

The Birth of Peace Isaiah 9:1-7

In the children's short story entitled *The Shadow* by Laura Richards, a child sits on the ground with her back to the sun. Though she hears the birds singing and the children playing nearby, it's the shadow in front of her that has brought her to the point of being paralyzed with sadness. "The world is so dark...dusky and gray, and there is no beauty in it. Why must I stay in this sad, gray world?" she asks. Then she TELLS the angel who is visiting her in her distress. "I hear the children and the birds, but I do not know where they are. I do not see them. I see only the shadow."¹

Many people live their lives seeing only the shadow, by choice, and many times and in many ways, by circumstances beyond their control. Life, is "*of few days and full of trouble*," says the blameless and upright man from Uz.² None are untouched by the darkness, upright or not. That's just one of many similar voices that rise out of the Old Testament. There are certainly more. The New Testament bears the same message. John 1, "*the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.*" John 3, "*People loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*" Paul's ministry was given that people might turn "*from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.*" The theme is extensive. The church at Rome read, "*For let us cast off the works of darkness.*" To the church at Ephesus, "*For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord...*," etc. With these snippets, you can see that the biblical writers equate darkness with sin and Satan, or satanic influence.

Some in here today might be fixed upon a life-shadow. You've done that dark thing, and it haunts you. You're sitting in the quiet darkness of a missing loved one, groaning for the opportunity to love them again, or be loved by them again. I share those pangs. Shadows are personal, and pervasive. They live in here and live out there. Just this past week we read of hundreds in the Philippines who are living in the shadow of having everything swept away in a massive flood; the elderly in Ukraine can't keep their life-sustaining medical devices powered because of the war, facing a potential emergency every time the light flickers.³ And that's just one layer of their life-or-death concerns. Headed into a new calendar year, maybe we're all tempted, or will be tempted at some point, to turn our backs to the Son in worry and distrust, fixed on shadows we can't seem to stop regarding over all else. And the consequence of such paralyzation is the lack of peace.

In Isaiah's day a similar gloom and hopelessness pervaded Israel at the beginning of his prophetic ministry. You might recall that at the time of Isaiah, the nation of Israel was split in two—Israel the northern kingdom and Judah the southern kingdom. And during this time, threats of incursions from the southern borders, the Edomite and Philistine peoples, hung ominously over the nation. And worse, from the north came rumors of the unrest and bloodthirst—the horses of the Assyrian army were being made ready, their swords kept sharpened, their war plans rehearsed. They were primed to do what they needed to do to seize the moment by flexing their military muscle.⁴

Maybe you could recall how it initially played out. In time, the northern kingdom would cave to the Assyrians with little resistance. But Judah, the southern kingdom, which was Isaiah's prophetic responsibility, held off the threats for a season. Yet, the season was short-lived as Ahaz, king of Judah,

¹ Laura Richards, *The Pig Brother and Other Fables and Stories*, 22.

² Job 14:1

³ Choose any newsfeed of your choice from this past week and you'll see these stories.

⁴ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 19.

went against the counsel of Isaiah to “*Be careful, be quiet, do not fear...*”⁵ he would finally succumb to the pressures and fears by allying with the Assyrians. This succumbing was expressed primarily by paying Assyria a large, crippling tribute each year. An economic enslavement if you will. And if you think the political situation was in complete shambles for Israel and Judah, I’ve said nothing of the entanglements of false worship, which would have been at the top of God’s list of problems.⁶ Read the entire book of Isaiah and the sin of idolatry towers over all the politics, and everything else.

What was God doing in all this? What does He purpose for the life of his peoples as they seek to navigate the mists of vanity?⁷ The storms of trouble? The shadows that are cast in this life? When things seem to be crumbling, what reality in my life will hold me together? It’s a good question, and those under the thumb of the Assyrian empire panted for an answer; and it’s not ceased to be an important question in 2023. What would make us not fixate on life’s shadows but help us persevere well with them or through them? It’s always been the reign of God in human hearts. Specifically, in times of trouble, the peace of God that can only be explained supernaturally. A peace built upon promises by One who cannot lie. A peace secured for the sinner in the best possible way. God’s people in Isaiah’s time needed it. And is our need any different?

I. Signs of Peace

The danger for Israel and for us under every shadow is to *so* focus on the darkness that God is overlooked. As we begin chapter 9, the Word of God is given to Isaiah. He has just warned king Ahaz of Judah to not compromise to the demands of the Assyrians. But Ahaz overlooks God. It’s arrogant. It’s disorderly. It’s self-destructive. It’s a hostile act toward the LORD. But thank God that grace is not just an ideal, or a word to soothe our consciences. God is the LORD who is ever so gracious. And as we open Isaiah 9, bookended between Ahaz rejecting Isaiah’s divine counsels and God’s promise to punish “*the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes,*” God will labor, through the prophet, to not *overlook* us. He, through this ancient voice, will announce His gracious plan to bring about the peace we all desperately desire and need.

And in the particulars, as Isaiah relays God’s word to Israel, the LORD is going to show them the DNA of peace, some components or features or signs that will help us see how God will establish His peace on earth. Sign number one...

a. Favor instead of Contempt

¹ But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

This is nothing less than God promising to dignify what He has allowed to fall into enemy hands. The Assyrians set up camp in the lands mentioned here. The northern track was a typical path for the enemy of God’s people.⁸ So the people in these northern sections were the sufferers, the first to be marauded, slaughtered, cuffed and taken away—these are the peoples that God is promising to console first. And isn’t this God’s way? He is simply drawn to the downcast. He casts a tender eye upon those wounded

⁵ Isaiah 7:4

⁶ Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 23.

⁷ I agree. It’s hard to stop referencing Ecclesiastes. Bear with us for a few months.

⁸ Ray Ortlund, *Preaching the Word: Isaiah*, 97

by life. Contempt for the struggler may be for a season, but those who are down and out and know it with humility—that’s a place where God’s grace is often found.

Here, the promise is that He will do something *glorious, by the way of the sea... Galilee of the Gentiles*. And in some way, this display of something glorious will be considered a consolation, an act or acts of favor, a deep honor. Contempt falls away. Favor takes the stage. That’s the first part of the promise. Sign two...

b. Light instead of Darkness

² The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.

These in the text, Isaiah says, are trying to, metaphorically speaking, read the times, walk through a maze, find security, all while in the dark. They are squinting in the shade and the gloom. They can’t see the way of peace, the way to be rid of this foreign enemy, the way of salvation. The situation is dark with political, social, economic, and religious significance. And what they needed most were the very promises given by Yahweh—*the people who walk in darkness will see a great light*. And if you’ve ever been in darkness, all that is needed is a little light. But the recipients of those that live in this dark land will see a *great light*. This is not merely the twinkle of a candle, but something more akin to a roaring blaze *will shine on them*.

I’ve been inside a lighthouse in Outer Banks, NC, but I’ve never been in need of seeing one, thankfully. But imagine being lost at sea, not knowing which direction the shore lies. Ten miles out to sea you would need more than a slew of candles shining from the shore to find your way. You would need a great light beaming across the night sky. Many lighthouses can project a 28 mile-long beam, rendering our flashlights and headlights and porchlights as lightweights.⁹ But here, God is promising direction, help, and a rescue from peril. And only a *great light* will do.

Perhaps some of God’s people heard the prophecy of Isaiah and thought in the immediate, “The Assyrians are no real threat! God, our God, if He promises to come to the aid of those in the north, where Gentiles are, surely He will come to our aid! He will lighten the way through this mess!” But the mess Isaiah spoke into would give way to a reality that would one day enable the distressed to endure, come what may. It may have seemed that God was not caring about their welfare at the moment, but if they would but remember the God making the promise, then help would be theirs. It would aid them in the same way as the promise of the new heavens and the new earth aid us in our dark days—calmed in His peace and anchored in hope. The third sign held out to them through Isaiah is that they would know...

c. Joy instead of Sorrow

³ You shall multiply the nation, you shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence as with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

Under the threat of war, where untold evils have unfolded in every age, joy is one of the first casualties. The threats are made. The news is confirmed. Soldiers with resolve are recruited. Families long for the days when their loved one will come home, even before they leave for the battlefield. The nation is on

⁹ <https://lighthousepreservation.org/>

edge. There is little space for a glad heart. But God through Isaiah is promising to spread the favor and the light to more and more people, a “*great multitude that none could number.*”¹⁰ And as they taste God’s favor and see this *great light* the response is a swelling *gladness*, ever *[increasing]*.

The comparisons of joy at harvest and joy after a victory in the battle speak sufficiently for themselves. It’s a promise that would have spoken clearly to Isaiah’s hearers. What God is going to do will create such a depth of pleasure, such lasting happiness, that nothing or “*no one will take...joy*” from them.¹¹

Last night, millions, perhaps billions of people heard the glad tiding of “Happy New Year!” The broad-road majority of them will never really have it without being found by the One who authored words like these: “*Blessed, or happy is the one whose transgression is covered...against whom the Lord counts no iniquity.*” Sure, there are Dead-Sea joys in this world—plenty of boating and floating, but if one’s sense of joy and well-being are disconnected from the life-filled ocean offered here by Isaiah, then joy with substance will be elusive. Note the fourth sign of God establishing peace is that He will usher in...

d. Freedom instead of Oppression

⁴ For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. ⁵ For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult, and cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire.

The **You** here is God Almighty. One commentator makes the all-important point that no human is the subject of any of the verbs in verses 4-7. That if liberation is going to happen, it must happen not by military might, or political savvy, or philanthropy, or by works of righteousness performed, but it must come from beyond or outside of human agency.¹²

But whose *yoke of burden*? Whose *staff* on whose *shoulders*? Who is holding the *rod of oppression*? What often happens with the prophets is that they will foretell the future by referencing the past. Thus these words could be subtle references to the central event in the life of the Jewish peoples—the Exodus from Egypt. As God did there, will He one day do in an even more spectacular way. One Pharaoh could never equal the cruelty and sin in millions of hearts. But the clearer reference is the battle of Midian recorded in Judges 6-8. In that battle, recall that God intentionally and shockingly reduced the size of Gideon’s army down to 300 men, showing us that when the trumpets were blown and jars were broken in faith, God excluded human glory as the Midianites turned on themselves in the middle of the night and fled.

So again, the *yoke of burden*, the *rod of oppression*, the *battle tumult*—what the Lord has planned to gain the glory is absolute victory over these gloomy shadows.

Freedom for oppression, joy for sorrow, light for darkness, and favor for contempt—all are begging for more information, aren’t they? Who will establish such magnificent realities? Who will have what it takes to do what these verses describe? Who is able and worthy to expel the contempt, darkness, sorrow, and enmity mixed with evil, and to ensure favor, light, joy, and freedom? We’ve got the *what*, but now what about the *how* and the *who*?

¹⁰ Revelation 7:9

¹¹ John 16:22

¹² Ortlund, 98.

II. The Arrival of Peace

6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

The words ***child*** and ***son*** express the lineage of this child's royal line. And when we open the Gospel of Matthew, we find the angel putting Joseph at rest with these words, "*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife...*" This son of Joseph, who by relation is also a son of David...He is the prime subject of Isaiah. And this child is God's reply to everything and anything that can make a wreck of our lives. In essence, God is saying to Israel, through Isaiah, to take an extended gaze at what He will do. He will triumph over the earth's powers, even the Assyrians knocking on the door, and He will do it, not with heavy artillery, or exorbitant bribery, or shrewd leverage, but with the birth of a child. Ray Ortland says it how I wanted to say it but couldn't find the words, "God's answer to the bullies swaggering through history is not to become an even bigger bully. His answer is Jesus."¹³

He is the subject and full expression of the first verse of our passage.¹⁴ How did Christ make these regions ***glorious***? With the presence of Himself! He went through this region of Zebulun and Naphtali healing and teaching the peoples about the kingdom of heaven. The Sermon on the Mount was preached from elevated Capernaum, overlooking the northern part of the Sea of Galilee. He dignified the place by showing up! The people here saw glory on two legs, with two arms, and a mouth that spoke precepts and promises. And eventually Christ's death would give meaning to all of life. It was made glorious! The weak, helped. The downcast, lifted up. The small, brought into a vast grace and into everlasting kingdom of a King worthy of marveling, King Jesus.

He is the subject and full expression of verse 2. He is the Light of the world. He is the One whom the darkness can never overcome. He manifested Himself as light at the transfiguration and as light to Paul at his conversion. He was the light that came into the world and will be the light in the renewed world to come.¹⁵ He's not simply in the divine limelight, He is the limelight.¹⁶

Christ is the subject and full expression of verse 3. The joy that seems so elusive to humanity is located in this Person. The angels announced His birth this way, "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*"¹⁷ His mother bore him with it, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...*"¹⁸ His followers come into the faith with some measure of it, "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*"¹⁹ And Christ's followers come into a heaven described by it, "*Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your master.*"²⁰

¹³ Ortland, 99.

¹⁴ Matthew 4: 11-14, "*Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. 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...*"

¹⁵ Revelation 21:23, "*And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.*"

¹⁶ Shai Linne, *Jesus Is Alive*, <https://www.shailinnemusic.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/The-Atonement.pdf>

¹⁷ Luke 2:10

¹⁸ Luke 1:46-47

¹⁹ Matthew 13:44

²⁰ Matthew 25:21

And Jesus is the subject and full expression of verses 4 & 5. How many burdens can be counted in this life? At the top is the incessant, itching burden humans have of justifying themselves. This Christ dealt with in His death and resurrection. He is both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Him. He broke this merciless yoke of believing that we must perform sufficiently if we are to be forgiven, cleansed, justified. But by the offering of Himself for us in death, he graciously relieves us of such an impossible burden. As a result, His burden is easy and His yoke is light. Have you placed your trust in Him who *breaks burdens*? Him who frees the one under the *rod of oppression* by a sight of Him and His gospel?

No wonder the Spirit couldn't just pin down one name as He led Isaiah to prophesy, *And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace!*

Whole sermons and perhaps books are devoted to these names given to Christ through Isaiah. Jesus is the *Wonderful Counselor* who moved through regions like Zebulun, Naphtali, and Capernaum, teaching and comforting those who would hear about the kingdom of God.

Christ is the *Mighty God*, breaking burdens and oppressions, saving from the wrath to come, subduing all things under His feet, and one Day He'll split the sky wide open and every eye will see Him. There's none mightier, and sometimes the might is exerted in the here and now. 2 Kings 19 is a microcosm of the final plan for all of God's enemies, "*Then it happened that night that the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when the men (of Israel) rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead.*"

And Christ, though distinct from the Father, shares the depths of His fatherly heart—seeing the sheep without a shepherd; touching the untouchables; engaging the blackballed and outcasts with a holy intent of making them accepted in the beloved; feeding others with both perishable and imperishable food; healing others with an eye to the sin-sick soul. Jesus is indeed the *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father*.

But take the bird's eye view look at this passage and consider again the context. Isaiah will prophesy to a people who are under the dark threats of war. If you're treated with contempt, walking in darkness, under a landslide of burdens, and the scents of oppression are easily discerned, what might meet you at your greatest point of need? The Bible tells us that it's the peace of God in Christ. If one has the *Prince of Peace*, irrespective of the circumstances, what can't be endured? Who else is needed?

Consider...in that Bethlehem stall the promised Peace of Isaiah was delivered. The multitude of angelic hosts announced his arrival couched in these terms, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.*"²¹ Isaiah repeated himself about this peace, "*He was pierced for our transgressions...crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace...*"²² Jesus Himself promised it before the cross, "*Peace I leave with you...*"²³ The apostles believed peace to be a synonym for Christ's person, "*For he himself is our peace...*"²⁴ He is the life-filled ocean that can deliver us from our Dead-Sea joys!

Interestingly, the Hebrew root in the name Solomon carries the idea of *shalom*. In fact, Solomon's name means "man of peace." This child, from *the throne of David* (vs. 7) is the new Solomon, David's perfect heir.²⁵ And *there will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace!* We don't have

²¹ Luke 2:14

²² Isaiah 53:5

²³ John 14:27

²⁴ Ephesians 2:14

²⁵ Motyer, 102.

to imagine this as only something that will be part of the glory of heaven. The child of Isaiah 9 was born, and through the blood of His cross, peace with God can be ours.

Conclusion

The little girl is coaxed by the angel to turn her gaze from the shadow towards the sun and the other children. She is surprised to see them and equally surprised about the shadow she can no longer see. The angel tells her the truth, “Oh no, the shadow is behind you, where it belongs.”

Here, under the sun, life is not as simple as the angel of this story would lead us to believe. The world is dark, starting with what I see in myself and a simple survey of the headlines would confirm the saturating darkness in every corner of earth. But peace can be had, even in the dark. That’s what Jesus gives when He gives us Himself.

Do you see only the shadows this morning, or will you resolve to turn away in these moments and look at God the Son, the birth of peace? In Isaiah, see Him and believe. Trust Him, and you’ll know peace in the shadows. Anchor your life in Christ by faith, and every shadow will one Day be behind you, where they all belong, just as God has planned for His children all along.