

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 5 February 2023. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Great Light in Galilee

Matthew 4:12-22

I'll never forget the time, in August 1990, when my family made a 1,000-mile road trip from Ohio to Florida, to take my sister to her first year at college. We made it into a "holiday," and stopped at several tourist spots along the way; and one of the places where we stopped was the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky. Now, the thing that impressed me most about Mammoth Caves was the minute or two when the tour guide turned off the lights in the cave! It was scary to put my hand in front of my face, and to see absolutely nothing. Even though I knew that I was standing in a perfectly safe place, with guardrails all around, I felt an irrational fear that I would fall into one of the deep crevices nearby. One visitor of Mammoth Caves described his experience this way. He said that during his tour,

"...my guide turned off the lights, and seemed to lose track of time. He started talking about different things, meandering into other topics, without turning the lights back on. It lasted 9 minutes, according to my watch. The first couple minutes were nothing special, and I was still fully aware of the group of people around me. After a few minutes I noticed a faint light. I don't know if it was a distant tour light around the corner, or if I was hallucinating. I spent a couple minutes looking and trying to figure it out. Around that point, I became really uncomfortable, and my heart rate increased as it went on.

My natural reaction would be to close my eyes. If they're closed, then surely I'll be immune from the effects of darkness. But this actually increased my anxiety. When it's pitch black, there's no visible difference between having your eyes open or closed. It feels like your eyelids aren't working, like the muscle movements are not happening. It caused a retreat into my own mind. Despite there being twenty people nearby, I felt like they weren't real. I started to think they could all walk off, leaving only me and the rambling tour guide."

Yet, despite all the mental distress that this man was going through, the reappearance of light in the cave made it all go away. The tourist went on to say, "I was surprised at how quickly things returned to normal after [the lights] came back on. I had felt like I was near a breaking point of some sort, but within seconds I was fine."

It's not until we are without light that we realise how desperately we need it! God designed us, physically and emotionally, to need light. In the same way, our spirits need the *spiritual light* that only the Lord Jesus Christ can give. He is the Light of the World; and the only way that we can be freed from the bondage of fear is to come to Him for salvation, and then to walk in fellowship with Him. This morning, we will be talking about all these things. The title of this message is *The Great Light in Galilee*.

Read Matthew 4:12-17.

I. Jesus' call to sinners (vv. 12-17)

In you read through the four Gospels, it doesn't take long to figure out that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each focused on a different aspect of Jesus' Person. Matthew focused on the fact that Jesus is **the King of Israel**, and that He came to offer a Kingdom; and he carefully chose events from Jesus' life that highlight the fact that He is the King of Israel. Matthew has

already shown us the *worship* of the King by the wisemen; the public *presentation* of the King, at His baptism; and the *testing* of the King in the wilderness. Now, Matthew takes us to the point in Jesus' ministry when He began to preach about "***the kingdom of heaven.***"

Now, there are many events from Jesus' early ministry which Matthew didn't record in his Gospel. (The Apostle John tells us about most of these early events.) After Jesus' baptism, and after His 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, He returned to Bethabara, where John was baptising; and it was here that John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and proclaimed, "***Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.***" Jesus' first two disciples, John and Andrew, began to follow Him immediately after this; and within the next couple days, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael began to follow Him, as well. On the third day of His public ministry, Jesus performed His first miracle of turning water into grape juice. He then went down into Judaea, to celebrate the Feast of Passover. While there, He continued to do miracles, and to preach; and many more people believed on Him as the Messiah. At this point, Jesus' disciples began to baptise new believers, just as John the Baptist and his disciples were doing. On their way back to Galilee, they went through Samaria; and a whole village of Samaritans believed on Jesus, and were saved. Jesus then returned to His hometown of Nazareth.

Now, let's read **verse 12** again. (**Read verse 12.**) It was upon the news that Herod had cast John into prison that Jesus returned to Galilee. John, the forerunner of the King, had prepared the way before Him; and now, *the King* was picking up where the forerunner had left off. Now that John was in prison, the greater focus of Jesus' ministry was on *preaching*. Of course, Jesus *had* been preaching up to this point; but the main thrust of His ministry had been His *healing* ministry. Through His healing and miracles, Jesus had been proving Himself to be the Messiah; but now, His *preaching* ministry was beginning in earnest.

With this in mind, please look carefully at what Matthew says. (**Read verse 13 again.**) In two simple words, Matthew says that Jesus **left** His own hometown of Nazareth. The Greek word "***leaving***" (*katalipon*) has the idea of "forsaking," "deserting," or "abandoning." Jesus was now forsaking His own hometown, and was making Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, His new home base. Why? Why would He forsake His own hometown? Because of something that the people of Nazareth did just after Jesus had returned from Judaea.

Read Luke 4:16-30.

When Jesus read this passage from **Isaiah 61**, He was very precise with His words. Right in the middle of **Isaiah 61 verse 2**, He closed the book. He stopped reading right in the middle of the sentence. Why? Because in the second half of the sentence, Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would *also* declare "***the day of vengeance of our God.***" Now, make no mistake about it: when Jesus returns to earth to set up His Kingdom one day, it *will* be the "***day of vengeance.***" However, that is not why He came the *first* time. In His *first* coming, Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to *save* the world through His sacrificial death on the cross. Therefore, Jesus stopped in the middle of the sentence, just after He had finished reading the words, "***to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.***"

Now, to say the least, the people were shocked when Jesus closed the book and said, "***This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.***" Jesus was claiming that *He* was the Messiah! He was saying, "*I* am the one who gave these words to Isaiah 700 years ago. *I* am the one who spoke those words about myself, through the pen of Isaiah. *I* am here to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." The phrase "acceptable year" literally means "year of favour."

It was the season of *grace*. God had sent His Son into the world so that He might provide the gracious gift of salvation for sinners. Furthermore, Jesus said that He had come to preach “*the gospel*” (the “good news”). Jesus did not, at this point, specifically define the Gospel as salvation through His sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection; but over the next three years, He would reveal, more and more, how He would soon die, be buried for three days, and rise again. In the meantime, Jesus declared that He had come to proclaim the “good news.”

Yet, the people of Nazareth didn't *like* this good news! They were especially enraged when Jesus implied that God cared for the *Gentiles*, too, and that the Gentiles were more likely to believe on Him than His own people were. The people were so outraged by these words, that they tried to murder Him on the spot, by casting Him over the steep cliff on the edge of the town. However, it wasn't Jesus' time. Jesus had to die in the right place, and at the right time, in fulfilment of the Scriptures. It *was* time, though, for Jesus to forsake Nazareth. The people of Nazareth had vehemently rejected and forsaken their King, who had grown up in their very streets; and now, the King was abandoning them. Only once more did Jesus return to Nazareth. Later in His ministry, He went back to Nazareth, to the people who had tried to *murder* Him. (We read about this in **Matthew 13**.) Yet, once again, His stay was short, because the people rejected Him for a second time. After this, He never returned.

There are a couple truths to learn from this. First, there is a lesson for Christians. The lesson is that God cares about those small, unlovely, and “unimportant” places. He cares about the people that everyone else has forgotten. He cares about the places of which people say, “Can anything good come out of such-and-such place?” Jesus went back to the hard-hearted inhabitants of Nazareth, because He loved them. Likewise, we should love those “unlovely” people, whom everyone else has forgotten. We should care about the people in the lands of darkest night, whose customs are strange, and whose ways are murderous. We should love and care about those people in the run-down cottages in the country lanes, or in those unlovely estates. We should love those people who have rubbish piled in their gardens, and whose houses smell like a mixture of alcohol and garbage, and who scream in your face when you knock on their door to tell them about Jesus. Jesus loves them, and wants to save them. Whether they receive Him or not, He wants to give them the *chance* to receive Him.

Now, there is a truth in this for those who *don't* know the Lord, as well. The message is: if you haven't received Christ as your Saviour, you'd better do so while you can! Jesus is the Light of the World, and He wants to bring light to your darkened soul. However, salvation is a limited-time offer. The Light of the world will not always be available; and He will not be trifled with. He won't always be hanging around and waiting for you to respond to Him. If you think that He will wait until you've had all the fun that you want to get out of this life, and you're good and ready to throw Him a few crumbs of service, you are greatly mistaken. He doesn't want a few crumbs; He wants your *whole heart and life*! He died to save your *soul*; and your soul is what He wants. While He's calling you to come to Him and be saved, you'd better respond, because there may come a day when He won't call upon you anymore. When He ceases to call you, you won't even be *able* to respond. Just as Jesus “left” the hard hearts in Nazareth, there may come a day when Jesus will “leave” *you*, and not call on you anymore; and your heart will remain cold and unresponsive, until you pass out of this life, and into an eternity of darkness! My friend, don't let that happen! Repent and believe on the Light today!

Read John 8:12 / 12:32-40.

Now, let's look again at our Scripture in **Matthew**. (**Read Matthew 4:13-16.**) In this passage, Matthew is quoting from **Isaiah chapter 9**. This is an important Scripture, because in it, Isaiah declares that the Messiah would arise from Galilee. Let's look at that prophecy.

Read Isaiah 8:22 – 9:2.

When Isaiah wrote this prophecy, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was just on the verge of being destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. It was a time of darkness, anarchy, and confusion; and Isaiah had a news flash for them: "It's not going to get any better." In the last verses of **chapter 8**, Isaiah said that the children of Israel would "look unto the earth," but would see only trouble, darkness, dimness, and anguish. Beginning with the destruction of Northern Israel by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and continuing on through the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians, there truly was much darkness and anguish in the land of Israel. Even after the Jews returned to the land from Babylon in 535 B.C., it was still a time of darkness and gloominess. From the time of Isaiah and onward, the Jewish people were constantly under the oppression of foreign enemies—Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and then Rome.

However, Isaiah points out that there was another kind of "dimness" that was even *worse* than the "dimness" that began in the land of Galilee, when God first began to afflict the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Zebulun and Naphtali were the northern-most tribes of Israel; and they were the first tribes to feel the wrath of the Assyrian army as it began to invade their land in the 730's B.C. Yet, Isaiah says that there was a "darkness" far worse than the darkness of the Assyrian invasion. The worst darkness was not a political, social, or economic darkness: it was the *spiritual* darkness that they were in because of their rejection of their God.

This spiritual darkness persisted from Isaiah's day until the time of Christ. There were brief times of revival under prophets such as Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Joshua, Zerubbabel, Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi; but the hearts of the people quickly grew cold again, and people went back to their evil, covetous ways. Because of Israel's disobedience, God did not give them any new Scripture for the last 400 years before Christ's birth. The time between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ is often called "The Four Hundred Silent Years." Even though Israel did experience brief times of material prosperity and relative political freedom during these years, most of the people remained spiritually dead to God, and in darkness—even though they had the Scriptures right under their noses!

But then, in the midst of this thick spiritual darkness, a great Light arose. We are told that this light would arise in the very region where the "darkness" of the Assyrian invasion had first begun—in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This is a prophecy of the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, in the land of Galilee, where He had grown up.

Jesus' earthly ministry officially began at His baptism in the River Jordan. His baptism was followed by His forty-day fast in the wilderness, and then by His initial meeting with his first five disciples. However, when His preaching ministry began in earnest, He did not begin in Jerusalem or Judea; He began in the northern-most tip of Israel, in the region of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali—the very place where Israel's "dark days" had begun centuries earlier.

Everywhere Jesus went, it was as though the light of the mid-day sun had suddenly appeared in all its fullness, from out of thick darkness. Jesus' words were pure light, because they proceeded forth from the mouth of the omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, immutable, holy, just, and gracious God. Jesus is Light; and "*in him is no darkness at all.*"

Read Malachi 4:1-2.

In this passage, Malachi is prophesying about Christ at His *second* Coming to earth—the time when He will usher in “*the day of vengeance.*” However, His name, “The Sun of Righteousness,” applies to *any* age! Jesus was the Sun of Righteousness in His first coming to earth; He will be the Sun of Righteousness at His Second Coming; and even now, He is the Sun of Righteousness to every soul who repents of his sin and believes on Him.

We’ve seen that there is a limited-time offer to receive the Light of the world. We must respond to the Light while we have it, or else the little Light that we *do* have will be taken away. We’ve seen Isaiah’s *prophecy* of the Light that would arise in Galilee. Now, let’s examine the *message* of the Light. **(Read Matthew 4:17 again.)**

The message of Jesus’ preaching was exactly the same as John the *Baptist’s* message. Both John’s and Jesus’ message was, “**Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**” This certainly wasn’t a popular message. It never has been, and it never will be. No sinner likes to hear that he needs to repent. However, this is the message that we all *must* hear. In our natural state, we are all separated from God because of our sin; and if we would enter the wonderful Kingdom that He is preparing, we must repent. We must turn in our hearts *to* God *from* sin. It’s *always* in that order. You cannot turn *from sin* without first turning *to God*. It all starts with Him. *He* is the one who gives you the power to overcome sin. To overcome sin, you must turn to *Him*. You must humble yourself, believe that His Son died for your sins and rose again, and *ask* Him to save you. He will then come into your life, and begin to change you from the inside out.

Now, before we move on to our next passage, there is something I’d like to point out about the Kingdom that Jesus was offering. **(Read verse 17 again.)** In this verse, we are told that “**From that time Jesus began to preach**” that people needed to repent, because the Kingdom of heaven was at hand. That phrase, “**From that time Jesus began,**” appears two times in **Matthew**—here in **Matthew 4**, and once more time in **Matthew 16**. Each time this phrase appears, it is introducing *a new phase* of Jesus’ preaching ministry. Let’s take a look at that **Matthew 16** passage, and see what we can learn about it.

Read Matthew 16:21.

Do you see the shift in the focus of Jesus’ preaching here? Back in **Matthew 4**, Jesus began to preach **that the Kingdom was at hand**. By the way, the Kingdom really *was* “at hand.” Jesus doesn’t make empty promises. If Israel, as a nation, had repented and believed on Jesus soon after His death and resurrection, the 1,000-year Kingdom would have come *within their lifetimes*. The Kingdom *was* at hand, and it was being genuinely offered to Israel. However, in order for people to *enter* that Kingdom, they had to be spiritually prepared. Their sins had to be washed away. That is why Jesus now began to hammer on the message of *repentance*. For the next year and half or so, this was the main focus of Jesus’ preaching. However, in the latter part of Jesus’ ministry, the focus of Jesus’ preaching shifted once again. By the time we come to **Matthew 16**, we find Jesus preparing His disciples **for His coming crucifixion and resurrection**. The time was drawing near for Jesus to become the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world; and in His preaching, He spoke more and more of His coming death. Now, this was perplexing to Jesus’ disciples, to say the least. They couldn’t understand why their Master, who had been preaching about the glorious Kingdom, was now talking about His

death! How could a dead Messiah reign over Israel and the world? Even Jesus' true disciples were confused. Very soon, all would be revealed. For now, though, Jesus' message was to "Repent"; and those who repented received eternal life.

II. Jesus' call to saints (vv. 18-22)

Read Matthew 4:18-22.

In **verses 12-17**, we saw Jesus' call to sinners. Jesus' call to sinners is, "**Repent!**" Now, in **verses 18-22**, we see Jesus' call to the *saints*. In these verses, Jesus is calling men who had *already* repented. Peter, Andrew, James and John had been following Jesus since the early days of His ministry; and they had already spent a good deal of time traveling with Him. However, Jesus was now calling them to follow Him full-time. He was calling them to leave the security of their fishing trade, so that they might become "**fishers of men.**"

Folks, do you realise what Jesus was asking of these men? They didn't have pensions, or unemployment, or any kind of social security net to fall back on for months on end, as they tramped around the country with Jesus. These men lived hand-to-mouth. Yet, Jesus was calling them to leave all and follow Him, because He had a very special task for them. He was calling them to trust *Him* to supply their needs, and the needs of their families, while He taught them how to be "**fishers of men.**" This would take a tremendous amount of faith in Jesus! Yet, did they balk at His request? No, they didn't. After all, how could they? He was their Messiah, and their Saviour! When the Saviour calls you, you must follow. Following Christ to some particular area of *service* is part and parcel of the call to salvation itself.

Now, please don't misunderstand me, here. I am *not* saying that salvation is obtained by acts of service! Salvation is the free gift of God, which Christ purchased for us; and we receive that gift by faith in Christ alone. However, you cannot separate the call to *salvation* from the call to *service*. It's all part of the same package. When Jesus saves a sinner, He saves that person so that he (or she) might now *serve Him with his whole life*, in whatever capacity *He* chooses! Peter, Andrew, James, and John were simple fishermen; but they understood this truth well. They had answered Jesus' call to believe on Him and be saved; and now that He was calling them to be "**fishers of men,**" they knew that they *must* obey Him immediately, and implicitly. When they placed their trust in Jesus, it wasn't an emotional decision, made in the heat and excitement of the moment. It was the *real thing*. The same faith that led them to *believe* on Jesus now led them to *serve Him* with their whole lives.

You know, even genuine believers can be led by fleshly emotions, and make impulsive decisions to serve the Lord in some area of their lives, without truly counting the cost. That kind of "commitment" doesn't last. When the emotions wear off, many Christians retreat from their initial commitment to the Lord. In the case of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, they had only a short window of time to be with the Lord. Jesus' time on earth was short; and they had to decide whether to obey their Lord, or not. Right when they were most occupied with the concerns of everyday life, He bade them to leave all, follow Him, and learn from Him.

To this day, Jesus still puts forth the test of discipleship to *every* believer. God calls *every* believer to be a "**fisher of men.**" For some, this involves leaving a career, and becoming a pastor or missionary. For many, it means being a witness right where they are. However, for *every* believer, it involves a cost. There is *always* a high cost for serving the Lord; and oftentimes, Jesus' demands look impossible. "Jesus is calling me to do *that*? Surely He can't

mean it! I will lose friends. I might even lose my job! I will have to give up all these things that I've worked for all these years. This will take an incredible amount of my time; and somehow, I know that it will cost me a lot of heartache, as I deal with people who reject my love. And where will this end? What if God should call me to go to a place that is truly dangerous, such as an inner city? What if He should call me to go to a land where people would try to *kill* me? Can't I be a disciple without walking such a difficult road?" Brethren, the answer to that question is, "No." The path of discipleship is never easy!

In the year 1838, an Englishman named James Calvert, along with his wife Mary, his missionary partner John Hunt, and Hunt's wife, Hannah, sailed across the world, and dared to step into the satanic darkness of the Fiji Islands. Amazingly, over the next 18 years, hundreds of these cannibalistic people (including their king), placed their faith in Christ, and abandoned their wicked ways. Calvert oversaw the translation of the entire Bible into the Fiji language; and fifty years after Calvert's arrival in Fiji, *not one* Fijian professed the old heathen religion!

Who would have thought that these four brave souls would have avoided becoming lunch to the cannibals, much less have led hundreds of people to Christ? The captain of the ship that took them to Fiji certainly didn't think that they'd survive. He tried to persuade Calvert to turn back. He said, "*You will lose your life, and the lives of those with you, if you go among such savages!*" To that Calvert replied, "*We died before we came here.*" My friends, this is what Jesus demands. Jesus demands nothing less than death to self. Christian, have *you* died to self? Are you taking up the cross daily? To follow Him, you must die to self, just as Peter, Andrew, James, and John did. By the way, *just before* Jesus called these men, there was a shocking event that happened, which prepared them to die to self. Let's see what it was.

Read Luke 5:1-11.

Folks, do you realise what Peter was saying here? "***Depart from me***" is the very thing that Christ will say to the unsaved at the Great White Throne Judgment, just before they are cast into hell. These are the most fearful words that anyone will ever hear. Yet, Peter asked the Lord, in earnest, to depart from *him!* Why? Because he realised that he was a "sinful man."

Now, make no mistake: Peter *was* a saved man. Yet, as believers grow in their relationship with God, they become aware of sins in their lives that they had not noticed before. For Peter, this was one of those "eye-opening" moments. What was *his* sin? Simple unbelief. Jesus had commanded him to let down his net to catch a draught of fish; but Peter, being an expert fisherman, thought that He knew better than the Lord. After all, they had fished all night, and caught nothing. Didn't Jesus know that you can't catch fish in the daytime? Peter *did* obey Jesus, and he *did* let down the net; but he didn't believe that anything would come of it. It wasn't until the boat was overwhelmed with fish that Peter came face-to-face with the ugliness of his unbelief. Peter realised how *unworthy* he was to be in the presence of the holy God; and he fully agreed with God that he deserved to be separated from Him forever.

Yet, what did Christ say to Peter? In His mercy He said, "***Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.***" Jesus reassured Peter not only of his *relationship* with Him, but also of His intention to use him for His glory. It was shortly after this event, as Peter, Andrew, James, and John were by the seaside, that Jesus came by and bade them to follow Him full-time. How could they refuse? This man had just shown them, through the miraculous draught of fish, that He could meet *all* their needs! Furthermore, this man was no ordinary man: He was *God*. What they *deserved* was to depart from Him forever; yet, in His incredible grace, He

was offering them the privilege of serving Him with their whole lives! For Peter, Andrew, James, and John, this was a no-brainer. They immediately left all, and followed Him.

Conclusion: We serve a longsuffering God, who has put up with our unbelief more times than we could possibly count. Yet, His call to us still stands. He still commands us to ***“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”*** Christian, are you *really* following your Lord? Would you follow Him *anywhere*? Are you really concerned about “fishing” for lost souls? If not, I urge you to humble yourself, as Peter did, and say, “I am a sinful man, O Lord!” Abase yourself, and He will be able to use you in His service. If you have never come to Christ for salvation, I urge you to come to the Light! Come to Christ while He is calling you. He will fill your soul with His wonderful light, *if* you will repent, and believe on Him!