

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit

If you are unfamiliar with the Gospels, the withdrawal of Jesus into Galilee, after the arrest of John the Baptist, could look like Jesus was running scared... but the truth is, the move of Jesus into Galilee was a calculated move, a move that served as evidence, not of His fear, but of His Lordship... the withdrawal into Galilee, seen in our Gospel text, was actually the fulfillment of a prophecy made 7 centuries before the birth of Jesus and gives us insight into why Jesus withdrew in the first place

Listen again to verse 13 of our Gospel text... “and leaving Nazareth He went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled” ... The text makes it clear that the withdrawal of Jesus wasn’t based in fear, but was the fulfillment of a prophecy made centuries before... and while that’s fun information for the Bible nerds, how does Jesus withdrawing into Galilee, fulfill a prophecy at all

Well, from the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, down through the years to Saul, David and Solomon, the people of Israel were always a united people... Sure they had their problems and more than their fair share of squabbling, but for over 1000 years, they remained together, they remained God’s united people... but after the death of Solomon, Israel was split into two rival factions... 10 tribes formed a northern Kingdom, and two tribes formed a southern one... and by the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, the people of God had been divided for 200 years... and while that division grieved the prophet, what he witnessed first-hand, was most assuredly worse

Isaiah lived through a time when the nation of Assyria swept into Israel from the north, they conquered and enslaved the northern 10 tribes, murdering anyone who stood against them... and in the aftermath of that invasion, 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel were taken into exile, they were lost to history, removed from the land... But even as darkness enveloped the lands Zebulun and Naphtali, Isaiah prophesized that a day would come when those conquered lands would one day, finally, behold a great light

You see, after the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew to the exact place where Isaiah said He would... He withdrew and entered a land of deep darkness, a land that had not seen the light of God for 7 centuries... the withdrawal of Jesus into Galilee wasn’t random or done in self-preservation... no, the withdrawal of Jesus into Galilee was a rescue mission, 7 centuries in the making... the Messiah, the light of the world, traveled into the conquered lands of the north, into the ancestral lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, to rescue his wayward children from enslavement and darkness

His motivation for withdrawing into these lands, was to bear the light of His life to a people that were trapped in darkness for centuries... to reconcile a wayward people, a people who had dwelt in the shadow of death for long enough... And when Jesus showed up, the darkness that had consumed the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, began to recede... day was breaking upon the people, upon a land that had only known the night... and what's amazing is that the dawning of the light had a very distinct sound, a sound that our Gospel text, allows us hear it

From that time Jesus began to preach saying, "repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand"... the sound of Jesus entering the land of deep darkness, was the sound of a call to repentance, and an explanation as to why they should... You see, when Jesus said "repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand, He's saying something like this... watch out, a train is coming and your standing on the tracks... repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand, is a warning to the darkness in the land, yes... but it's also a warning to the darkness found in the hearts of men... God was now present in the land and He would expel the darkness wherever it was found

Christ, the light of the world, was walking in the darkness, pronouncing judgment upon darkness itself... but He was also telling those trapped in darkness, that He was providing them a way out... Christ was telling everyone, repent, renounce the darkness that you live in, renounce the darkness that lives in you and turn and face the light... And according to the Gospels, that was something Jesus never stopped preaching

Jesus wasn't here to coddle sin, He was here to call you out of it... He wasn't here to be the latest guru with a new set of teachings... no, Jesus came to this Earth to fight sin and death, He came to establish a Kingdom of light in a world enveloped in darkness... and whether the darkness was in the land or in your heart, He came to overthrow it, to root it out wherever it might be found... and the implications of His mission and ministry are woven into the fabric of what it means to be His disciples

You see, in verse 19 Jesus walks up to Simon Peter and Andrew and says, "follow me and I will make you fishers of men" and a little later Jesus makes a similar statement to James and John... and that command, follow me, is such an iconic phrase that everyone recognizes it right away as the words Christ spoke to His first disciples... But that command, "follow me", the expectation that you will drop whatever you're doing and follow Christ, wasn't just for Peter, James and John... it's the expectation of every single person that calls Jesus Christ, Lord... whatever else it means to be a disciple of Jesus, whatever nuances and subtleties it may contain, there is one central feature of being a disciple of Jesus... a disciple of Jesus walks with Jesus, a disciple of Jesus goes where Jesus goes

And in the beginning, I think the disciples did that, they followed Jesus everywhere He went, they found themselves wherever Jesus was... but what they learned along the way, was that Jesus went led them into places they never imagined going... the disciples walked into the darkness of Samaria, into the darkness of Zebulan and Naphtali, they found themselves confronting the darkness that dwelled in their own hearts... because they followed Jesus, the disciples always found themselves confronting strongholds of rebellion and sin, and they walked with Him every step of the way... and we can be hard on the disciples, focusing on the times they fumbled the ball, focusing on the times they didn't say or do the right things... but from the time they were called, they followed Jesus everywhere He went... and that's a truth we need to hear

A Disciple of Jesus doesn't know what new darkness tomorrow holds, what new calamity is just around the corner... A disciple has no assurances where the Lord will lead us, no idea what dark place He will call us to inhabit with Him... a disciple rarely knows any of that... but knowing which direction we go next, knowing what tomorrow holds, is not a mark of a disciple... A disciple may have little to no knowledge of where we are going, but a disciple knows exactly who it is we follow... We can't see tomorrow from today, but we can see Christ every second between then and now... and I cannot tell you what a relief and hope that has been for me over the years

Eva and I have been in situations that were as dark as I ever hope to see... Eva worked with a ministry in Jackson, that befriended strippers and prostitutes, in the hopes they would encounter Jesus, and leave the darkness... I spent the better part of a decade ministering to youth's charged with drug crimes, showing them Christ, pointing to the light every single chance I got... and often times the world pushed back, as the world does... the world despised us for being a light in the darkness and sure that was uncomfortable, but the scorn of the world is what a disciple of Jesus should expect

But what does a disciple do when the opposition doesn't come from the world or from strangers... what does a disciple do when it comes from a direction you never saw coming... what does a disciple do when the attack comes from your own family... How does a disciple of Jesus respond, when you are belittled and lied about by those who share your last name... How does a disciple respond when someone you love, rejects you and pushes you away and then blames you for the separation... How does a disciple respond when those who are supposed to love you most, abandon you

What does a disciple do when their adopted family, the Church, hurts them... How do you bear those in the Church who would rather gossip about you, who would rather form a negative opinion about you and then never tell you they had a grievance... and then behind closed doors, they smear your name and encouraged others to follow suit

For years, my family endured things like that... we fought ghosts and whispers, half-truths and outright lies... we felt discouraged and beaten down by the ones we were supposed to be able to trust... And for years, the Lord listened to our prayers, the Lord spoke to us in miraculous ways... He brought people into our lives that encouraged us and told us the truth about ourselves... in conditions that could have spoiled our hearts and dragged them into the darkness, God kept our hearts in the light

And for years, we prayed that God would show us a way out... Instead, what God showed us, was Himself... Instead of leading us out, God supplied us with everything we needed to stay where we were... For years, God did not take the problems away from us, instead God bore them with us, He forged our hearts to be united to His... God bore for us what we could not bear ourselves

God showed us in one of the darkest periods of our lives, as clearly as I have ever seen, just how good of a Father He was... and while we learned many things during that time, the one that sticks out the most, is that a disciple of Jesus moves when Jesus moves and a disciple of Jesus stops when Jesus stops... A disciple inhabits the places His master has directed Him to inhabit and then relies upon His master to provide... That is what it means to follow Jesus, that is what it means to be a disciple

And I'm not saying these things because I think my family provides some absolute model for following Jesus and your doesn't... my family has areas of our lives that are dumpster fires just like yours... the reason that I brought up all those personal examples is because being a disciple is hard, but it's simple... When Jesus says, "follow me", it's easy to hear and understand, but it's hard to do... and for 2000 years, disciples of Jesus have been finding out just how true that statement is

Jesus looked at the disciples, He looked at James and John and Peter and Andrew and said, follow me... and for 2000 years, His disciples have heard the same two words, every single one of us has been issued the same command... Jesus looks at you and says, follow me... and if we are disciples of Jesus, then we will do exactly that