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Old Testament: Isaiah 9:1-4

Context: Isaiah speaks to people who feel like they are living in the dark - worn down by fear, loss, and bad news - and announces that God is about to turn the lights on.

THE RIGHTEOUS REIGN OF THE COMING KING

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun (ZEB-byoo-luhn) and the land of Naphtali (NAF-tah-lee), but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 9:1-4 is a “pivot” passage: it moves from **gloom to hope**. It says that a region humiliated by invasion and oppression (Zebulun and Naphtali, the north) will be honored again. The imagery is simple and strong:

- **Darkness becomes light** (a new dawn for people who have been “walking” in it).
- **Smallness becomes growth** (a nation enlarged; joy increased).
- **Oppression becomes freedom** (the yoke and rod are broken).
- **The change is God-driven** (not wishful thinking - it is presented as divine action).

Christians often read this as part of the lead-in to the famous “For a child has been born...” passage (Isaiah 9:6-7), which is why it shows up around Advent and Christmas.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before (Isaiah 8)

Isaiah 8 is heavy. Judah is scared of regional powers, and leaders are tempted to solve fear with politics, alliances, and “anything but trusting God.” **Isaiah warns that Assyria - the very power many think will stabilize things - will become overwhelming.** The chapter ends with a bleak picture: people looking for guidance in the wrong places, spiraling into distress, and seeing only “darkness” and “anguish” (8:21-22).



So, when 9:1 starts with “Nevertheless...” (or “But”), it is a deliberate turn: **the darkness isn’t the last word.**

The Passage Itself (Isaiah 9:1-4)

- **9:1** names the bruised place: the northern tribal territories (later associated with **Galilee**). The insult becomes a setup for honor.
- **9:2** takes the emotional reality (darkness) and announces reversal (light).
- **9:3** describes the fruit of that reversal: joy like harvest-time or post-battle relief.
- **9:4** explains what changed: oppression is shattered “as on the day of Midian” (a callback to Gideon’s unlikely victory - God wins in a way that can’t be credited to human strength).

Immediately After (Isaiah 9:5-7 and beyond)

- **9:5** continues the liberation imagery (boots, garments of war).
- **9:6-7** gives the famous royal/child prophecy: a ruler whose reign brings justice and peace.
- **9:8–10:4** swings back into warning and accountability: hope doesn’t erase consequences for injustice; it calls Israel/Judah to repent and live differently.

Broader Book Context (Isaiah as a whole)

Isaiah is both **diagnosis and promise**:

- **Diagnosis**: worship without justice, leadership corruption, exploitation of the vulnerable, empty spirituality.
- **Promise**: God will judge evil **and** preserve a remnant; God will ultimately restore Zion; the nations will be drawn toward God’s peace.
The theological pulse is: **God is holy, God is faithful, and God’s rescue is moral (it changes a people), not just political (it changes a headline).**

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Isaiah’s ministry is usually placed in the late 8th century BCE, when the Assyrian Empire was expanding aggressively. The northern kingdom (Israel) and the wider Levant were being crushed, reorganized, deported, and economically exploited. Zebulun and Naphtali sit in that northern corridor - often the first to get hit when empires roll through.

So, Isaiah 9:1-4 speaks directly into a real geopolitical trauma: invasion, occupation, forced tribute, and social collapse. It is not abstract “hope talk.” It is hope **aimed at a map location** and at a people carrying generational fear.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

A helpful simplified timeline for where this sits:

- **c. 740–700 BCE**: Isaiah’s prophetic ministry spans major upheaval in Judah and the region.
- **Mid-late 730s BCE**: Assyrian pressure intensifies; northern territories are invaded in waves.
- **722 BCE**: Samaria falls; the northern kingdom collapses; deportations increase.
- **Post-722 BCE**: Judah remains, but under severe pressure, tribute demands, and internal instability.



Isaiah 9:1-4 fits the emotional landscape of those decades: people living under the shadow of a superpower, wondering if God has abandoned them - and Isaiah says, “No. This darkness is not permanent.”

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original Language and Dating

- **Language:** Hebrew (with poetic-prophetic style).
- **Dating:** The material is associated with Isaiah’s 8th-century BCE context, though the book as a whole reflects a long editorial history as Isaiah’s words were preserved and shaped for later generations.

Major Stages of English Translation (very brief)

- Hebrew texts preserved and standardized over time (Masoretic tradition).
- Greek translation (Septuagint) shaped how later Jewish and Christian communities heard Isaiah.
- Latin (Vulgate) influenced medieval Western Christianity.
- English tradition: early English Bibles, the KJV era, then modern translations drawing on broader manuscript scholarship and contemporary language.

Theologically Significant Word Choices (places English “hides” layers)

- **“Nevertheless / But / In the past... in the future...” (9:1):** The Hebrew is tricky and translations differ. The main idea is consistent: *former humiliation, coming honor*. The shift itself is the message: God’s “future tense” interrupts despair.
- **“Darkness” and “light” (9:2):** More than mood. It is a total-life metaphor - safety, truth, leadership, spiritual clarity, and public wellbeing.
- **“Oppression / yoke / rod” (9:4):** These are tangible domination images: forced labor, economic extraction, fear-driven compliance. Not just “I feel oppressed,” but “a system is on my neck.”
- **“As on the day of Midian” (9:4):** Translation is straightforward, but meaning is layered: deliverance by unexpected means; God overturning power dynamics.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Metaphorical Reading (scholarly, but grounded)

Isaiah 9:1-4 functions like a “theology of reversal”:

- **Places written off become places revisited.**
Zebulun and Naphtali were borderlands - vulnerable, overlooked, first to suffer. Isaiah says: the story starts there.
Metaphor: God often begins renewal at the edges - where dignity has been eroded.
- **Light is not denial; it is direction.**
The people are still described as walking in darkness - meaning this is lived reality. Light means a new orientation: a visible path, not instant perfection.
- **Joy is communal, not private.**
Harvest joy and liberation joy are shared experiences. The passage imagines relief you can hear in the streets.



- **Freedom is the breaking of a yoke, not just a pep talk.**

The “yoke” is systemic pressure. Metaphor: God’s salvation includes loosening what binds people economically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Modern-Day “Darkness” That Still Looks Like a Yoke

Without getting partisan, the “yokes” in a community like Grant County can include:

- economic stress that keeps families in survival mode
- addiction cycles and the quiet shame that isolates people
- loneliness (especially among seniors and young adults)
- local institutions stretched thin (schools, healthcare, social services, churches)
- the sense that “nothing changes here” or “we are forgotten”

Isaiah’s message is not “pretend everything is fine.” It is: **God is not finished with places that feel overlooked.** And the promise carries an implication: if God is breaking yokes, God’s people should not be in the yoke business - we should be in the loosening business.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Be honest about the darkness - without worshiping it.**

Name what is heavy in your community and your life, but refuse to make despair your theology.

- **Practice “light-bearing” behaviors.**

Light, practically, looks like: truth-telling, consistency, presence, and showing up when it would be easier to disappear.

- **Increase joy by increasing dignity.**

Joy grows where people feel seen and valued. That can be as practical as hospitality, rides, meals, mentoring, job-network help, or simply consistent friendship.

- **Help break yokes, not just comfort people under them.**

Charity matters. But Isaiah’s image pushes beyond charity into liberation: reducing burdens, removing barriers, addressing what keeps people stuck.

- **Remember the Midian principle: God works through “unlikely” means.**

Don’t wait for the perfect plan, the perfect leader, the perfect funding. Start where you are with what you have.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *What are modern “yokes” people carry quietly (economic, emotional, spiritual, relational)? Which ones can a church realistically help loosen?*
- *“As on the day of Midian” points to an unexpected deliverance. When have you seen meaningful change come from unlikely people or small beginnings?*
- *What is one specific “light-bearing” action our class could take this week that would be small enough to do - but real enough to matter?*



Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23

Context: After John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus withdraws to Galilee, fulfills Isaiah's prophecy about light dawning in darkness, begins preaching repentance, and calls His first disciples to join His mission.

JESUS MINISTRY

Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun (ZEB-byoo-luhn) and Naphtali (NAF-tah-lee), so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.”

Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People

Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

OVERVIEW

Matthew 4:12-23 is a pivot point: Jesus moves from preparation (baptism, temptation) into public ministry. The passage has four big movements:

- **A change of location and moment** (John arrested; Jesus relocates to Capernaum).
- **A prophecy frame** (Isaiah: light in darkness, hope in a hard place).
- **A core message** (Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near).
- **A core method** (He calls ordinary workers, forms a community, teaches and heals).

In short: the King arrives, the Kingdom is announced, and the mission starts with people, not platforms.



BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately before (Matthew 3:13-4:11)

- **Jesus is baptized** (3:13-17): public identification with God's purposes, and the Father names Him "beloved Son." That identity matters because...
- **Jesus is tested in the wilderness** (4:1-11): He refuses shortcuts to power, spectacle, and control. He chooses obedience over image management.

So when He begins preaching and calling disciples in 4:12-23, He is doing it as the Son who already refused to build the Kingdom the world's way.

This passage (Matthew 4:12-23)

- **John is arrested**: the cost of truth-telling and the political threat of prophetic speech is now on the table.
- **Jesus relocates to Capernaum (Galilee)**: this is not random. Matthew frames it as purposeful fulfillment of Isaiah.
- **Jesus preaches**: "Repent" is not mere moral self-improvement. It is a reorientation: turn from one way of life toward God's reign.
- **Jesus calls**: fishermen are invited into a new vocation: "fishers of people." The Kingdom spreads through relationship and formation.
- **Jesus ministers**: teaching, proclaiming, healing. Word and deed together.

Immediately after (Matthew 4:24-25 into chapters 5-7)

- **Crowds gather** (4:24-25): His fame spreads because the Kingdom is felt, not just argued.
- **Sermon on the Mount begins** (5-7): Matthew places Jesus' flagship teaching right after this summary, as if to say: "Here is what the Kingdom actually looks like in daily life."

Broader narrative and theological context of Matthew

Matthew is constantly showing:

- Jesus as **Messiah** (fulfilling Israel's story and Scriptures).
- Jesus as **true Israel** (tested in the wilderness, faithful where Israel stumbled).
- Jesus as **King** whose reign is upside-down: humility, mercy, justice, integrity.
- Discipleship as the normal response: not admiration, but following.

This passage is where Matthew transitions from "Who is Jesus?" to "What does it mean to follow Him?"

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

- **Galilee vs Judea**: Galilee was often viewed by elites as less "pure" or less prestigious, yet it was a crossroads region with trade, mixed populations, and constant cultural friction. Starting there signals a Kingdom that does not begin with the powerful center.



- **John's arrest:** In the Gospels, John clashes with Herod Antipas and is imprisoned. Politically, prophetic critique is dangerous because it threatens legitimacy. Spiritually, it also tests the people: will they treat repentance as a season, or a way of life?
- **Roman imperial reality:** The "kingdom" language lands in a world where Caesar's rule was backed by force and taxation. Jesus announcing a different "kingdom" is spiritual, but it is never less than political in its implications: it forms a different kind of people with different loyalties.
- **Fishing economy:** Fishing on the Sea of Galilee was real work: early mornings, physical labor, partnership networks, and dependence on markets and regulation. Jesus calling fishermen is a call out of ordinary life into a risky, communal mission.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **Likely ministry period:** Many scholars place the start of Jesus' public ministry in the late 20s AD (often around AD 27-30), with the crucifixion commonly dated around AD 30 or 33 (dates debated).
- **Sequence in Matthew:**
 1. Baptism (3:13-17)
 2. Temptation (4:1-11)
 3. John arrested; Jesus begins ministry in Galilee (4:12-17)
 4. Calling first disciples (4:18-22)
 5. Early Galilean ministry summary (4:23) leading into Sermon on the Mount (5-7)

So, Matthew 4:12-23 functions like "Week 1 of the movement."

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original language and dating

- **Language:** Matthew was written in **Greek**.
- **Dating:** Often dated somewhere in the **late first century** (commonly around AD 70-90), though proposals vary.
- Matthew draws heavily from the **Jewish Scriptures** (often quoted via the Greek Septuagint), which shapes how he frames fulfillment.

Major stages of English translation (high level)

Early English tradition includes **Wycliffe** (based on Latin), then **Tyndale** (from Greek/Hebrew), then major lineage streams through the **KJV** tradition, and later modern translations drawing from broader manuscript evidence and updated scholarship (RSV, NIV, NRSV, ESV, CSB, etc.). The key takeaway: modern translations often reflect both improved access to manuscripts and different translation philosophies (word-for-word vs thought-for-thought).

Theologically significant word choices in this passage

- **"Repent"**
More than feeling bad. It is "change your mind/heart," a reorientation of your whole direction. Some translations preserve "repent," others emphasize "turn back." The layered meaning matters: Jesus is not recruiting fans; He is inviting transformed people.
- **"Kingdom of heaven"**
Matthew often says "heaven" where other Gospels say "God" (a reverent Jewish way of



speaking). It does not mean "go to heaven later" as the primary idea. It means God's reign and authority breaking in now.

- **"Has come near" / "is at hand"**

Not merely future. The Kingdom is approaching, pressing close, becoming accessible. It creates urgency and hope: something has changed.

- **"Follow me"** This is apprenticeship language. Not "agree with me," but "attach your life to mine."

- **"Fishers of people"**

It is metaphor, but not cute. It is a total vocation shift: the same skills (patience, teamwork, persistence, reading conditions) get re-aimed toward people and restoration.

- **"Healing" and "disease" language**

Matthew pairs proclamation with repair. The Kingdom is announced and embodied: teaching and healing belong together.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

A strong metaphorical reading (without denying the historical realities) sees this as a blueprint for how light moves through a community:

1. **Crisis creates a hinge moment**

John is arrested; something closes. Jesus responds by beginning something new. In modern terms: when a trusted voice is removed, when an institution fails, when cynicism rises, the Kingdom response is not retreat into bitterness but a deeper commitment to truth and mercy.

2. **The light starts in "Galilee" places**

"Galilee of the Gentiles" suggests mixed, overlooked, complicated places. In Grant County terms: not the polished places where everything is already resourced and healthy, but the neighborhoods with real stress: job instability, addiction impacts, loneliness, strained families, underfunded schools, aging infrastructure, and the quiet shame people carry. The Gospel repeatedly starts where life is hardest.

3. **Repentance as community reorientation**

Repentance can look like a whole county shifting its default instincts:

- from blame to responsibility,
- from gossip to presence,
- from "those people" to "our neighbors,"
- from performative religion to practiced mercy.

4. **Discipleship is vocational, not theoretical**

Jesus does not begin with a committee, a brand, or a building campaign. He begins with people who will learn His way and carry it into their networks. In a small-town context, this matters because relationships are the currency: the Kingdom spreads through trust, consistency, and showing up.

5. **Teaching + healing = credible witness**

Teaching without compassion becomes harsh. Compassion without truth becomes vague. Matthew holds them together. In local terms: sound teaching paired with tangible care (food pantry, visitation, grief support, mentoring, addiction recovery partnerships, rides to appointments, showing up at ballgames and hospital rooms).



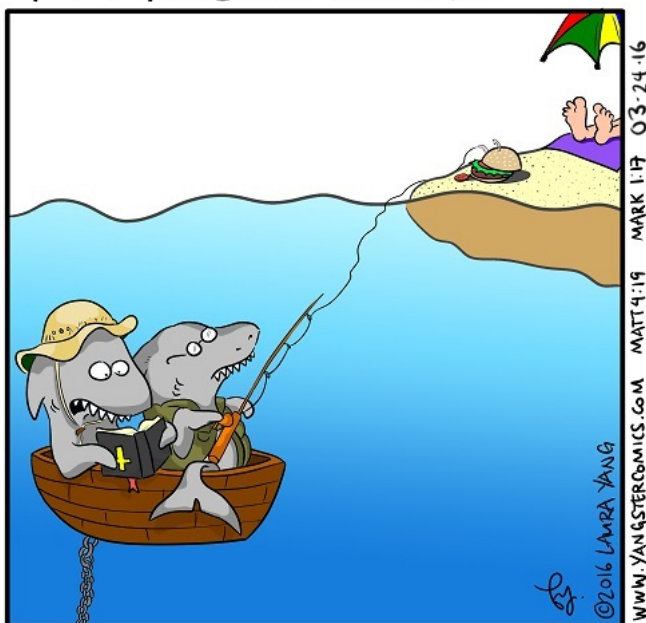
HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **When the world feels darker, do not wait for ideal conditions. Begin.**
Jesus begins in the shadow of John's arrest. Faithfulness is not postponed until life is stable.
- **Treat repentance as a direction, not a shame spiral.**
It is not "I am terrible." It is "I am turning around."
- **ask: Adopt a discipleship mindset, not a spectator mindset.**
"Follow me" is the call. In practice: a weekly rhythm of prayer, Scripture, service, generosity, and relational repair.
- **Start where you actually are.**
Fishermen do not become disciples by leaving humanity behind; they bring their skills into a new purpose. Your work, your routines, your relationships are the primary mission field.
- **Hold word and deed together.**
Speak truth with humility. Practice mercy with consistency. Be the kind of Christian whose presence makes people a little less afraid of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *When you hear "repent," what emotions come up (guilt, relief, resistance, confusion)? What do you think Jesus intends it to produce?*
- *What is the difference between "believing in Jesus" and "following Jesus" in daily life?*
- *Jesus called working people mid-routine. What routines in your life might be the exact place God wants to meet you?*

Yin + Yangster by Laura Yang



"Somewhere in here Jesus says
he'll make us fishers of men."



Addendum

Heroes

First: are heroes “leaders without egos”?

Broadly — yes.

But with one important refinement that actually strengthens your point:

Heroes aren’t people without egos; they’re people who refuse to be *led* by them.

That distinction matters because:

- Ego doesn’t disappear — it gets *put in its place*
- The hero isn’t invisible or passive
- The hero acts, but doesn’t need credit, dominance, or applause

Why “hero” is such a loaded word now

In modern culture, “hero” has been flattened into:

- celebrities
- strongmen
- culture warriors
- people who dominate space

Whereas the older, deeper sense of hero meant:

- *someone who shoulders responsibility without demanding recognition*
- *someone who stands in the breach and then steps back*
- *someone whose authority comes from trust, not volume*

Rethinking Heroes: Light, Calling, and Quiet Courage

When we hear the word “**hero**,” most of us picture someone strong, visible, decisive — someone who steps forward, takes charge, and wins. Heroes are often imagined as larger-than-life figures: warriors, kings, leaders with confidence and authority.

But when we look closely at today’s scriptures, that picture starts to fall apart.

1. Isaiah 9:1–4 — Light without spectacle

Isaiah describes a people:

- walking in **darkness**
- living in a **land of deep shadow**
- burdened and oppressed

And what changes everything?

Not a hero riding in with force.

Not a powerful ruler asserting control.



Instead:

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

The light doesn't overpower the darkness — it **reveals**.

It doesn't dominate — it **guides**.

This kind of heroism isn't about ego or conquest. It's about presence. Light doesn't shout. It doesn't argue. It simply shows what is already there and makes a new way visible.

2. Matthew 4:12–23 — Heroes who don't look like heroes

Matthew shows us how that light actually enters the world.

Jesus does not begin in Jerusalem.

He doesn't gather elites or authorities.

He doesn't claim a throne.

Instead:

- He goes to **Galilee**
- He walks along the **shore**
- He calls **fishermen**

Ordinary people. Working people. People with calloused hands, not polished resumes.

And the call is strikingly simple: *"Follow me."*

No speeches.

No guarantees.

No promises of power.

Just a direction — and a relationship.

*This is where our usual image of heroes really gets challenged. Jesus doesn't recruit heroes. He **creates them**, not by inflating egos, but by reorienting lives.*

3. A different definition of hero

This brings us to a quieter, truer definition of heroism — one that fits both Isaiah and

Matthew: *A hero is not someone without ego, but someone who refuses to be led by it.*

Biblical heroes are rarely impressive at first glance. They:

- listen before they speak
- act without demanding credit
- lead without needing to dominate
- serve without keeping score



They don't make themselves the center of the story — they respond to a call that *isn't about them*.

4. What this means for us

If that's true, then heroism today probably doesn't look dramatic.

It looks like:

- choosing compassion over certainty
- showing up where it would be easier to stay silent
- offering light without insisting on control
- following the call to love, even when it costs comfort or status

The world still wants flashy heroes. Scripture keeps offering something else: **faithful people willing to walk toward the light and invite others along.**

5. Questions:

- *Who were your heroes growing up?*
- *Who are your heroes now?*
- *Do we confuse heroism with power or certainty?*

Faith as lived response, not transactional reward.

What I'm sensing (even if you don't want to name it yet) is this:

In rural communities, **heroism has traditionally been local, relational, and uncelebrated** — and that kind of heroism is quietly disappearing from the stories we tell ourselves.

Not gone. Just unnamed.

- Neighbors who showed up without being asked.
- People who carried responsibility without recognition.
- Faith lived as steadiness, not spectacle.

That's a depth worth taking seriously — and it lines up *perfectly* with Isaiah's light and Jesus walking the shoreline, not the palace halls.

Poor In Spirit

In *everyday* language, "**poor in spirit**" sounds like:

- weak faith
- bad theology
- not believing enough
- being spiritually lazy or ignorant

If that were the meaning, then yes — *why would that be blessed?*

But that's **not** what Jesus is saying.

What Jesus actually means

- "Poor in spirit" does **not** mean *poor beliefs*.
- It means **poor in self-reliance before God.**



- **Poor in spirit means knowing you don't bring spiritual wealth to the table.**

It's the opposite of:

- "I've got God figured out."
- "I'm doing better than most people."
- "I've earned my standing."

Another example:

- The **tax collector** who says, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner*" goes home justified.
- The **Pharisee** who lists his religious credentials does not.

Same theme. Different story.

God can fill empty hands. He can't fill clenched fists.

Someone who knows they are spiritually needy:

- is open
- is teachable
- is honest
- isn't pretending

That person is "blessed" not because they are weak — but because they are **available**. They are not pre-judging.

Poor in spirit doesn't mean someone has bad beliefs or no faith. It means they know they need God. Jesus isn't blessing ignorance — He's blessing humility.

It's not about having less faith. It's about having less pride.

Why Jesus puts this Beatitude first

Jesus starts here because **every other Beatitude depends on it.**

If I'm not poor in spirit:

- I won't really mourn
- I won't be meek
- I won't hunger for righteousness
- I won't be merciful