

Jesus begins to Preach

About a year elapsed between the temptation of Jesus in the desert and His return to Galilee. Events of that year are recorded in the first four chapters of the gospel of John. In Judea during those months, Jesus experienced considerable opposition and hostility, and John the Baptist was cast into prison.

Jesus then withdrew from Judea to Galilee, not only because of the opposition He had been experiencing but primarily because the prophet Isaiah had foretold His Galilean ministry. Nazareth in Galilee had been Jesus' boyhood home, but now He decided to make the city of Capernaum His home and the headquarters of His work. It was centrally located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and on the road from Damascus to the Mediterranean Sea, in the territory that had been assigned to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali when the Israelites occupied the land under Joshua. Some of Jesus' relatives and disciples also lived in Capernaum.

Galilee was populated by many Gentiles in addition to the Jews who lived there. Not all of the Canaanites had been driven out when Israel occupied the land. Furthermore, in the eighth century B.C. the Assyrians under TiglathPileser had taken many Galileans into captivity and had replaced them with Assyrians and other Gentiles. This mixture of Jews and Gentiles had its effect upon the religious life of the people. The God of Israel was not unknown there, but the worship of God had departed considerably from the forms of worship that the Law of Moses called for. The people were "living in darkness," as Isaiah had foretold.

Darkness symbolises wickedness, ignorance, and unbelief. Most of the people did not know the way of salvation. But then Jesus, the Light of the world, came to Galilee. He proclaimed the saving truth throughout that land. He attracted huge crowds of people, who followed Him from place to place to hear Him preach and see Him perform miracles.

The message Jesus proclaimed was the same as John the Baptist's message: "*Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" Repentance implies a radical change of heart and mind, followed by a corresponding change in behaviour. Jesus' call to repentance was an invitation as well as a command. The people could not respond positively to that invitation unless the Holy Spirit prompted such a response through the power of the gospel. To repent and believe the gospel is not a decision anyone can make on his own.

The initial enthusiasm of the Galileans did not last for long. Many deserted Jesus when they learned that he was unwilling to be the kind of Messiah they wanted. Finally, Jesus pronounced this verdict over the people of Capernaum: "*If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day,*" (11:23). Sodom was synonymous with wickedness, but Jesus said Capernaum deserved a fate worse than what Sodom and Gomorrah experienced (Genesis 19).

Their opportunities to know the Saviour were greater, for He was bodily present among them and taught in their synagogue and in their streets. That made their guilt in rejecting Christ all the greater and all the more inexcusable.

How sad it is today when those who grow up in a land of religious liberty such as Australia, and who perhaps are even baptised and instructed in God's Word, finally deny the Saviour and go their own way! We must continue proclaiming the same message John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed: "*Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"