the middle, what is there? A finished home, perfectly decorated, because the developers want you to know that though you see now muck and mess and dirt and chaos, well this is what the whole development is going to look like one day.

And it's going to be brilliant. That's what these miracles are here to say, that now Christ has come to bring God's kingdom in part. But one day when Christ returns, he will bring his kingdom in all of its fullness. And then he will take away all cause for crying. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. But all mourning is sadness and tears will be no more. Words of C.S. Lewis, everything sad will come untrue, because he is coming to make all things new. That is why it's so worth us being part of his kingdom. It's partly why it's so worth us sharing the good news of his kingdom, the invitation for others to come in. Because the gospel not only gives us confidence today that our sins are forgiven, that we are right with God, but even in the face of death, that death itself has been defeated. And so we respond rightly to what God has done in Jesus by putting our hope in him. What a world made me. At the turn of a year, there's plenty for us to worry about, isn't there?

Maybe our own hearts are full of anxiety, uncertainty. Perhaps we fear things today. You know, in our world, there's so much cause, isn't there, for mourning and crying and death.

And perhaps your own heart today is full of the sadness, the suffering that comes from living in a sin-torn world. You know, maybe the end of one year, reflecting on the year behind you, looking forward to the year ahead actually makes that pain sharper and harder to live with. Well, the good news of God's kingdom is that it gives us a hope of a world free from sadness and suffering in our own hearts and in the world around us. When Jesus comes, he won't just take away our personal hearts, but all cause for pain and hurts in our world. And that promise of the gospel is yours tonight. If your hope is in God's King and his coming kingdom, he's the one who came once to take away the penalty and the power of sin through his death on the cross. And he is the one who is coming again to take away the presence of sin in our hearts, in our world. And tonight he invites each of us to come into that kingdom forever by putting our hope in him. Repent, he said, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

[29 : 58] And so if you need to tonight, will you turn? Put your trust in this great King, believe his good news, come into his kingdom, have life forever with him. It was a wonderful hope going into another year and a great peace to know that whatever this year brings, your ultimate need has already been met.

Your ultimate problem has already been solved, for you are at peace now with God through Jesus Christ. And it is a wonderful hope to have the certain hope of a world made right and ye when the King comes again.

Let's take this chance together to respond to God now as we pray. Let's pray together. Amen. Gracious Father, how we thank you that you have worked in our world for our salvation. Thank you for what you have done in sending Christ, he who came to take away our sins, to make us right with you, to bring your kingdom into our world, into our lives. Father, we pray for your forgiveness for the times where we do not want that. Even as your people, Lord, times where we rebel. And we say even inwardly, we do not want for this man to rule over us. Lord, forgive us, we pray. Give us a desire for the King. Let us believe his good news. Let us repent with a whole heart. Let us live in his kingdom and love his perfect rule. Help us, we pray, to follow him as he calls us to do. Father, we pray for those in our lives who we love, but who do not love the Lord Jesus. Lord, even those in this room, we pray that you would, this coming year, draw them to yourself. We pray, Lord, that you would grant us boldness by your spirit to share the good news that we have received, not as a hardship, but as a joy.

Father, we long for those who are in our lives to know your goodness and grace. And so we pray, Lord, that you would give us opportunity, Lord, even this coming week, to speak of Christ, to offer an invitation to come, to hear, to believe the good news that he came to share. Lord, how we thank you that you do not require a demand of us more work, for the work is finished, but simply trust in the Lord and for all he has done for us. Grant us this faith, we pray. Help our unbelief and help us to faithfully follow. For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.