

Light in the Darkness

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- [0 : 0 0] But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come.
- Recognize it? Here's the thing I'm always reminded when I hear movie quotes like that. Finally, banish the darkness.
- And I think that's why we're acutely aware that in our world, heartbreakingly, there are areas that will always be associated with darkness.
- The other night I was watching Arsenal play in the Champions League. Arsenal are arguably, arguably, one of the best teams in world football right now.
- They are watched by millions of people all around the globe. And here's the reason that they have not just a sponsor on the front of their shirt.
- [1 : 1 0] They actually have a sponsor on the sleeve of their shirt. So wide is their global appeal. And if you know this sponsor on the side of the shirt, it's been there for the last three seasons.
- Here it is. It's this one. Visit Rwanda. And I was curious when I saw this. So I googled it. The Rwandan Tourist Board pay £10 million per year for people to see that slogan.
- And you think to yourself, surely a YouTube advert would do, right? But then it begins to dawn on me why they spend £10 million per year trying to convince us that Rwanda is a really lovely place to go.
- And it's because of the first word that pops into my mind as a 90s kid when I hear about Rwanda. The images that come to my mind is genocide, isn't it?
- Heirs of a world that have been blighted by the darkness. Not just Rwanda. You can take your pick. You can think of places like Normandy, forever associated with war.
- [2 : 1 9] Think of places like Hiroshima, forever associated with the bomb. Places in our world that are heartbreakingly always associated with darkness.
- Now try and imagine what it must have been like to live through those things. When you cannot get the thought of death out of your mind.
- When every noise outside sets you on edge. Not a wink's sleep because anxiety has kept you up all night. Living in constant fear.
- Not just about what tomorrow holds. But even whether there will be a tomorrow for you to breathe in the air. Places where hope has gone to die.
- Now if we try and get our heads into that space. We'll begin to enter the world of this text. So one of the reasons I love the Bible.
- [3 : 2 5] What we find here is not Aesop's fables or lofty platitudes. This is to quote Spock. Come to the Bible. This is life, Jim. And exactly as we know it.
- It's a lot of darkness in the Bible. It's a lot of darkness in our world. Because have a look at verses 13 and 15. What do you see? Contagious in these few verses.

What is it full of? It's full of what? Places. Do you see it? Full of places. Most notably, Galilee. And this area known as Zebulun and Naphtali.

Now I'm guessing that for most of us here today, those names mean diddly squat. Yeah? Mean nothing to us. Not a jet to holiday destination anytime soon.

Right? But if you're a Jew in Jesus' day, you hear that word in conversation. You think about this area. And the word that most likely pops into your mind is this.

[4 : 29] Darkness. And to understand why, have a look at where this is on the map.

Take it in. Have a look. Zebulun and Naphtali were the two names of the two most northern tribes of Israel. Way up there in the north.

Now sitting where you are, Zebulun and Naphtali, you are two things. Number one, you are a passageway to and from the nations.

And enemy soldiers treat your land like their living room. And they come back and forth, back and forth. And they are not considerate neighbors. You're used to your land being trashed.

And number two, what you are, is you are a first defense when an invading army attacks Israel from the north. Do you get it? Meaning that you are constantly being what?

[5 : 32] If you live in this area. You are constantly being battered. Can't get insurance on your house. Can't convince people to come visit you on holiday.

And the thing is, one particular time in history, when the mighty superpower of Assyria attacked these guys from the north. And the Bible would tell us it's not just because of politics.

It's actually because of God's judgment on their sin. But these guys roll into town, the mighty Assyrian army, and they demolish the place. No time for mercy. No time for peace talks.

It was brutal. And the Assyrians, as well as trashing the land, they take many of the people of that land back home. And what happens when a big area of land like that becomes vacant?

All sorts of different people move in. Other people from other nations, with their own flavor of God's, their own customs, their own values, all begin to make their way into this land.

[6 : 41] And that's probably the reason why this area is called, verse 15, Galilee of the Gentiles. We're just nations.

All sorts of people are in this land. So bring that all together. This place is not just a place of historical darkness. This place has now become a place of spiritual darkness.

And that's why Jews in Jesus' day look on at this area of Zebulun and Naphtali and Galilee, and they don't feel sorry for them.

No, they look down their noses at the people living here, thinking to themselves that's a second-rate place full of questionable people. Would not go there, even if you paid me.

And why that is a tragedy is that God has constantly called his people throughout the Old Testament story to be a light to the nations.

[7 : 53] All these details are important for where we're ending, by the way, just in case you're keeping up. A light to the Gentiles, the nations. They were to live in such a way and worship in such a way that they would light up the world so that their neighbors from roundabout would look in and say, Hey, tell me more about your God.

How can I come to know him? How good a God do you have that he's called you to live in such a good way? Their light was to be attractive.

But in this day, they are being anything but. So Zebulun, Naphtali, darkness reigns, hope is gone to die.

You with me? Now have a look at verse 12. That backdrop. So we're back in the narrative of Matthew.

What does he say? He says, after John the Baptist had been put in prison. So John's been arrested and thrown, not into a 21st century jail, but he's been thrown in a 1st century dingy dark cell because people didn't like the message that he was preaching.

[9 : 06] So John, if you like, is also experiencing the push of the darkness. Darkness. So darkness is all over these verses.

And Jesus leaves Nazareth and he goes to Capernaum. Now the word withdrew there, do you see it, might make you think that Jesus is doing what?

He's doing a runner. Yeah? Going off grid. Dodging the authorities. Like Harrison Ford from The Fugitives. First thing that comes to my mind. Thinking about a runner.

But Matthew wants you to see, me to see, us to see, that the exact opposite thing is happening. Do you see it in the text? And that's why he quotes from Isaiah 9 here.

And this is the Christmas reading. To these people living in the land of darkness and in the shadow of death. And you've got to take the contours of that language in.

[10 : 08] God says, I see your suffering. And I know your pain. And I see your sin. And I'm promising you that one day in the future, you guys are going to be the first ones to see my light.

That's what's going on here. Jesus is taking the baton, if you like, from John the Baptist.

And he's going to be everything that God's people in this day were called to be and just weren't. What's he going to be? A light to the Gentiles. A light to the nations.

He's making his way into darkness to be the light. Not to hide from the light, but to be the light. And in so doing, do the thing that Israel were called to do and never did be a light to the Gentiles.

And in this gospel so far, this is what we've seen. Matthew has been dropping the clues to set Jesus up. Not just as the true and better Israel.

[11 : 22] But he's also been helping us see that Jesus is Israel's long-anticipated king. Who's come to bring his kingdom of light.

Right? Just follow with me here. Where we've been in this gospel. Follow with me. Jesus has been introduced as king. By the angel before his birth.

Right? Jesus has been worshipped as king. As the wise men made their way from the east. And threw gifts for a king at his feet. Jesus has been affirmed as king at his baptism.

As the father says of the son, In him I am well pleased. He's been tested as king in the wilderness. We thought about this last week. Israel failed 40 years in the wilderness.

Jesus goes to the wilderness. How many days is he there? 40 days. That's what we're meant to see. He's fulfilling everything that Israel were called to do and didn't.

[12 : 28] And now we're about to see him acting as king. The king is here. Isn't it wonderful? We're going to think about this over the next few weeks.

The king is here. And here he is in action. And where is he choosing to go? To kick it all off? He's choosing to go to this land and to this people of no hope and all pain.

And to this people who've got mistakes all over their past. And who've got hurt in their history.

And who maybe look out and they've not got a clue. God's just not even on their radar. Where does Jesus go? He goes here to these people. And that tells you about everything that he's come to do.

I'm here to save you from your darkness. I'm here to be the light that you need. And what's the way into Jesus' kingdom? See verse 17.

[13 : 33] Repent. For the kingdom of God is near. The time that we have left, we're just going to unpack that one phrase.

Repent. For the kingdom of God is near. Which if you're on the ball. You'll know is precisely word for word the phrase. That John the Baptist was preaching back at chapter 3 verse 2.

It's exactly the same. Same message. Different context. John was preaching in the south.

And he was telling. Remember who was listening? Lots of people. But who came? The Pharisees and the Sadducees. Who were the religious looking guys of the day. They needed to repent.

That was the message. And now here's Jesus in the north. Speaking to the Gentiles. People from all sorts of backgrounds. Who've got totally different issues. Different problems.

[14 : 33] From those in the south. But it's the same message that Jesus preaches as John the Baptist. Do you see? Different context. Same message. You've got to repent. You've got to change your mind. You've got to stop going your way.

Come back. Come clean before God of all the ways that you've offended him. And do a 180. Do a U-turn. And start going Jesus' way. And know that when you do that.

You are turning. Not from light to darkness. But you're turning from your darkness to his light. That's why a Christian theologian from years ago.

John Gresham Macken. Insightfully called Christianity. The religion of the broken heart. And it's so important to see that different context.

Same message thing. Because no matter where you're from today. What issues you might be facing. Or what problems you think you have. All of which will be completely different from somebody living on the other side of the street.

[15 : 40] Let alone this city. We've got to see that our biggest problem as human beings. Is the same. One of my best mates is called Andy.

He's the pastor down at Nidri Community Church. Him and his family. Him and Debbie have been there for, I think, coming up 17 years living and working in that scheme. And he always tells me that the biggest problem in our Scream Shanksie is not drugs.

It's pride. Biggest issue in our scheme is not drugs. It's pride. And I always return him the compliment. And I say the biggest problem in Brunsfield is not affordable property prices.

It's not loneliness. It's not school catchment areas. It's not lack of school spaces. It's not a lack of access to a GP. As real as those things might be.

The biggest problem in our area is pride. That we do not want this God. Or we want him on our terms. And this calls us as we hear this call to repent from the most loving individual who has ever existed.

[16 : 48] It reminds us that the opposite of pride is repentance. The fundamental problem of the human condition is not primarily what we say or what we do.

What we have or what we don't have. Rather, it's that we love other things instead of God. And we rob him of the glory that he alone deserves.

But into the bargain as well, this whole darkness thing. Friends, we've offended our God by our sin. But the thing is, living in darkness gets us nowhere. Chasing the things that we think will give us life, it gets us nowhere.

God loves us. He's wooing us out of that. Do you know what? I've just finished. I've finished the autobiography of Bjorn Borg. And the fact that some of you here do not even know who he is, is exactly the point of his book.

Right? Five Wimbledon titles. Some of you will remember this of a generation. Voted the Swedish athlete of the 20th century. He's got the whole world at his feet. But here's what he writes at the peak of his fame.

[17 : 58] And it's a long quote, but it's a belter. So we'll go for it. Okay? He says this in his book at his height. What was I even doing here? I was just a regular guy from, and we'll just go with this just outside Stockholm.

Okay? Now here I was, floating in a pool on Long Island in some luxury mansion, surrounded by people who all wanted something from me.

All I could think was how miserable my life had become. Guys get everything, right? The thoughts grew heavier by the second, and suddenly everything felt ice cold and crushing.

What if I had won that match? Just another victory. Then what? Just sit in that then what for a bit, what he's saying. Making his peace with the fact that if a generation today know him at all, it's for his underwear, not his tennis.

Guy's got an identity crisis. Poured his life into this stuff, and at the end of it, he just thinks, at the end of the book, it's just, I want to go to Ibiza and be my own. All because Jesus offers us something better, friends.

[19 : 07] I'd point that out to you. He says, repent. And the thing is that Jesus' association with darkness won't stop with him entering the land of darkness. This gospel is all about how he will experience the full weight and force of darkness as he dies on the cross for all of our sin and all of our mistakes, bearing the wrath of God on himself.

See, in Matthew's gospel, the aroma of the suffering servant, wherever you are, is always lingering in the air. Jesus, the true light to the Gentiles, come to shine in the darkest of places.

Can I give us two real quick things in terms of application for us as we wrap this up this morning? Here's number one. Do you know what this tells us? It tells us that no place is too dark.

Think about our country. Think about our world. No place is too dark. You know, Christ now lives in us, empowering and enabling us to obey him and to do the good works that he has prepared in advance for us to do.

And as that happens, what will he do through us? Shine. We thought about this in growth groups this week.

[20 : 33] If you were watching the Passion for Life videos about how where we are is not coincidence. We are placed in places by a sovereign God who has got plans to reach the peoples of this world.

Hope you were encouraged by that. But think about it corporately, first of all. Where does God put us? He has put us in this area. To do what?

To shine. And this calls us to upsize our prayers and perhaps stretch our gospel ambitions for more churches to be planted in our nation.

So much of our country there is no gospel witness. And I've become a big fanboy of just every time I see a church being planted or hearing of one. Letting out a little yippee.

Yeah? Grace Mount. One started there. Praise God that there's a church there shining in the darkness. Nidri. Shine. Musselbur. Shine. Cowdenbeeth. For you, Bethany.

[21 : 31] Shine. Dumfries. Shine. Peebles. Shine. Do you see? What he's called us to be is a church. And then take it corporately and think individually.

He has sovereignly placed us, each of us, in places around people for a season, for a reason. Your workplaces. Schools.

Boardrooms. Student digs. Lecture hall. Sports teams. Again, what has he called us to do? What will he do through us as we live our lives of godliness there?

He will shine. Maybe think about it like this. You know who my favorite folks are in the circus? It's the flamethrowers. Fire breathers, rather. Is that what they're called? Fire breathers.

Love these guys. And I've just taken to thinking about speaking about Jesus like this. Ever thought about this? Every time we speak about him, what is happening?

[22 : 32] The light is invading the darkness. Don't underestimate it. Just speaking his name. Talking of him. Again, encouraged this week to ask a spiritual question.

Light is going forth into the darkness. No place is too dark. Wherever he has us today, no place is too dark.

Here's the second thing. No person is too lost. Where does Jesus go to live? Do you see it in the text? Where does he go to spend the majority of his ministry?

In this place called Capernaum. Do you see it? This little fishing village by the Sea of Galilee. Now, who is in Capernaum?

The author of this book, who we'll meet later on, called Levi. Matthew. He's from Capernaum. That's why I think he knows so many details about what's going on.

[23 : 32] His nine to five is that he is a tax collector. He's a Jew who's got rich because he's a dishonest cheat who sold his soul to the Romans.

Which is a royal flush if you're looking to be hated by your own people, right? And you can imagine that he's sitting there counting his coins. As he's doing that, I don't imagine he's thinking to himself, I'm winning at life.

Mountains of mistakes. Rabbit holes of regret. Shame smeared all over his life. A man who is the epitome of Galilee.

And it's as if Matthew can't get over the fact that Jesus came to dwell in his patch. Jesus was willing to step into his darkness.

And to own his mistakes. And to be Matthew's light. And we'll see in a few chapters, call him out of darkness.

[24 : 41] You know, maybe you're here and you're thinking of that friend. Or that colleague. And you think Jesus and them. It's just never going to happen.

Maybe you're the person. You're here this morning. You're thinking God would never be interested in me. Honestly, me and my situation is a total lost cause. Maybe you're drowning in addiction.

Maybe you feel like you're chained to sinful patterns. You think actually emblazoned over my life is no hope. I am Zebulun and Naphtali. Friends, well listen.

Let's close with verse 17. If that's you, this is for you. See the end of verse 17. And this is where we'll close. Do you know what's going to happen at 7.28 tomorrow morning?

It's not difficult whenever you think about it. Dawn. Sunrise. Now this one's from Arthur's seat. If you Google it, this is apparently still one of the top ten places in the UK for a sunrise.

[25 : 46] Isn't that cool? There's something about sunrise, isn't there, that so breathtakingly captures a human heart. I always wonder whether God has weaved these things into the pattern of creation to teach us spiritual truths.

Because you read this and it's as if Matthew is saying, see all those daily dawns since the beginning of creation. They were but the warm-up act to get us as humanity ready for this.

Do you see it? The thing that Jesus brings in this moment and the arrival of Jesus the King brings the dawn of a new day. A new day that will happen at the end of his gospel after the cross when he walks out of that tomb.

And there starts a new day. The coming of Jesus changes this world forever. Do you know what this says? It says whoever you are here today, you don't need to live in the darkness anymore.

Sins can be forgiven. Shame can be covered. Hearts can be transformed. Desires can be redirected. Minds can be renewed. Futures can be rewritten.

[27 : 01] Relationships can be forged and healed. Wounds can be bound up. Why? Because the King of Light is here. And with the arrival of this King, friends, the Kingdom of God has come.

Repent and believe. The Kingdom of God has come near. Let me pray. Proverbs 25.25.

Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land. Father, we thank you for the willingness of your son Jesus to step into our darkness.

Father, we feel the contours of that word in so many different ways. And so, Lord, I pray that your spirit would bring the healing balm of his gospel to our souls just now.

Father, we thank you for your words. Thank you that we have it in our language. We can pick it up, read, and understand. But, Father, may even today, for some people here, may the first day be the first day of salvation.

[28 : 21] Father, thank you that there's none like Jesus. As we look to him today. And we pray all of these things in his name. Amen.