

Matthew 4.12-17 'Kingdom Light' Transcript

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A little while ago, I think maybe a couple of months now, I took Caitlin through the Clifton Caves. It was the first time I'd been into the cave system since a school trip when I was a teenager many years ago. I presume that some of you, perhaps in your younger years, went through those caves. If you're really keen, you can even get your feet wet at the end, where there's a big internal pool, and you can scoot around the outside. We didn't do that, but you can certainly do that if you want to.

A cave is one of the few places where we can experience true and utter darkness, isn't it? That is, if you're game enough to turn off your light while you're inside the cave and sit in darkness. I remember thinking, as Caitlin and I moved through the tunnel system over at Clifton, imagine if the batteries on our different light sources gave out. Exiting the cave would be nearly impossible. We would be completely without a source of even the faintest light to guide our way. I don't think we would get on very well having to fumble our way through the darkness either. We wouldn't know which way was up or down, or which little cabin to go through. It would be near impossible.

Darkness can sometimes be so intense that we can almost feel it. I remember in the Exodus account when the Lord tells Moses to stretch out his hand that darkness may come upon the land of Egypt as one of the plagues, and it says that it was thick darkness for three days. Darkness can feel like that sometimes. Light and darkness are polar opposites. Light and darkness cannot coexist or mix. Where there is light, there is no darkness; where there is darkness, there is no light.

The Bible employs this creational reality to powerful metaphorical effect as well. The book of speaking of God is overcoming his spiritual darkness. David said of the Lord in 2 Samuel 22, "For you are my lamp, O Lord, and the Lord illumines my darkness." Or as I came across in the book of Daniel the other day, light describes the truth that is in God. Daniel says, "It is he who reveals the profound and hidden things. He knows what is in the darkness and the light dwells with him." Speaking of God's indescribable radiance and glory, the apostle Paul wrote,

"He who is the blessed and only sovereign, the king of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light."

The apostle John described John the Baptist's ministry as the forerunner of Christ to the same effect. "So there came a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify about the light so that all might believe through him." Light, most notably, was used by our Lord Jesus to describe his person and presence. Think of the apostle John as he conveys the words of Christ again, John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Appropriately, this morning we come to consider light in the same manner, and specifically, as I have entitled this message, "Kingdom Light." If you make special notice of verse 16 that we read together in Matthew chapter 4, you'll see that Matthew considers Jesus' move into the north of Israel, into this town called Capernaum. He sees the fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah 9 coming to pass. He quotes there, "The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light. Those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned."

What was the nature of this light in the darkness? The answer comes in the next verse, verse 17. It's all about Jesus' announcement of the presence of the kingdom of heaven now at hand in his person. "The kingdom of heaven is at hand," he says, "repent." What's fascinating about this passage is that it's the first instance of Jesus' announcement of the kingdom in Matthew. His audience is made up of a significant number of Gentiles, that is, non-Jews.

In this, we see a dispelling of the Jewish interpretation of many at the time who expected the coming Messiah to be a political figure for them, to bring them to God's kingdom rule and reign and dominion. But how wrong! Matthew shows from Isaiah that the coming of the Jewish Messiah was, in reality, a Messiah and a king, a savior for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews. You see, there is kingdom light for all without distinction. Christ's kingdom in light is rightly proclaimed to Jew as to Gentile, to male as to female, to slave as to free, to black as to white. No distinction; the kingdom of heaven is not and has never been about race or anything else but it is about grace through faith.

Here in Matthew 4:12-17, and really the wider section through to perhaps verse 25, we have an outworking of what the apostle will later write in Romans 3. "Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised, that is the Jew, by faith and the uncircumcised, that is you and I as Gentiles, through faith is one."

So that's something of what we have in this passage this morning. Moving into the biblical text now, I want to quickly move through the text and pick up the necessary details so we can then piece them together and focus on our big idea of kingdom light. I want you to note with me first of all that Matthew gives us a clear reason for Jesus' withdrawal from the south in Israel and Judea to the north, specifically this town identified as Capernaum there in verse 13. The reason is that John the Baptist, who we've been introduced to and understand something

about now, has been arrested by Herod Antipas, that is the son of who we understand as Herod the Great, the first Herod we're introduced to in the scriptures.

But his son Herod Antipas is now in power in a different way, all the same. John the Baptist has condemned Herod's marriage to his brother's wife. It's a messy situation we can't get into, but essentially Herod Antipas has now married his brother's wife who has left his brother. It's an absolute mess, and John the Baptist is preaching against it. You can read about that in Mark 6:17-20. The point is that hostility towards the preaching of John and Jesus himself is clearly beginning to ramp up. Things are going to escalate quickly.

We see this tension by looking in John's gospel and noticing this reference to the Pharisees who are paying attention to Christ at this time. The Pharisees were the religious leaders of the Jews, and over Jesus' time, they grew more and more hostile to him. In John 4:1-4, we read, "Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself was not baptizing but his disciples were, he left Judea and went away again into Galilee." So Jesus will not spend long, not spend much more of his time in Judea permanently. He will move to the north of Israel, and on his way to move there, he will arrive in his hometown of Nazareth again on the way to Capernaum. But Nazareth is not going to be Jesus' home for much longer.

If you'll notice in verse 13, at the beginning of verse 13, it tells us, "And leaving Nazareth." Just a wee little insert there by Matthew. This is really the understatement of understatements. It's not simply that Christ left Nazareth; you see, Nazareth became no longer safe for Jesus. Now listen to how Luke describes what happened then in Nazareth on his way to Capernaum. "And they got up and drove him out of the city and led him to the brow of a hill on which their city had been built in order to throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went on his way," Luke 4:29.

So Jesus is facing early signs of what would be an ultimate corporate rejection by the Jewish people. Departing then, as verse 13 says, departing from Nazareth, Jesus moves further north to set up his ministry base and home in Capernaum, as the passage describes. Capernaum was a large town, a key center of Galilee in trade and commerce, fishing, and notably was home to a large Gentile non-Jewish population. It was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, one of the lowest freshwater lakes in the world. It even had a Roman garrison with a unit of soldiers, estimated at around 100.

This is not the first time that Christ has been in Capernaum, but it is now his permanent base, and deliberately so. Significantly, Matthew, observe again in verse 13, Jesus moves into Capernaum, bringing him into the region historically identified as the vicinity of Zebulun and Naphtali. That is, two of the northernmost tribes of Israel. There were 12 tribes in Israel, you remember? If you can imagine a map of Israel in the north, you have Asher on the westernmost coast, then you would have Naphtali and Zebulun right there, sort of in the middle, and then Manasseh on the eastern border.

So Zebulun and Naphtali, these two northern land areas, historic land appointments to these two tribes. In the mind of Matthew, as superintended by the Holy Spirit, he sees that by the Messiah's settling into his ministry in these two northern parts of Israel, as opposed to, say, Jerusalem, the religious epicenter of the land in the south, the fact that Christ goes to the north instead is of immense prophetic significance.

This brings us into verse 14, and you'll notice we have this fulfilled formula again. "This was to fulfill." These fulfilled formulas that we've seen already in Matthew form part of the proofs that Matthew gives to demonstrate that Jesus is the expected Messiah promised in the Old Testament scriptures. Here again, Matthew reaches his hands down into the Old Testament and finds in Isaiah expectation of what is taking place here in Jesus' shift. Isaiah is one of the prophets most laden with messianic promises. It shows that Jesus' move to the northern parts of Israel coincides with Isaiah, who foresaw that the Gentiles too in the land would receive God's kingdom light in the Messiah's arrival.

You'll notice in verse 15 there from Isaiah 9, it says, "Galilee of the Gentiles," and that is important to what Matthew is doing here. One question is this: why is the region of Galilee, that is in this northern part of Israel, home to so many Gentiles and non-Jewish people at this time? Why is it called Galilee of the Gentiles, and it had been called like that for quite some time? Why?

The answer lies in Israel's history. You see, the northern tribes of Israel were the first to go into what is called the Assyrian exile. The first exile was part of God's judgment in 722 BC, so 700 years before Christ was born during the Assyrian invasion of the land. Those northern eight tribes, Benjamin and Judah in the south, the northern eight tribes, they went first into exile. After the exile of the northern kingdom, the region was resettled by other peoples who then ended up intermarrying with those Jews who had not been deported. There was like a half-caste race of half-Jews left behind. The Samaritans that you'll read about in the scripture were descendants of these people.

In 2 Kings 17:24, it describes this resettling of the northern land, so Gentiles flooding into the land of Israel. "So the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, Cullath, Avah, Hamath, and Sepharveum, and settled them in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel." So there is the coming in of the Gentiles into the northern parts of Israel. This is why it's called Galilee of the Gentiles.

It is highly significant that Christ moves and sets up his ministry base in a place where we have not only Jews but a large majority of Gentiles as well, because this is telling us something important. Now we can move on to this heading, "Jesus announces the kingdom." So we've set the context; we understand a little bit about what's going on here. Now we can consider the reality and significance of this passage.

I have three points for us to consider regarding verse 17 here. "From that time, Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" The first thing that you need to understand about Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of heaven is that it signifies a

pivotal moment in the redemptive history of fulfillment and inauguration. John the Baptist was the last of the prophets of the Old Testament order. Here in Matthew 4:17, Jesus, in a way of saying, is taking the baton off John and sets out on this final stage of redemptive history that is as a living fulfillment of all that preceded him.

If you can imagine a running track, a 400-meter running track, let's think of one in town. Running on this track are the different figures of the Old Testament—prophets and leaders. They're running on this track, and throughout time, we have a handing on of the baton down through history of revelation. Finally, the baton is handed to John the Baptist, and he will be the last of the Old Testament prophets to run with this baton out in front of them. He is preaching the same message as Christ: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

As John is arrested and taken into prison, his life will soon be over. It's as if he's handing over the baton to Christ, for Christ is the last runner in this race. He will run that final leg. He is the one who will inaugurate the kingdom of God. It was all about Christ, you see.

The timing is crucial. Jesus didn't proclaim the kingdom's arrival until John the Baptist's imprisonment. Jesus didn't announce the kingdom immediately after his baptism. There's some six months to a year that has passed from when we arrive at verse 12 here from when Jesus was baptized and tempted in the previous section. So the timing is crucial. Jesus didn't announce the kingdom when he was 12 years old in the temple. It is only now that Jesus begins to proclaim the kingdom. This is the beginning of his public ministry.

Jesus' ministry has been ministering in private for some time now since his temptation, but this is the beginning of his public ministry. As John fades into the background, Jesus comes forward and begins his ministry. Now he can announce that the kingdom of heaven is truly at hand. All of the Old Testament prophetic expectations captured in this language of the coming kingdom are now present and inaugurated in Jesus' ministry. That's important for us to understand.

A second thing we need to know about the kingdom of heaven is that it focuses upon Christ's person completely. No Christ, no kingdom. There's no knowing the kingdom apart from Christ. There's no knowing or enjoying the reality of the kingdom apart from the saving benefits of Christ. The light that Isaiah 9 spoke of, as quoted here by Matthew, is not known apart from Christ's presence.

I remember on weekday mornings during the school term when I was a teenager, I'd be lying in bed for too long. It's time to get up, get ready for school. The room would be pitch black, curtains closed, and mum would suddenly open the door and turn the light on. Your eyes are bleary, and you wake up, "Time to get ready for school." It's a little bit like that. That's what Christ is to the kingdom of God. He's the light which illuminates this kingdom, which makes the kingdom what it is.

When you look at the context of Isaiah 9, the quotation that Matthew is using here, in the same prophetic cradle is the promise of the coming child. It's a passage that we read every Christmas, and we will again this year in December. You know it well: "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given; the government will rest on his shoulders, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of his government or of peace on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this."

See, it all centers on Christ; it's all about him. Kingdom participation is about following Christ, and that's exactly what we'll find in this next section of scripture we're going to look at next week in verses 18 to 22. As Jesus is calling his first disciples, he's not saying, "Follow the kingdom, follow the law." Jesus is saying, "Follow me; I am the kingdom. Its presence is me; it's me here among you. Follow me." It's all about Christ.

Jesus is radically reshaping the false view that the Messiah's kingdom was essentially something earthly. Rather, the kingdom of God is a spiritual reality; it's not of this earth. Only in its consummation, that is, at the end, shall it be a physical reality as well as a spiritual reality.

Of course, there's a debate among different theological camps among Christians on the nature of what the kingdom looks like in its consummation state after the return of Christ. Many Christians hold, for example, to a thousand-year literal reign amid what they call the millennial reign of Christ on earth with a reinstated memorial animal sacrifice system and a new temple and so on. It's a very popular viewpoint, particularly in the United States, as it is in New Zealand, and I don't need to discuss that any further now but only to emphasize that Jesus clearly understood himself in the very real sense as inaugurating that which was promised in the Old Testament—the rule and reign of God over his redeemed.

Christ brings with him those signs of that kingdom, demonstrating its power and reality. When we witness the miracles of Christ, those are signs of the kingdom to show that the kingdom of darkness is now being overwhelmed by the light of his person.

So you need to understand, first of all, as we considered that the kingdom is a pivotal moment in redemptive history in its announcement. The second thing was to understand that the kingdom focuses entirely on Christ's person. The third thing we need to know about the kingdom of heaven is that it's being announced for the first time by the Jewish Messiah to a population of people who are largely Gentiles. This is highly significant.

Again, we see how radically different and, in fact, wrong the prevailing understanding about the coming messianic kingdom was in Jesus' day. Here Christ is pursuing a people with the kingdom light who were not even expecting the light to come. They were in darkness. They had no revelation, no understanding, no true concept of who God was, and Christ is pursuing them with kingdom light in Capernaum and in Galilee.

In fact, this idea of the kingdom being offered to Jew and Gentile is bookended by Christ at the end of Matthew's gospel. After the resurrection, Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to my brethren and leave for Galilee, and there they will see me." You see, even after his resurrection, he says that he'll meet up with his disciples in Galilee. He was crucified, buried, and raised in Jerusalem in the south, but he will again go to the north in Galilee to the Gentiles as a way of redefining expectations. There he will commission the disciples to take the gospel to all the nations of the world, to Jew and to Gentile.

We shouldn't be surprised how Christ made his ministry reach Jews and Gentiles. Micah 4:1 says, "And it will come about in the last days that the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, and the peoples will stream to it." In Amos 9:11, "In that day I'll raise up the fallen booth of David and wall up its breaches; I'll raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name." A text quoted in the New Testament as evidence of God's ministry to the Gentiles and their inclusion in the kingdom.

All of these vast and varied promises of a time of redemption and restoration in Israel were always to be for the world also, all flowing out of their original promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, "And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

As we close, let's consider three application points to help us bring into our own lives what is here in this passage. You have these on your supplement. The first application point is this: the light of Christ is for all. If there was any obvious point of Christ moving into Capernaum to be among not only Jew but Gentiles and to preach the gospel to them, to bring his light to such a people, it is that we are such a people who need that light, and the light of Christ is for all.

It's a clear and sound implication of this passage that everybody needs Jesus. It's not simply that these particular people in this land dwell in darkness; this is indicative of us all. We are all in a land of darkness. I think of the political carry-on that's around this bill of the treaty principles and so on. I've been doing a bit of research on that and getting into the treaty again just to understand what's going on. It took me back to when I was at university, and I did a couple of papers on New Zealand history, particularly in the missional sense where the missionaries first came to New Zealand.

New Zealand was a land lying in darkness. Māori mythology is paganism; there was no light of the gospel here. The missionaries came, and they labored and labored. It was at least a decade until they began to see fruit of conversion from their labors. Some of the Māori chiefs became believers, and so on. In the end, the Māori were running ahead of the missionaries with the gospel, so that when the missionaries arrived in the South Island of New Zealand, the gospel was already here in front of the missionaries because the Māori had brought it down themselves.

This is the nature of light in the darkness, and the light of Christ is for all. It's not only that when the British came to New Zealand, it was also a work of God in that real sense. God had

plans for New Zealand to bring light to this nation, to establish a nation here which would have many believers who would call upon his name for generations to come.

We all lie in this darkness, and we all desperately need the light of Christ. Your family members need Jesus. Your co-workers and your friends need Jesus. They need his light that they would not walk in darkness any longer. They need Jesus that they would escape the judgment and banishment for sins and hell that is to come. The scripture calls for theirs, as it does for mine and yours, repentance.

Commentator Matthew Henry wrote, "Here light discovers and directs, so does the gospel. The doctrine of repentance is right gospel doctrine. Not only the austere John the Baptist but the gracious Jesus preached repentance. There is still the same reason to do so," he says. The salvation that is received by God's grace through faith alone because of the life that Jesus lived to earn our righteousness before the law, because of his death in which he suffered God's wrath against our sins, we have forgiveness and are transferred out of darkness and into light.

Consider Colossians 1:13: "For he rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." There we have it: in whom we have the redemption, the forgiveness of sins. So we have been transferred, and all need this light.

A second application is this: believers are to live for the kingdom. If we are in Christ, then we are to walk as children of the light. We must put away the deeds of the darkness. We must go to war against the flesh that is in our hearts every day. We must say no to sinful temptation. We must flee to the Savior who loved us, and in our weaknesses and our struggles, we must flee to him. We must remind ourselves that we are part of a kingdom—a kingdom rule that has dawned in Christ, and Christ will not forsake or forget his people, but he is with them even to the end of the age.

In Ephesians 5:8, it says, "For you were formerly in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." There's a great challenge here, isn't there? If the kingdom is very much here and now in Christ, it's inaugurated, awaiting consummation, and he has made us his citizens. Well, that's cause enough for deep reflection on what that looks like for you in your circumstances, where God has placed you, with the people that he's put in your life, with the family he's given you. What does it mean that you're a member of the kingdom in the context in which you and I live?

It's going to affect all areas of our life. It's going to affect how we use our time, how we allocate our time to the different responsibilities we have. It's going to affect how we use the internet; it's going to affect how we use technology. It's going to affect how we talk about others, how we speak to others. It's going to affect how we order our finances; it's going to affect how we order our retirement, for example. All areas of our lives must be ordered in respect to the presence of this kingdom in Christ and our participation in it, in Christ's transferring us from darkness into his light.

So there's a real reflection and challenge there for us. A third and final application is this: it's a very simple one—have you seen the light? Have you seen the light? It's a final solemn challenge coming to us out of this text, the very call of Jesus, one which is personal. I fear often that we know these things, but we don't obey these things. There's a very strong difference. People in the darkness do not think they are in the darkness in the spiritual sense. In fact, when somebody comes to Jesus, or rather to be known by Jesus, first comes a profound awareness of the terrible darkness and depravity that is in their hearts and a realization that awaits for them only judgment and everlasting contempt if they have not Christ as their Savior.

Once we acknowledge the existence of sin, Christ enters our lives, and our hearts no longer feel hopeless due to that realization, but we realize that Christ has made the ultimate sacrifice for us. I wonder if these words resonate with you this morning. I know many of us have been attending church our whole lives—some of you three times my lifetime. Attending church is one thing, but it's a whole other matter entirely as to whether we have obeyed the call of Jesus to repent of our sins before God and put our faith in Christ and his sacrifice.

You see, many in churches know about God without knowing God personally, but it doesn't have to be that way because the light has come. Call upon your God who sees and hears all—the one who knows even your innermost thoughts of your mind—and acknowledge your guilt before him, and only this will do. Theologians call true repentance to God a repentance of contrition. Contrition means sincere remorse. Genuine biblical repentance is deep remorse over guilt towards and respect of God. It's a willingness to repent in turn, having offended God in your life.

Recall the words of Romans, and Paul in Romans 2:4: "Or do you think lightly of the riches of his kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" So I ask again, have you seen the light of Christ? If so, is it leading you to live a life of repentance and faith and hope in Christ? The kingdom is here; it's present. The light has come. Repent and believe the gospel.

Let's pray.