

A Light Shining In the Darkness

Isaiah 9:1-7

Close your eyes. Squeeze them tight. Imagine TOTAL darkness. No beacon to show the way. Just dark. Imagine the lights go out and they don't come back on. The minutes turn into hours, the hours into days, and then weeks and months and years. This is what the Bible says it was like for the southern kingdom of Judah in the late 8th Century BC during the ministry of Isaiah the prophet.

You can open your eyes now. I don't want you falling asleep. No, Judah hadn't run out of olive oil for its lamps. There wasn't some miraculous eclipse blocking the light of the sun over Israel. It is a description of how things were politically, economically, and spiritually. Spiritually, the people had turned their backs on God, and were worshipping idols. Politically, they had sought the help of wicked earthly allies who had since betrayed them, and threatened to wipe them off the map. The Assyrians had already erased the northern kingdom of Israel from history, and now the Assyrians were beating at the very gates of Jerusalem.

Economically, the picture is just as bleak. King Hezekiah tried to pay off the Assyrians. He offered them a tribute of more than 20,000 pounds of silver and 2,000 pounds of gold. To pay this exorbitant sum he had to empty both the royal and temple treasuries, and strip the gold off the doorposts of the temple. It didn't matter. The Assyrians continued their march toward Jerusalem. Archaeologists have uncovered Assyrian records that brag about how they destroyed 46 cities in Judah, and that Jerusalem was trapped like a caged bird. Herds and flocks had been cut down. Crops had been destroyed. There was no trade in or out of the city.

It was a time of darkness in the land. The closing verses of Isaiah 8 describe it as a time where they do not have the light of dawn. Vs. 22 says they see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, or, the dimness of anguish. There is no darkness blacker than a dark night of the soul. Chapter 8 ends saying they will be thrust into "utter darkness."

I don't think it's just a description of 8th Century Judah, though. I think, sometimes it's a description of our own lives, our own hearts, our own dark night of the soul. Hasn't your journey taken you through some very dark places? Have you journeyed through the valley of

the shadow of death, as you've said goodbye to a spouse, to a parent, even to a child. The darkness of the grave is pretty bleak.

Maybe darkness has swallowed you whole as you felt helpless as your marriage fell apart, or as your child's life skidded off the rails. You looked for any ray of light, but could find only shades of darkness. It might just be the blackness of your own choices and foolish mistakes. Each choice you made took you deeper into the shadows. Finally, at some point you turned around and realized you couldn't see any light at all. Maybe for you it is the pitch black of addiction. You find yourself so firmly within its clutches, you can no longer see through its claws. And there in your dark place you experienced a total eclipse of your soul.

Isaiah 9:1-7 is a dazzling display of light for all who have found themselves in a very dark place. You see our text in Isaiah 9 opens with a glimmer of hope. The darkness will not last forever. A new day will dawn. In the darkness, the prophet tells of something wonderful.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."

As we begin our journey to the manger, it doesn't sound very Christmassy, does it? I mean military history, and ancient political intrigue is a curious way to kick off the season. But then we realize what this great light is. This is the passage Matthew quotes in his gospel to explain the angel's announcement to a very confused Joseph. He uses this passage again to explain the beginning of our Lord's ministry. It's a birth announcement written 700 years ahead of time. Isaiah is pointing to the dawn of a new day that would happen with the birth of a baby in a manger. The Apostle John may have also been thinking of this very verse when he opened his account of Jesus' life with these words.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

Over these next four Sundays we will make our own journey to Bethlehem. We take our first steps this morning as we look at Isaiah's prophecy of a brilliant light shining in the darkness. And then over the next three Sundays we will journey into the stable to worship, not just a baby lying in the manger, but a victorious king who brings wonderful light into the darkest shadows of our souls. These next three Sundays are the perfect time for you to invite your

friends and neighbors, your coworkers and family. Christmas is a time of year when many, who usually don't have time for God or church, are a little more open to making some space in their lives. It would be a good chance for them to come hear this good news of great joy. So, I really want to encourage you to invite your friends over these next three weeks.

Our text opens with a promise to the area around the Sea of Galilee.

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

*2 The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.*

Jesus would be born in Bethlehem of Judah, but where would he grow up? In the region of Naphtali and Zebulun in Galilee. This is where He would begin his ministry. Around Galilee's shores he would perform his first miracles and first announce the kingdom of heaven that would reign in the hearts of men and women that followed Him. These were the first tribes to fall to defeat when the Assyrian army came marching from the north. In the very land that first fell to the darkness, the light would first shine. And what was that light?

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.*

That sounds a little more Christmasy? We want to take a few minutes this morning and consider from these verses how Jesus brings light into our deepest, darkest places.

The Light of His Hope

The first thing I want you to see is the light of his hope. The coming of Jesus brings hope. When you're lost in the dark, nothing lifts your spirits like a ray of light. The word hope isn't used anywhere in this text, but I think hope is oozing from its pores. This passage is just dripping with hope.

We see it there in the promise of vs. 2, "*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.*" This isn't just a flickering match or a dollar store flashlight. It is a great light. After a long, hard night, a new day is dawning. Hear the hope flowing from these words.

*You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.*

The children of God have seen their land divided and their borders shrink as the enemy consumes them. However, Isaiah tells of a time when their nation will be enlarged, and their joy will be increased. It will be like the celebration of a bountiful harvest or an overwhelming victory.

The prophet calls to their minds the lopsided victory they enjoyed over the Midianites during the time of the judges. No longer will they be in servitude to other nations. They will be able to draw down their military. They won't need their arms anymore. They will be able to burn their battle clothes. There will be an end to the fighting and bloodshed. Peace at last. There is hope.

Assyria would never capture Jerusalem. God would miraculously deliver them from the hands of the Assyrians. During the night, an angel slew 185,000 Assyrian troops, and their king was forced to withdraw. This mass death of Assyrian troops is a fact of history. An ancient

Babylonian historian, Berossus, records that a pestilence broke out in the army camp. Greek historian Herodotus tells of field mice scurrying about the camp and chewing at the leather of the Assyrian weapons rendering them useless. Modern historians suggest the Assyrian army succumbed to Cholera or some other water borne illness since King Hezekiah had blocked up all the safe water supplies in the area. Whatever means the angel used, God delivered Jerusalem from an overwhelming force.

Judah would experience a time of resurgence under King Hezekiah, although many doubt that these promises were fulfilled under his reign. Some scholars feel that these were conditional promises that Israel forfeited because they rejected Jesus. Others, believe they are still be fulfilled at some point in Israel's future. Others point to a spiritual fulfillment, as God enlarges his people by making peace between Jew and Gentile and bringing in those of every tribe and nation into his church. And so he brings peace, not political or military peace, but a spiritual peace between God and people where our sins are forgiven and there is no fear of judgment, an inner peace where we are finally at one with ourselves, and an eternal peace we can enjoy forever.

As with much of biblical prophecy, the prophetic finger points to two things at the same time. Bible prophecy can be kind of like quantum physics in that a single thing can be in two places at once. In the foreground, there is an immediate reference, but on the distant horizon is an even greater fulfillment. In the foreground here, there may be some promises to an earthly Israel, but I do think the mountain peak on the horizon here is the coming of Jesus and the peace that passes understanding that he gives to all who love and follow him. Ultimate peace is not found in treaties and alliances. True, lasting peace cannot be achieved through military might or diplomatic maneuvering, but only by having a relationship with God.

We all have times we walk in darkness. In the bleak shadows of our souls, we have no peace, but Jesus brings light to those dark corners. The light of his hope dispels the shadows of broken relationships, broken dreams, and broken promises. He fills our hearts with hope.

And this is no fairy tale, Disney, wish upon a star kind of hope. This is a sure and certain thing. Notice, even though this is a prophecy, how many of these verses are written in the past tense. The people HAVE SEEN a great light. You HAVE ENLARGED the nation. In the Hebrew, this

is all in the past tense. God's vision of the future is written as a thing that has already happened. That's how sure this is. Not a "maybe," or "If I can work it out." It's done. When you give your heart to Jesus, you're not just throwing our spiritual coins into a heavenly fountain and wishing for the best. You are finding the light of a sure and certain hope.

The Light of His Humanity

It isn't just the light of his hope that dispels the darkness from our hearts. It's also the light of his humanity. At first, this might seem confusing, and not so reassuring. Wait a minute! You mean God is coming in human form? As one of us?

Not only that he is coming as a child, *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given."* How do you package a Mighty God as a baby? How was this to bring hope to Judeans crushed under the boot print of the mighty Assyrian army. How are the dreaded invading armies of the Assyrians, tens of thousands strong, threatened in any way by the birth of a helpless infant?

God's deliverance often comes from the most surprising of sources. How about Daniel- a 14 year old kid from a conquered nation whisked away into captivity, forced into the king's service, and he asks to go on a special diet—and so deliverance begins. How about Joseph—a slave rotting in prison has a strange dream— and so deliverance begins, How about Ruth- a foreign widowed refugee picks grain in a certain field, How about Esther- a slave girl in the king's harem asks the king a question at dinner. And from such small sources God changes history. God's hope often comes from the direction you would least expect it.

It turns out God in the flesh is exactly what we need. We didn't need an angel, or God in Spirit form, but we need Emmanuel, God with us, as one of us, to see what we see, to feel what we feel. To face the same trials and temptations we do. We didn't need a God merely declaring what we need, but we needed God demonstrating. *A light with us helps us see much better than any light shone at us.* A light with us illuminates. A light at us, only blinds.

I remember a few years ago when I first leaned to hunt. There was a guy in my church named Frank who showed me how it was done. I had read about it. I could tell you the bullet point instructions. I had even watched videos on YouTube, but what I needed was someone in my place, to show me, to do it for me, to walk me through it. Frank shed more light on what to do than anything I had read or watched on the computer.

What we needed was more than commandments etched in stone, more than a prophet with words from on high. We needed God to stand in our place, to show us, to do it for us, to walk us through it, to be the light so we could see. The author of Hebrews says that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. He writes later on in Hebrews 2, *“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death- that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”*

Our text says this son wouldn't just come, or be born. It says, *“to us a son is given”*. He was a gift. He wasn't ours to take or earn or demand, but God's to give. And so Jesus was sent. He was given. He is heaven's gift.

The Light of His Honor

There is the light of His hope, the light of His humanity, and there is also the light of his honor. Honor might not be the best word to use here, but I needed something that started with an “H” to fit with the other two. But I think honor does capture the idea of the majesty and power we see in our text. He may have come as a child, but verse 6 ends by telling us this Son will be able to take the government upon his shoulders.

Isaiah's original audience would understand Government a little different than you and I as 21st Century Americans. One translation I looked at used the wording here of “princely power.” **This refers to the royal reign of Jesus.** You see he wasn't just a human baby. He wasn't only the son of man.

He was also the Son of God. Somehow, somehow the power of the Almighty God was poured into that frail, fleshly package of a baby. What those in power could never do for us, he is able to take upon his shoulders and do himself.

Politicians may promise peace, but they never deliver, at least for long. Neville Chamberlain signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler and declared he had achieved, “peace for our time.” How well did that work out? A few years ago, Secretary of State John Kerry returned home with an agreement with Iran. How well is that working out? On July 27, 1953 an armistice was signed with North Korea.” It was designed to, “insure a complete cessation of hostilities

and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved.” We still haven’t found that final, peaceful settlement.

Do you want final, lasting peace? Listen to the text,

*Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.*

*He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.*

The only government that brings true peace to our lives, isn’t the legislation of anyone in Washington, but only the royal rule of Christ in our hearts. Our hope doesn’t come from the White House in Washington or the United Nations in New York, or any other hall of human power, but only in the honor of Jesus Christ as he lights our hearts with his love.

His throne is the throne of our hearts. It is the throne of heaven, where one day we will reign with him in the New Jerusalem of the new heavens and the new earth. His rule will be complete. His reign will be perfect. Everything will be just and right.

Jesus will bring a royal rule that never ends and a peace that lasts forever. Ultimately, this prophecy isn’t talking about any earthly government. This is eternal peace, an everlasting righteous rule. And it can begin right now in your heart when you decide to follow Jesus. He is the light in the darkness. He is your light in your darkness.

- For the confused and wandering soul – a wonderful counselor
- For the weak and defenseless – A mighty God.
- For the abandoned and fatherless – an everlasting Father
- For the wounded and hurting – A Prince of Peace