

## Sure Could Use a Little Light Down Here

Matthew 4:15, 16

A factory worker told a co-worker, "I think I need some time off from work."

"How will you pull that off?" asked the co-worker.

The first man climbed to the rafters and hung upside down.

The boss walked in, saw the man hanging from the ceiling, and asked, "What on earth are you doing?"

"I'm a light bulb" the man answered.

"I think you need to take some days off," said the boss.

So, the man climbed down and went home. His co-worker, not quite as bright, began walking out behind him.

The boss asked, "And where do you think you're going?"

He answered, "Home, I can't work in the dark."

No one does well in the dark, so God in His mercy did something about that. He sent Light to us:

<sup>12</sup>When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. <sup>13</sup>Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali - <sup>14</sup>to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: - Matthew 4:12-14

Matthew condensed several months of Jesus' life into two verses. Luke and John flesh out the narrative. Before Jesus began His ministry in Galilee, He spent time in Judea, near Jerusalem, while John was preaching in a wilderness area nearby. During this time, John baptized Jesus and acclaimed Him to be "the Lamb of God." Jesus drew some disciples to Himself as John was encouraging his own disciples to trust Jesus. It may have been in this same wilderness area where John was preaching, but certainly in some Judean wilderness, that Jesus was tempted.

After his wilderness temptation, Jesus heard of John's arrest. Rather than become embroiled in that turmoil, He returned from Judea to Nazareth in Galilee, His hometown. He was there long enough to command adequate respect to be invited to publicly read God's Word at the synagogue. Luke 4 describes how one Sabbath Day, Jesus read a prophecy about the *messiah* for whom every Jew was waiting. Then, He made a provocative claim, essentially, "Here I am, everyone!" The people of Nazareth ran Him out of town, so He headed eastward to Capernaum.

Capernaum was a town on the northwestern shore of Lake Galilee, in the ancient tribal allotment of Naphtali near the boundary with Zebulun. Centuries later, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrians, it was through this region that the enemy rushed in from the northeast. Isaiah spoke of a deliverer who would appear here. Matthew, formerly a tax collector in Capernaum, was inspired by the Holy Spirit to understand Jesus' arrival in Galilee, and the "dawning" of His public ministry, to be the most complete fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy:

<sup>15</sup>Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
the way to the sea, along the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles -

<sup>16</sup>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." - Matthew 4:15, 16

Matthew was describing the impact of Jesus' arrival in a specific geographical region that Isaiah had described as a land of darkness. Still, whether or not he knows a thing about ancient Galilee, Assyria, Zebulun or Naphtali, every Christian's heart leaps at the idea of a light dawning in the darkness, for he sees Jesus in that prophecy. Jesus is God's light Who dispels spiritual darkness.

## **I. The Insidious Darkness**

### **A. A Darkness of Ignorance**

The Galilean Jews were woefully ignorant of the things of God. At least, that was the opinion of their cousins to the south in Judea, where Jerusalem and the temple were located, and sacrifices were offered. Judea is where the priests and the most reputable scribes were concentrated. Galilean Jews met in synagogues, little gathering places for Jews scattered among the nations. Synagogues were a nice try, but hearing some rabbi teaching at a synagogue was hardly the same as worshipping at Jerusalem's temple. Galilean Jews kept the Sabbath and observed most major holidays, but they were not terribly on top of the finer points of ritual. Galilee was a land *WITH* Jews, but it was not the land *OF* the Jews. Galilee was considered darkness by Judean standards.

### **B. A Darkness of Prosperity**

Perhaps, one reason that Galilean Jews seemed too busy for the things of God was because of the distractions of commerce. Galilee was the richest region in Palestine. The soil was so fertile that even the least motivated farmer seemed to do okay. The fishing industry on the Sea of Galilee was lucrative. Fish from Galilee were exported throughout the world. But, the kicker in business is always "location, location, location!" The *Road to the East* carried goods back and forth from the Great Sea to Persia. *The Way of the Sea* was the major trade route between Damascus and Egypt. Both highways intersected in Galilee. Galilee was only 25 miles wide and 50 miles long, but people thronged there. 204 of its countless villages had more than 15,000 people each.

In this nation, even the poorest of us lives well relative to the world. We don't like to face it, but too much prosperity can be more crippling to our spiritual well-being than too much poverty, for prosperity can cement out hearts to the world, causing us to forget how desperately we need God.

### **C. A Darkness of Paganism**

Note that the prophecy refers to "Galilee of the Gentiles," not "Galilee of the Jews." Many Jews lived in Galilee in Jesus' days, but the area was never solely Jewish. In the days of Joshua, when the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun received their allotments of land, they never completely drove the pagans out. Centuries later, when the Assyrians defeated this area, they repopulated it with their own people. Then, the Greeks and Syrians ran the area. Only a century and a half before Jesus came, the Jewish population in Galilee was so small that they were transported to Jerusalem for their safety. When the Jews drove the enemy out of the area in the days of the Maccabees, they were transported back. By the time of Jesus, the Jewish population was flourishing.

Still, Galilee was bordered by Phoenicia to the east, Samaria to the south and Syria to the west and north. Many Gentiles still lived in Galilee, actively worshipping their various gods. Galilee was a place where the error of watered-down truth, the superstitions of paganism and the cynicism of those who wanted nothing to do with any of it each abounded. In fact, Galilee presented many of the same challenges to the truth of Jesus Christ as does our own nation today.

### **D. Still, Great Light Dawns through the Thickest Darkness**

Darkness did reign in Galilee. It reigned in Judea too, but that province could not acknowledge the fact. Judea was tucked away, off the major trade routes. The Gentile presence was minimal. Those Jews could keep to themselves while commending one another for their great righteousness and moral purity. In Galilee, such religious pretense was minimal. Galileans were constantly reminded that they were second-rate Jews who rubbed elbows with pagans. Still, God could use their openness to various philosophies and ideas for His own purposes. If Someone were to enter Galilee and teach with an authority that could only come from heaven, and prove His dominion over the demonic activity that was common there, and enlighten them in their superstitions, and melt away their meanness - people would follow such a light, and many did.

The social ills that believers today rant and rave about most are not the biggest obstacles to the light of Christ dawning in this nation. I'm not minimizing the sinfulness that surrounds us, but sinful lives eventually break, and Christ delights in repairing broken people. The biggest obstacle to His light dawning is the religious pride and comfort of those who claim to know Him. When religious pride blinds our eyes, then, like ancient Pharisees, we portray a false picture of God to our world. When we are comfortable that we have drawn "close enough" to God, then, like the ancient priests, we talk of faith, but we live materialistically, expediently and self-indulgently. It is for those who can face the reality of the darkness within that Christ dawns the brightest.

## II. The Incredible Light

### A. Light Dawns the Brightest where Darkness Rules

Today, trophies of God's grace are being won throughout the world in Korea, Africa, China, Indonesia and any other number of places that we would like to think of as less friendly to the Gospel than our own homeland. America is a tougher nut to crack. Sure, churches are popping-up right and left. People are coming to faith in Christ, but candidly, how much of daring, cost-counting, persecution-courting, New Testament faith does the average American believer model?

We're a bit like ancient Judah. We're pretty sure that we are God's chosen. We're pretty sure that we are standing firm. Sometimes, we can even be a little cynical of the overboard fanaticism of second and third-world believers. After all, they don't have much. They're desperate. Have we forgotten that "desperate and poor" is exactly where God meets each of us? They forgot that in Judea. Christians are in danger of forgetting that in our own nation. But, in Galilee, in a place that no Jew held up as a beacon of religious purity, a great light could dawn.

### B. God's Word Is the Vehicle of His Light

When darkness reigns, God speaks, and wherever His voice is heeded, light shines. At creation, "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3), and He's been shattering the darkness by the light of His Word ever since. Those who listen cannot miss it:

<sup>17</sup>"The poor and needy search for water,  
but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst.

But I the LORD will answer them;  
I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.

<sup>18</sup>I will make rivers flow on barren heights,  
and springs within the valleys.  
I will turn the desert into pools of water,  
and the parched ground into springs. – Isaiah 41:17, 18

<sup>18</sup>Who is a God like you,  
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression  
of the remnant of his inheritance?

You do not stay angry forever  
but delight to show mercy.

<sup>19</sup>You will again have compassion on us;  
you will tread our sins underfoot  
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. – Micah 7:18, 19

<sup>1</sup>Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;  
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without cost.

<sup>2</sup>Why spend money on what is not bread,  
and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

<sup>3</sup>Give ear and come to me;  
hear me, that your soul may live. – Isaiah 55:1-3

<sup>28</sup>“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” – Matthew 11:28-30

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” – John 8:12

Jesus only calls those who are desperate because only those who are desperate can hear Him. But, when they obey His voice, Jesus can take the most useless man and render him useful in the kingdom. May God deliver the church in this land from its sophistication, its professionalism, its books, its expertise and its fascination with celebrity talking heads. And, may we once again discover the power, the glory, the joy and the passion, even the fanaticism that comes when we rediscover what it means to simply and desperately rely on the grace of God.

### **III. The Indescribable Christ**

Speaking of the Christ, the Apostle John wrote:

... The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. – John 1:9

What this means can be summed up in a single Name. That Name is Jesus. But, it cannot be summed up in a single thought. Jesus is the “Word,” the full utterance, the complete self-expression, the final revelation of God to man. Everything about Jesus is essential light to us.

#### **A. The Light of His Name**

An angel announced the birth of Christ to the man who was to raise Him, saying, “...you are to give him the name *Jesus*, because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus is a form of Joshua, meaning “*JEHOVAH* saves.” Of course, many little boys were named for that great hero, Joshua, but for Joseph and Mary’s son, the Name reflected the divine mission.

What set this Jesus apart from all the other little boys named Jesus or the other would-be *messiahs* that entered and exited Israel’s national stage? The other Name by which we know Jesus is “Christ.” This was the Greek equivalent of *messiah*, meaning anointed one. Jesus was not acclaimed as Savior by Himself or by His following but by God Himself. He is not a self-appointed prophet or called a holy man by those who admired Him in the tradition of Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha or Joseph Smith. At His baptism and at His Transfiguration, the voice of God affirmed to witnesses:

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” – Matthew 17:5

If God has anointed Jesus to save men from their sins, then any sinner can trust that He is able!

## **B. The Light of His Nature**

God became a man. Because Jesus was fully man, He understands our human struggles with temptation. He identifies with every tear we shed. Because He is man, He feels your needs. But, because Jesus is also fully God, He can do something about those needs, especially, your greatest need, your need to be rescued from your sins and from the Hell that would otherwise await you. Salvation must be the work of Someone Who is both God and Man. The death of Someone divine, but not human would be a charade. The blood of someone wholly human, but not divine would lack the power to appease God's wrath. Jesus is the only Priest Who can stand in the gap between heaven and earth. As a perfect Sacrifice, only His blood can be applied to the sins of others.

## **C. The Light of His Advocacy**

Jesus intercedes for us before the Father. We know that at the Judgment, our standing in Christ will save us. We know that our prayers are heard because Jesus has secured access to God's presence for us. We do not pray superstitiously. We know our prayers are heard. But, even when we do not know how to pray, Jesus takes our broken thoughts and presents them to His Father.

Think of those times when you just could not bring yourself to utter a coherent thought to God. Maybe, you frantically desired to know His will, but clarity was elusive. Maybe, you felt estranged from the Father. Fellowship seemed broken. All you could think to pray was, "I feel estranged from You, Father. I feel like knucklehead, but I don't know what to do about it."

Do you realize that Jesus takes that broken, rambling prayer to the Father and fills in what's needed? "Father, I want to talk to you about our knucklehead. He says that he doesn't know what to do about the estrangement he feels. He knows. He's just put it out of His mind, because hearing it is too hard. He's held a grudge against Bert and Mabel since 1974. He has seethed in bitterness towards Earl since 1992. He loves the world. He has surrendered to a variety of behaviors that he should not be involved with. Of course, he feels out of sync with You. Keep him out of sync, but keep Him in Your hand, until he concedes and is willing to lay it all down."

## **D. The Light of His Love**

Rich Johnsons writes: "Growing up, my Mom always claimed to feel bad when a bird would slam head-first into our living room window. If she really felt bad, though, she'd have moved the bird feeder outside." Sympathy is pitying someone from the other side of some barrier. God-like love is crossing the barrier and entering the world of the sufferer. That is what Jesus did.

Perhaps, nothing draws people to Jesus more than His loving demeanor toward those who hurt. Children had no status in ancient Palestine, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me . . ." A woman was unable to worship or socialize normally because for eighteen years she had suffered from an issue of blood that rendered her ceremonially unclean. She touched the hem of Jesus' robe in desperation, and He healed her. Lepers had to live apart from their loved ones and announce their approach with the cry "Unclean! Unclean!" Jesus fearlessly touched the untouchable. Demon-possessed people were restored to sanity. Publicans with whom no self-respecting Jew would associate were befriended. Another woman had a reputation in her town for being a notorious sinner. Jesus extended her grace when others only scrutinized her.

When Jesus came into the world, He had to veil His deity. Otherwise, those who encountered Him would have been stricken with terror. So, He veiled Himself in the demeanor of a loving and gentle servant. But this demeanor was no mask that in any way misrepresented the character of God. The love of Christ is an authentic reflection of the love of the Father for His children.

Whatever darkness envelopes your life, Jesus is the Light that can drive it away and lead you to God.