

LESSON 7

The People Walking in Darkness

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

— Isaiah 9:2

Judah turned from God's word to Assyria and to the dead, and the land went dark; into that darkness God promises a light and a Child born to sit on David's throne, whose name is Mighty God.

WHERE WE ARE

About 734–733 BC. Ahaz has turned down God's offer of a sign and sent the temple's silver and gold to Tiglath-pileser of Assyria. Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel are still a threat, and Jerusalem is full of fear and rumor. Assyria's armies are already moving west toward Israel and Aram. This passage answers the question: when the darkness comes, where will you look for light?

Introduction

AHAZ HAD SENT FOR THE KING OF ASSYRIA, AND GOD TOLD HIM HE'D GET EXACTLY THAT. Chapter 8 shows what came next. It ends with people *driven into thick darkness*, 8:22.

Then the very next line turns toward the light. *Nevertheless, the gloom of the distressed land will not be like that of the former times*, 9:1. A few verses later comes one of the best-known sentences in the Old Testament: *For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us*, 9:6. You've probably heard it read at Christmas. Isaiah first said it to people who had gone looking for answers among the dead.

So the passage raises three questions. What happens to a people who stop listening to God? Where do they go instead? And what does God do for the few who keep listening after everyone else has quit? Isaiah answers all three, and his children's names are part of the answer.

Speeding to the Plunder (8:1–10)

Then the Lord said to me, "Take a large piece of parchment and write on it with an ordinary pen: Maher-shalal-hash-baz," 8:1.

It was large and public, written in plain letters anyone could read. The CSB's footnote translates the name *Speeding to the Plunder, Hurrying to the Spoil*.

God has the writing dated before two witnesses, *the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah*, 8:2. Neither man was Isaiah's friend. Uriah is the priest who later builds Ahaz a copy of a pagan altar the king

saw in Damascus, 2 Kings 16:10–11. Zechariah was most likely Ahaz's father-in-law, 2 Kings 18:2. When the name came true, nobody at court could say Isaiah had written it after the fact.⁵⁸

Then the placard becomes a person. Isaiah's wife, *the prophetess*, conceives and gives birth to a son, and God says, *Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz, for before the boy knows how to call 'Father,' or 'Mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria will be carried off to the king of Assyria*, 8:3–4. A child says "Daddy" somewhere around his first birthday. Before Isaiah's boy could say it, the two kings Ahaz feared were finished. Tiglath-pileser marched down the coast in 734 BC, stripped Galilee from Israel in 733, and took Damascus in 732.⁵⁹ The boy's name had come true.

The next oracle is harder news for Judah.

Because these people rejected the slowly flowing water of Shiloah and rejoiced with Rezin and the son of Remaliah, 8:6. Shiloah was the quiet channel that carried water from the Gihon spring into Jerusalem. It was a quiet stream, but it was enough to keep the city supplied. Gihon was also where Solomon was anointed king, 1 Kings 1:33–34, so the quiet water stands for God's quiet promise to David's house.

Commentators divide over who *these people* are: the northern kingdom, which had walked away from David's line and now marched with Rezin, or Judah, which had refused the quiet water by sending for Assyria.⁶⁰ Either way the trickle was refused.

So, God sends the flood. *The Lord will certainly bring against them the mighty rushing water of the Euphrates River—the king of Assyria and all his glory*, 8:7. It overflows the northern kingdom and keeps coming. *It will pour into Judah, flood over it, and sweep through, reaching up to the neck*, 8:8. Ahaz had paid Assyria to deal with Rezin and Pekah, and he had no way to make it stop at Judah's border.

The water stops at the neck. In 701 BC Sennacherib *attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them*, 36:1, but he couldn't take Jerusalem.

Then the verse ends on a name: *its flooded banks will fill your entire land, Immanuel!* 8:8. The land belongs to the child of 7:14. A Hebrew writer speaks of "your land" that way about a king or about God, and almost never about anyone else.⁶¹ The flood Ahaz invited is soaking Immanuel's land.

The name turns Isaiah around mid-sentence. *Band together, peoples, and be broken ... Devise a plan; it will fail. Make a prediction; it will not happen. For God is with us*, 8:9–10. In Hebrew *God is with us* is the name itself, *Immanuel*. Assyria could flood the land, but the land still belonged to Immanuel.

Fear Only Him (8:11–15)

God speaks to Isaiah *with great power, to keep me from going the way of this people*, 8:11. The commands that follow are plural; the prophet and the few who believe him are being set apart from the crowd.

Do not call everything a conspiracy that these people say is a conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear; do not be terrified, 8:12. Jerusalem was full of rumors, and Isaiah himself was probably the subject of one. A prophet who stands in the street telling the king not to trust his allies sounds a lot like a traitor.⁶²

God doesn't tell Isaiah the rumors are all false. He tells him where to put his fear. *You are to regard only the Lord of Armies as holy. Only he should be feared; only he should be held in awe*, 8:13. Isaiah learned that in the throne room, 6:3.

Then a strange promise. *He will be a sanctuary; but for the two houses of Israel, he will be a stone to stumble over and a rock to trip over, and a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem*, 8:14. Sanctuary is the word for the tabernacle and temple, where God lived among His people. For those who fear Him, God Himself becomes their temple. For everyone else He's a rock in the road. *Many will stumble over these; they will fall and be broken; they will be snared and captured*, 8:15.

God is the same God in both halves of the verse. The difference is how you treat His holiness.⁶³

Go to God's Instruction (8:16–22)

Bind up the testimony. Seal up the instruction among my disciples, 8:16. Isaiah has preached, and the nation has stopped listening, just as 6:9–10 said it would. So the word is sealed like a valuable document and entrusted to a small circle of *disciples*.

Then Isaiah says what he'll do. *I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will wait for him*, 8:17. Hiding the face is the opposite of the priestly blessing, *may the Lord make his face shine on you*, Numbers 6:25. Isaiah doesn't pretend God's face is shining, and he keeps waiting for Him.

Here I am with the children the Lord has given me to be signs and wonders in Israel, 8:18. Isaiah means "the Lord saves." *Shear-jashub* means "a remnant will return." *Mahe-shalal-hash-baz* means the plunder is coming fast. Every time someone in Jerusalem called one of them by name, they heard the message again.⁶⁴

The crowd had a different plan. *When they say to you, "Inquire of the mediums and the spiritists who chirp and mutter," shouldn't a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?* 8:19. A medium claimed to call up the dead, as the woman at En-dor did for Saul, 1 Samuel 28:7–8. Isaiah mocks the whole business; the spirits *chirp and mutter* like birds. Why ask the dead about the future of the living? Ahaz himself had sacrificed *to the gods of Damascus* and built *altars on every street corner in Jerusalem*, 2 Chronicles 28:23–24. It's no surprise his people went looking in the dark.

Isaiah's answer is a single cry: *Go to God's instruction and testimony!* 8:20. Then he gives you a test. *If they do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them*. A voice that contradicts what God has said has no light in it, however spiritual it sounds.⁶⁵

The chapter ends where that road ends. People wander *dejected and hungry* and curse *their king and their God*. They look up and find nothing; they look down and *see only distress, darkness, and the gloom of affliction*, 8:21–22. Ahaz wouldn't look up for a sign, and now his people look up and find nothing.

A Child Born for Us (9:1–7)

Chapter 9 picks up right where chapter 8 left off.

Nevertheless, the gloom of the distressed land will not be like that of the former times when he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future he will bring honor to the way of the sea, to the land east of the Jordan, and to Galilee of the nations, 9:1. In the Hebrew Bible, this verse is the last line of chapter 8. Its words for *gloom* and *distress* are the same words that ended 8:22. Isaiah means the two should be read together.⁶⁶

Zebulun and Naphtali, the tribes around the Sea of Galilee, were the first part of the promised land to fall to Assyria; Tiglath-pileser took *Galilee—all the land of Naphtali—and deported the people, 2 Kings 15:29.* It sat on the border, open to foreign traffic, which is why Isaiah calls it *Galilee of the nations*. God promises honor to the very region that fell first.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness, 9:2. Isaiah writes it as though it had already happened, because he's certain God will do it.

Three reasons for joy follow, each one starting with *For*. God shatters the oppressor's yoke *just as you did on the day of Midian, 9:4.* Gideon's three hundred won a battle only God could have won, Judges 7:2–7, with men from Zebulun and Naphtali in his army, Judges 6:35. The boots and bloody uniforms of war are thrown into the fire, 9:5. Then the reason the other two rest on:

For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace, 9:6.

Ahaz took bad counsel and followed it. This King is a *Wonderful Counselor*, and *wonderful* in the Old Testament nearly always describes what God does. He is *Eternal Father*, caring for His people the way a father does, and He never dies. He is *Prince of Peace*, who brings the peace of 2:4.

And He is *Mighty God*. Some soften that to "godlike hero," but one chapter later Isaiah gives the same title to the Lord Himself: *The remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the Mighty God, 10:21.* The Child is born, so He's human. His name is *Mighty God*. We can't say how much of that Isaiah understood, but he wrote down what God gave him.

He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever, 9:7. No son of Ahaz fits that, Hezekiah included. Hezekiah was a good king, and he died. This is the promise to David, *your throne will be established forever, 2 Samuel 7:16*, carried to its end.⁶⁷

Who guarantees it? *The zeal of the Lord of Armies will accomplish this, 9:7.* Ahaz's plan depended on a payment to Assyria; this one depends on the Lord's own zeal.

Looking to Christ

Seven centuries later, a preacher from Nazareth moved to a fishing town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. *He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah, Matthew 4:13–14.* He quotes 9:1–2, then adds, *From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near," 4:17.*

The light dawned first in the region Assyria had stripped first, among people the rest of the nation looked down on. The kingdom of 9:7 was preached there before it was preached anywhere else.

The apostles found the rest of chapter 8 in Jesus too. Hebrews puts 8:17–18 in His mouth: *I will trust in him. And again, Here I am with the children God gave me*, Hebrews 2:13. Peter calls Him *a stone to stumble over, and a rock to trip over*, 1 Peter 2:8. And when Peter tells frightened Christians not to fear, he borrows Isaiah's words with one change: *in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy*, 1 Peter 3:15. Isaiah was told to regard the Lord of Armies as holy. Peter says that Lord is Christ.

Applying the Text

Don't let the crowd set your fears. Jerusalem panicked over every rumor; your news feed does it faster. God gave Isaiah one place to put his fear: *only he should be feared*. When the noise rises this week, ask yourself whether you've spent more time with the rumor or with the Holy One.

The same God is a sanctuary or a stone. Isaiah 8:14 describes one God and two outcomes. You'll either find shelter in Him or trip over Him, and the difference is whether you treat Him as holy. Jerusalem had the temple in its midst and still stumbled over Him.

Take every voice to the word. You'd never visit a medium. But you might read a horoscope "just for fun," follow a teacher because he's popular, or decide what God wants by how you feel that morning. Isaiah's test still works: *If they do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them*. Whatever you're listening to, hold it up to Scripture.

Wait for the Lord when His face is hidden. Some seasons God seems silent. Isaiah didn't fill the silence with something else. He said, *I will wait for the Lord*. If you're in that season, keep reading, keep praying, and stay close to other believers. The light of 9:2 came to people who had walked in the dark a long time. How long have you been willing to wait?

For Discussion

1. What did the name *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* mean? Why do you think God had Isaiah write it in public, before witnesses, before the boy was even born?
2. Compare *the slowly flowing water of Shiloah* in 8:6 with *the mighty rushing water of the Euphrates* in 8:7. What does each stand for, and what does the contrast say about the choice Judah made?

3. How can the same God be *a sanctuary* to some and *a stone to stumble over* to others (8:14)? Read 1 Peter 2:6–8. How does Peter apply Isaiah's words?

4. Isaiah 8:21–22 ends with people looking up and looking down and finding only darkness. Why does turning away from God's word end there? How does 9:1 answer it?

5. When you face a hard decision, how much of what you do before deciding involves an open Bible? What do you consult first?

6. Is there something you're afraid of mostly because everyone around you is afraid of it? What would it look like this week to regard the Lord alone as holy and fear Him instead?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 8: The Axe and the Hand That Swings It (Isaiah 9:8–10:34)

The northern kingdom refuses to learn from its losses, and a refrain tolls through four stanzas of judgment: *his hand is still raised to strike*. Then God turns to Assyria, *the rod of my anger*, and the empire that flooded Judah starts boasting that it did it all alone. Isaiah answers with a question every proud power should hear: *Does an ax exalt itself above the one who chops with it?*

Before you come: read Isaiah 9:8–10:34. Underline every place the refrain *his anger has not turned away, and his hand is still raised to strike* appears, and count them.

⁵⁸ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 221. On 8:1–2 he takes the writing surface as a polished tablet set where many could see it, and identifies the witnesses as Uriah, one of Ahaz's trusted priests (2 Kings 16:10), and Zechariah, the father of Ahaz's wife (2 Kings 18:2). He judges them likely hostile witnesses whom even Isaiah's enemies would believe, able to count back the months once the child was born and named.

⁵⁹ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 92–93. On 8:1–4 he reads the placard as deliberate publicity in ordinary script anyone could read, and quotes Derek Kidner: because the time of Immanuel's birth was undisclosed, Maher-shalal-hash-baz takes over the task of being the immediate time-indicator, presaging doom where Immanuel focuses hope. He dates the fulfillment: Tiglath-pileser down the coast in 734 BC, Galilee and Transjordan lost in 733 (2 Kings 15:29), Damascus fallen in 732.

⁶⁰ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 93–94. On 8:6 he notes that Shiloah carried Jerusalem's water from the Gihon spring, the site of Davidic coronations (1 Kings 1:33–34, 45), so the stream can stand for the Davidic monarchy; he takes *these people* as the northern kingdom, which had abandoned David's line. Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 223–24, takes them instead as Judah, rejoicing at the news that Rezin will fall and congratulating itself for trusting Assyria rather than God.

⁶¹ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 94–95. On 8:8 he observes that *land* with a possessive pronoun and a following address is found nowhere else, and that a singular possessive is joined to the land as a political unit only for kings, a personified Israel, or the Lord; Immanuel cannot be any ordinary child. Young, *Isaiah*, 1:307, hears the cry as a prayer addressed to the Messiah, whose land the Assyrian has no right to.

⁶² Young, *Isaiah*, 1:310–11. On 8:12 he argues that the one being accused of conspiracy was Isaiah himself, for opposing the court's policy of seeking foreign aid, and that prophets who call God's people to act like God's people have often been treated as troublemakers.

⁶³ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 97. On 8:14 he explains *sanctuary* as the place where God dwells in His holiness, the word used of the tabernacle and temple, and concludes that the same God in His unchanging nature is both sanctuary and snare; it depends on how people react to His holiness.

⁶⁴ Young, *Isaiah*, 1:314–17. On 8:17–18 he sets out three readings of who is speaking (Isaiah alone, the Messiah, or Isaiah as a type of Christ), leans toward the Messiah without being dogmatic, and notes that Hebrews 2:13 supports the messianic reading without excluding a secondary reference to Isaiah and his sons. Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 48, takes the Messiah as the speaker on the strength of Hebrews 2:13.

⁶⁵ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 230–31. On 8:19–20 he points to Ahaz's promotion of foreign worship (2 Kings 16; 2 Chronicles 28) as the background, notes that the Law repeatedly forbids contacting the dead (Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:10–11), and reads *to the instruction and testimony* as a test by which every claim to supernatural knowledge is to be judged.

⁶⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 99–100. On 9:1 he shows that *gloom* and *distress* pick up the vocabulary of 8:22, notes that Zebulun and Naphtali were the first part of the land to fall to Assyria in 733 BC, and observes that no one but Isaiah ever called the region *Galilee of the Gentiles*.

⁶⁷ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 102. On 9:6 he argues that the repetition of *Mighty God* in 10:21, of the Lord Himself, settles its meaning, and that renderings like "Godlike Hero" are linguistically improbable. Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 241–43, adds that no other person in the Old Testament bears God's name, and that the titles and the eternal reign of 9:7 rule out Ahaz, Hezekiah, or Josiah. Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 50, notes that David himself sat on the Lord's throne (1 Chronicles 29:23), so the throne of 9:7 is not to be read in a narrow, earthly sense; Christ, the son of David, is seated on it now.