

The Journey to Christmas: Finding the Light in Jerusalem

Isaiah 9:1-7

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith

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The Words of the Prophets Are Written on Subway Walls

In the final verse of the eighty-eighth Psalm, the author writes in desperation, “You have distanced loved one and neighbor from me; darkness is my only friend.” (Psalm 88:18). The psalmist acknowledges that God has placed him in the lowest part of the Pit, in the darkest of places. He has been separated from his family and his neighbors and friends. All he knows is darkness. He questions if God’s wonderful works will be known and experienced in the darkness. It is such a gloomy state that he writes that his only friend is darkness.

It reminds me of the lyrics written back in the early 1960’s by Paul Simon: *Hello darkness, my old friend. I’ve come to talk with you again.*¹ Psalm 88 expressed the mood of many people that are living in Jerusalem at the time that the prophet Isaiah wrote chapters eight and nine. That dark sense of gloom expressed the mood of the end of chapter eight and prepares readers and hearers for the promise of chapter nine.

And it can certainly speak to a contemporary world that is wallowing in darkness. We see the parallels between then and now. In Israel during Isaiah’s life and today, people distance themselves from God and seek out answers from those who have already died or from the earth itself.

Today, the spiritual darkness people face is the result of the choice to reject the Light that came into the world in Bethlehem. That doesn’t mean people are not trying to find answers and seeking out something that promises any sort of relief from the darkness.

Even in David’s capital city of Jerusalem, the location of the holy temple, the spiritual darkness Isaiah predicted was God’s impending judgment on Israel for their constant sin and rebellion. I invite you to turn with me this morning to Isaiah 9:1-7. (Read text)

¹¹ Lyrics from the Simon and Garfunkel song *The Sound of Silence*, written by Paul Simon and recorded in 1964 and released on their first album, *Wednesday Morning, 3AM*.

People Walking In Darkness

I am reminded of the old preacher's saying that we are to read the Bible backwards, so to speak. We read it from a New Testament perspective. As we look back at passages like this, we understand that these verses point us to Jesus. Phrases such as, "for unto us a child is born, a son is given" are echoed in the words of the angels. This text informs the words used in the New Testament narrative of the birth of Christ. The prophecy here was written maybe several hundred years before the events fulfilling them ever occurred.

The first word in chapter nine, "nevertheless," invites us to look at the words that preceded them. So, we glance back into chapter eight. Isaiah 8:22: "They will look toward the earth and see only distress, darkness, and the gloom of affliction, and they will be driven into thick darkness." It reads as both ancient and contemporary. Today, we realize that so many people have a pantheistic belief that this earth is the answer to our problems. It is a problematic horizontal scramble for help rather than a vertical inquiry to the Lord for help.

In chapter eight, Isaiah writes about how the people, in their horizontal gloom and darkness, turned to mediums and "spiritists." In 8:19 they are seeking answers from mediums and spiritists, necromancers who promise to commune with the dead, "who chirp and mutter" in their search for answers. That stuff happens even today. Mediums promising to raise up answers from people long dead to give guidance and advice. Interestingly, the phrase "chirp and mutter" could also be translated into the English words "chirping and twittering."

How gloomy is it to feel that things are so dark and gloomy that you must ask for help from people who only deal with deadness and darkness? When you are seeking answers for life, Isaiah writes to "inquire of your God" and not "ask things from the dead on behalf of the living." The people have not turned to God. Instead they've turned to this earth and to mediums and false gods. And because they've bowed and prayed to the lifeless gods they've made, God will instead send them into the gloom and darkness of captivity and exile.

God brings the darkness and gloom in judgment. God takes sin seriously, and here He is bringing darkness as a form judgment on Israel for their constant rebellion.

Will Soon See Light

In our Advent reading just yesterday from the Jesus Storybook Bible, we read that because sin had permanently entered God's perfectly created world, people would always be running away from God and hiding in the darkness.² But God loved people so much that He brought the Light of Christ into the darkness. That is what Isaiah wrote in chapter nine.

Because after reading about the judgment of darkness in exile, we soon see a beautiful promise here in Isaiah's prophetic word. God has promised that a great light will dawn, and the people walking in darkness will see a great light. We know that this is the prophecy of light in the Messiah. God brings judgment of darkness. But he also brings the promise of Light.

The previous chapter ends in the gloom of anguish. The people are thrust into thick darkness as judgment was pronounced on Israel. So often, following the judgment, comes the promise. The gloom of darkness will not be like it was in "the former times." That can sound vague, not too specific. What are these former times of gloom? Perhaps he means what we read about in 2 Kings 15:29, when an Assyrian king named Tiglath-pileser came and captured the region of the Sea of Galilee in the northern land of Naphtali and carried the people into captivity in Assyria. That former gloom is different. This gloom will end in glory, in light.

Those were former times, now comes the latter times for Naphtali and Zebulun and the land around the Sea of Galilee. In the future, honor and glory will come to that area, referred to here as "the way of the sea." That is a pretty great promise, isn't it? Galilee will go from gloom to glory.

Jesus is clearly in view here in this text with our New Testament perspectives. "Galilee of the nations" refers to the Hebrew area Galilee and further to the region bordering other northern kingdoms beyond the land of Zebulun and Naphtali³. The borders were porous as there was truly nothing keeping foreigners out. Isaiah refers to glory that is to come through Galilee

² Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 34.

³ It is important to remember that when we refer to Zebulun and Naphtali, we are referring to one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, named after twelve sons of Jacob. It also refers to the land marked out for the tribe. So, Naphtali is a man, a Jewish tribe of people and also the region or land given to the people of the tribe of Naphtali.

that will extend out to the rest of the world. Isaiah is hinting here that there is the promise of glory for more than Israel that will come out of the region of Galilee.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” Those who have been living in the darkness of gloom will soon walk in the light. Light has shown on people who live in a deep darkness. It is interesting to wonder just how much Isaiah understands about the Messiah, the Christ, as the Light. What is clear as we read through Isaiah, Isaiah has more than just some vague sense of light coming into the darkness. 1 Peter tells us that Isaiah searched and inquired about the person or the time that the Spirit was indicating all of this would happen.⁴ Isaiah is careful and thoughtful about what God is revealing. And Isaiah understands that somehow a Messiah will come, light will shine, and gloom will be replaced with glory.

Here in chapter 9, we read a significant amount of information about the Light of the Messiah. God will add to the people he considers to be his children. God will break this oppression that sin holds over people once and for all. This light will come into the world through a child born for us, a son given to us. This Son will be the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. He will bring light to people walking in darkness and be a source of glory and joy to both Jews and beyond. Isaiah had a pretty significant understanding of the Messiah.

As if that weren't enough, read Isaiah 53 and you see that Isaiah inquiring of God about the Messiah would yield that beautiful understanding that “on Him will be our sin. All we like sheep have gone astray. But God laid all of our iniquity on Him. He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquity. Our punishment was upon him and by his wound, we are healed.” Isaiah doesn't know everything about the Messiah but what he does know presents a powerful picture of what Christmas is supposed to mean to us.

A Light For Everyone Who Repents and is Saved

Isaiah has spoken about the nature of the One who is bringing the light here in chapter 9. And Matthew 4:12-17 records Jesus fulfilling the prophecy found in verses one and two of Isaiah 9. After this is fulfilled, Jesus began to preach for people to repent, because the kingdom of heaven had come

⁴ 1 Peter 1:10-12

near.” In other words, the Light had come for those walking in darkness. According to Isaiah, the Light had come for both the Jew and the Gentile. For *anyone* living in darkness, which is of course, *everyone*, the light has dawned. Jesus preaches repentance.

If you want to walk in the light, repent. Turn from your rebellion and your sinfulness and receive salvation in Jesus Christ. Let the Light shatter all of the darkness.

Using light as an example is different two thousand years later. We are surrounded by lights. You cannot even count all of the lights in this room. We have table lamps, recessed lighting, outdoor lighting, pendant lighting, fluorescent lights, LED's, candles, fireplaces...you name it, we've got it. In fact, you've got at least one light on you right now! We have so many lights around us, we inadvertently turn them on. Have you ever been walking and then you look down and realize that your flashlight on your cell phone is on and try as you might, you can't make that magic catty-wampus swoosh across the phone? It just keeps going to that infernal search screen rather than the flashlight icon. We've got lights on all the time.

But Isaiah's people knew about darkness. No holiday exterior illumination back then. No hotels leaving the light on for you. Except for one significant festival each year, there were not many lights outside. When Isaiah wrote about being overwhelmed in spiritual gloomy darkness, people could understand what he meant. But we have to stop and think. What are those gloomy, dark seasons we face?

You lose that loved one and the light just seems to leave your family. You get the terrible diagnosis, and everything is darkness. You come to a place in your life where you wonder if this is really all there is for you. You feel that gloom of being alone. It feels like there is a distance between you and friends, a distance between you and family, a distance between you and contentment, a distance between you and the life you know deep, deep down inside that you are not experiencing. You look around and your only companion, your only "friend" is darkness.

And then Isaiah comes and tells you this nearly three-thousand-year-old promise. When there was no other ray of comfort, when everything was all darkness, all gloom, Light came. "In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:4-5)

When you face spiritual darkness both in the world and within you, you can turn to the Light of Christ for relief.

You don't have to be overwhelmed in the gloom of darkness anymore. In Bethlehem, in a manger, a Child was born, and a Son was given. He would fulfill all of those glorious promises that Isaiah prophesied about.

You can have that Light, today. Right now. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life." Believe those words today. Walk in the Light.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT:

What lights do you have in case of emergency and where do you keep them?

How many lights are on at your house right now?

How has God increased your joy since you started walking in the Light of Christ?

What causes you to rejoice before the Lord?

What difficult battles has God won for you in your life? In Isaiah 9:4 we read about how God will break the hold that Israel's enemies held over them. How has God done that for you?

How do the names given for the Messiah to come in Isaiah 9:6 encourage you? How can they speak to various aspects of Christ? Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.