

It's that time of year again. A time when people ask, "What do you want for Christmas?" If you are like me, it is not an easy question to answer. My first response is, "nothing." When it comes to material things, I have everything I need and then some. But there are some gifts that would be nice to have. I would like to know the future. I wouldn't mind having super powers. Maybe a stocking full of security and a heart full of peace would be nice. I think Jana's response would be something like, "Sorry but you will have to settle for new slippers or a new sweater." But here is the amazing thing - the Christmas gift that God gives us will free us from mental confusion, provide us with power, give us a sense of security, and relieve us of our anxiety about the chaos and violence in this world. "A child has been born, a Son has been given," who is called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There is no greater gift we could ever receive or offer this world than the One mentioned in Is. 9:6.

For the next four weeks I want to examine each of these names found in Is. 9:6. Today I want to consider the Wonderful Counselor.

Times were tough in the land of Israel. Is. 8:22 provides a bleak summary of conditions during the time of Isaiah. Isaiah had lived through a series of failed kings and a crumbling kingdom. So 600 years before the birth of the Jesus the prophet looks out at the horizon to a time when God would send a Messiah, His anointed King, to rule permanently on the earth. "The government will rest on His shoulders." This reminder couldn't come at a better time. We are recovering from a very contentious political season. Most of us are weary of politics, politicians, polls, pundits, protestors and publicity stunts. If you have felt that way, I have good news and bad news for you; the good news is the election is over. The bad news is the next campaign has already begun. But the best news of all is that Isaiah says there is a day coming when there will be no more campaigns, no more flawed candidates, no more contentious elections. God will rule on the earth forever.

This same Messiah who will rule over all the earth wants to rule in our hearts. And if "every heart prepares Him room," we will receive four of the most wonderful gifts anyone could ever receive. The first gift is a Wonderful Counselor. This is the gift of divine guidance. Without the Messiah, we walk in darkness. "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light." (Is. 9:2). Matthew quotes this same verse as Jesus begins His ministry. The people who stumble around in the dark bumping into each other will be led by a Wonderful Counselor.

When we hear the word "counselor" we think of someone who has been trained to

help them get a better grip on life. The American Counseling Association says that professional **counselors** "help clients identify goals and potential solutions to problems which cause emotional turmoil; seek to improve communication and coping skills; strengthen self-esteem; and promote behavior change and optimal mental health."

The idea of a counselor in this context is one who offers divine guidance based on a predetermined outcome. This Wonderful Counselor will lead us to the place He has prepared for us. "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you." Ps. 32:8. God has a plan for your life. He does not eliminate the responsibility to choose a course of action or make wise decisions but those who trust in Him will eventually arrive safely at their ultimate destination. One of the great theological debates is the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. The Bible affirms both. How can that be? It's like hopping on a train going to Chicago. You are free to move around the cars, sit in any seat you want, sleep or read a book, but at the end of the day, you ARE going to be in Chicago. So we can go through life with the assurance that no matter what happens to us, we are moving toward a glorious future.

The adjective Isaiah attaches to Counselor should inspire and comfort us. The word is "wonderful." There are a couple of ways we use this word. The most common definition is "desirable, excellent, very good," as in "I had a wonderful time at the Christmas party." But here the word means to inspire awe. Insert "awesome." We have worn out that word but in the best sense "awesome" conveys amazing, extraordinary, great, beyond what we expect. The Psalmist prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law." Ps. 119:18

The Bible is a "wonderful" book. By that I don't mean it is just good or excellent or desirable. I mean that on every page there is a story that slaps you upside the head. An old woman has a child, a young boy kills a giant, the sea parts, the sun stands still, a donkey talks and a lamb conquers. Who woulda thunk it?

God's gift to us in Jesus is an all-knowing counselor who guides us into a wonderful future. If Jesus is your wonderful counselor, then you can afford to make a couple of life-changing decisions.

1. If Jesus is your wonderful counselor feel free to resign as General Manager of the Universe. We are all control freaks. We think we know how the story should go, how the script should read. But it rarely goes the way we envision. That means

either we are hopelessly lost in a series of unconnected accidental events or we are part of a divine plan. The Messiah we worship walked on water, calmed the raging sea, cast our demons, healed the sick and raised the dead. No matter what happens, Jesus is able to transform your crazy circumstances into a strategic advantage. Do you trust Him?

2. If Jesus is your wonderful counselor feel free to be a witness to the wonder. There is not much wonder in our world today. Everything has been reduced to atoms and genes and x's and o's and 0s and 1s. Even Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist, wrote a book in an effort to awaken the wonder of creation. In *Unweaving the Rainbow*, he mentions the poet Keats who playfully accused Isaac Newton of destroying the poetry of the rainbow by "reducing it to the prismatic colors." A couple of years ago I went to the Body Works exhibit that was here in Dallas. Human bodies were sliced and plasticized so that you could see every bone and muscle, every nerve and organ. I came away disappointed because after an hour of looking at all these plasticized people in various poses, the wonder was gone. They were not human beings with stories who lived and loved, they were science experiments no more wondrous than the frog I dissected in high school.

Christmas can be that way. We can hustle through the next three weeks going from store to store and party to party never taking time to wonder. We run the risk of analyzing the holiday like analyzing a kiss. "If you describe a kiss in sheer physical terms, it sounds repulsive. Two people press their moist, creased facial orifices together, cinch tight the sphincter muscles to draw the flesh around the orifice into a bulbous mound, and exchange saliva and breath. It takes imagination to transmute that into an act of intimacy and eroticism. It takes the power to see beyond and beneath the stark physicality of it. Those who look at the stars and see only dead rock and gases are like men who have spent their lives analyzing kisses and have never kissed anyone." Mark Buchanan

When we live without wonder it is like walking through an art gallery staring at the floor. Wonder grows weaker as our lives get busier. When we are in a hurry we can miss the wonder of it all. So slow down, witness the wonder and then tell someone about your wonderful story. "Me? There is nothing wonderful about my story." I disagree. Remember the time you almost died but God spared your life? Remember the trouble you were in a few years ago but now you have recovered? Remember when you were broke...and you're still broke? But you can laugh about it because you've never missed a meal.

He Shall be Called
Whatever Happened to Wonder

Isaiah 9:2-6

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One day our Savior's rule will extend even over those who do not acknowledge His lordship. But until then, His kingdom is invisible and the Messiah's rule is over those who trust Him and obey Him as Lord.