

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

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the way to the sea, along the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ 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.”

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

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. ²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:12-23)

Light Cures Darkness

The other day, I was working with one of our members in my garage. The light in there isn't very good, so we both were using our phones to see what we were doing – and neither one of us was having much success. It probably speaks to our relative age, but we both have trouble finding the flashlight app on the phone and then actually making it work. I have to confess that when they first started putting that app on phones, I didn't believe it would ever give off enough light to really do any good. Yet, I have to admit that it's pretty convenient to have a flashlight on your cell phone – when I can find the button that turns it on. Today, Matthew quotes Isaiah's famous words: “**The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.**” The truth is, those people never expected to see that light. And it did not come in the form any human being would expect a light from God to take, just like I never really believed that cellphone flashlights would ever serve a good purpose. And that light doesn't work the way we human beings naturally think it should. But God comes back to this basic point again and again in both the Old Testament and the New: **Light cures darkness.**

I.

How much light does that take? Doesn't that depend on how dark it is? Last weekend, my son was mocking me because I sometimes use a magnifying glass to read. My eyes are getting old. But the problem isn't really the size of the print. It's how dark my reading space is. During the daytime, I can sit by the window and see even small print without much trouble. But at night, I have to blow those characters up. Isaiah pictures thick darkness for us. If we found ourselves in the middle of a total blackout, how much could we read by candlelight? How much by the flashlight on our phones? **The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.** Isaiah was talking about a light so bright that even a spotlight can't compare. Jesus is that light. The world was stuck in darkness so intense that the only way to cure it was for the Son of God to be born in human flesh. **Light cures darkness, even the darkness of sin.**

In what way is sin darkness? Our first thought is probably the evil that people do. Police officers and social workers often see real evil. And it's not unusual for them to have trouble getting those images out of their heads. Any of us could go online and find pictures of concentration camps and people being starved or brutalized. That evil *is* a darkness that lives in this world. But the problem with thinking of the darkness in those terms is that it lets most of us off the hook. While my family members could certainly tell you stories of me coming up short as a dad, on my worst day, my kids were a long way from having cigarettes put out on their

arms or being starved. I think that's generally true among us here. It's easy for us to compare ourselves to true abusers and thank God that we're not like those people. We love our children. We sacrifice for them. We spend time and money on them.

That attitude, my friends, is also part of the darkness of sin. It blinds us to our own faults. It makes excuses for our bad behavior. It says, "Well nobody's perfect." "I'm only human." "I do the best I can." "There are lots of people who are so much worse than me." True as that might be, God doesn't say, "All right, everybody line up in order of the most sinful to the least sinful. Everyone who's ahead of this line gets into heaven." In the Old Testament, God said, "**Be holy, because I am holy.**" In the New Testament, Jesus – the example of love and forgiveness and grace – said, "**Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" It doesn't matter if you're a better father or husband or worker or neighbor or Christian than I am. What matters is how you measure up to God. And you know what? By that standard, we are all sinners.

God says that nothing good lives in us, that is, in our sinful natures. We're all born totally evil from God's perspective. But the catch is, we don't know that. Teachers sometimes ask children to imagine how they would explain the color blue to a person who was born blind. All human beings are born blind to God, so we don't know what holiness actually looks like. That means we have trouble recognizing its opposite: sin. And even when we have to admit that we have done something terrible, we still know nothing about how to take care of that evil. We're stuck between making excuses for our sins and despairing over how evil we are. That, my friends, is true, spiritual darkness.

But Jesus is the Light. He comes to us in only one way: through the gospel, so we can say that the gospel, too, is the light. Our gospel lesson for today tells us that Jesus preached and taught and did miracles. He shined the light on people in darkness. He called the first disciples to establish the Christian Church to shine that light for all generations. And our gospel lesson points out that God sent the light to Galilee of the Gentiles. What does that mean? Galilee was the northern part of Israel. In Jesus' day, the Jews who lived there had a reputation for being not as serious about the faith as the Jews in Jerusalem were. And Galilee had a number of Gentile cities in it. There was a strong outside influence that contributed to a more casual approach to the faith. Sound familiar? Galilee was a lot like the United States, where all kinds of unchristian influences affect our thinking and our commitment to the truth.

But that's where Jesus started his ministry and called his disciples. The people walking in that darkness were shown the greatest light of all, and that light continues to shine today in the gospel. God sent his Son to live in our place. Instead of having the sinful heart that we were born with, his heart and his mind were holy. They lined up perfectly with God's standard. Jesus didn't need anyone to bring the light to him. He was the light, and his life was all that God wants anyone's life to be. But he didn't live that life to make us feel guilty about how imperfect we are. God wrote Jesus' perfect life down in his record next to our names, so God calls us holy and perfect.

Then Jesus died and paid for all the darkness in our hearts. Even when that darkness doesn't show itself, even when it lies hidden in our secret desires and thoughts, God sees it. And Jesus paid for it. So of course, he paid for that sin that did come out, for all the evil in our words and actions, for all the things that we make excuses for. Jesus even paid for the excuses themselves and all the darkness they bring. He died and his blood erased God's record of all those sin in our lives. So Jesus rose to tell us we are holy and free. He rose to tell us that we will indeed live with him in joy forever. Here in this Galilee of the Gentiles that we call the United States, we who walked in darkness have seen the greatest of all lights. Jesus, the Light of the World, has come to us and given us faith in him.

II.

But there are other kinds of darkness in this world. Sorrow often feels like darkness. When people who are struggling with depression describe their lives, sometimes they'll call their depression "darkness." Sometimes, when people go through some kind of terrible loss, they'll say that they're in a really dark place. When people are sick and in pain or dying, it can feel like darkness is coming. Sometimes we speak of famines or wars or disasters as dark times. I think we all understand why we say and feel those things. Light is good. Darkness is bad. Dark times are things we want to escape from. All that darkness – and every other kind you can think of – is caused by sin. But we don't always think of the sin connection when we're trapped in that kind of darkness, so we may not feel that forgiveness brings us out of those kinds of darkness. But Jesus conquered

all darkness when conquered the cause of it all. So Jesus is the answer for those kinds of darkness, too. **Light cures darkness, even the darkness of sorrow.**

What do I mean by that? Well, I don't mean that hearing about Jesus instantly makes every sorrow go away. When I was at the seminary, I dated a girl for a while before I met my wife. It didn't work out – let's be honest. she dumped me. She dumped me hard. And I was kind of down about that. One of my friends – who is a pastor today – said to me, “Smile! Jesus rose!” And he was totally sincere. And I love his clear faith in our Lord. And I do believe that Jesus rose and brought the only real solution to all that's wrong with this life. But that didn't change the fact that I felt hurt and rejected because my girlfriend dumped me. On a far greater scale, when we lost our daughter, another pastor whose son had died wrote me and told me that the gospel doesn't make pain go away, at least, not instantly. And he pointed out to me that we sometimes talk as if it did. But Jesus never said, “Preach the gospel and everything will be all right.” He never promised that pain will stop on this side of heaven. He certainly never promised that Christians who are sick and suffering extreme physical pain will always smile just because I tell them that Jesus rose.

But Jesus did rise. And the life he won is the final cure for all that hurts. There's a famous Bible story about a paralyzed man whose friends lowered him down through the roof in front Jesus. And before Jesus cured him, he said, **“Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”** Not, “Take heart, you're going to walk again.” “Take heart, your sins are forgiven.” Because sin is the cause of all that we suffer here. And even after Jesus healed that man, he was still going to have to live in this world where sin causes pain and sorrow. So do we. It may not hit all of us all the time. But it hits some of us every day and all of us at some point in our lives.

So what does the light of the gospel do for us when we're walking in the darkness of pain and sorrow and loss? First of all, it reminds us that we are not alone. Our Savior loves us and he walks with us. He hears and answers our prayers for relief. And he gives us strength to endure whatever we have to face today. Now, that doesn't mean he's going to make us into supermen and superwomen who stand up and carry any load and do it all with a smile. Sometimes, he gives us just enough strength to stay on our knees while we weep and pray to him. But he gives us that strength.

And he does give us comfort. He points us to our goal. All the hurt we have to face here is a necessary part of getting from this world to the next. Last summer, I read a book about the gold rush. It followed certain real individuals as they tried to get to California. Some people went overland and got buried in snow in the mountains or ran out of water in the desert. Some people tried to go through Panama and got stranded in the jungle or on the coast or their boats overturned running the rivers. Both those ways were littered with bones of pack animals and graves of people. But the 49ers kept going because they thought the destination was worth the trip. For most of them, that was a lie. Only a handful of people actually got rich. But the travelers comforted themselves at the end of weary days with the dream of reaching their destination.

Well, my friends, we aren't going to California to dig gold. We are going to heaven to be with Jesus. We are going to the resurrection and the renewal of all things. We are going to a world without pain or sorrow where Jesus will wipe every tear from our eyes and let us live in his presence forever. That goal is worth the journey. God uses the light of the gospel to keep us going. Focusing on the goal gives us hope and strength and comfort. God shines that light on us while we muddle through the darkness here. And then he brings us home.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. Who walks in darkness? Every human being who ever set foot on this planet. Every single one of us was born into a world that is broken and dying. Sin did that. But Jesus conquered sin, so he conquered the damage. When the time is right, he will return and raise the dead and renew this world. That promise is the great light. It's the sun rising on a new day. That light is ours. Cling to it now and forever. Amen.