

“The Light Has Come”

Isaiah 9:1-2

Pastor Jason Van Bemmel

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

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have seen a great light;
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on them has light shone.*

- Isaiah 9:1-2, ESV

“Familiarity breeds contempt” but “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Why am I starting a sermon with two clichés strung together in such an obvious way? Well, here we are on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, at the start of a familiar season in our lives and culture. Our culture calls it “The Holiday Season,” and it begins roughly the day after Halloween these days, takes a few hours off for Thanksgiving Day, which we like to call Turkey Day (probably so we don’t have to be reminded that we should be thankful and, more importantly, that there is Someone to whom we OWE our Thanks, for every good and perfect gift. But this has been such a strange year, a year in which so many of our traditions and routines have been disrupted, a year in which political animosity has divided people more deeply than ever before, that this year, we seem almost desperate for the familiar traditions of the “holiday season.” Perhaps it’s because it feels like 2020 has lasted for 3 years, maybe 4, and so it feels so long ago that we had a normal, traditional holiday festival season.

But for Christians, this season has traditionally been known as Advent, and it is a season of waiting, of anticipating, of remembering, and of rejoicing. Christmas Day begins the traditional Christian celebration of 12 Days of Christmas, ending with the traditional Feast of the Magi on January 6th, celebrating the visit of the wise men from the East. Much of it is, admittedly, rooted in traditions that have little to do with Scripture.

For me, the best part of Advent is the opportunity it gives us to step back from the familiar place we live in, 2,000 years on this side of the coming of Jesus into the world, and to go back to the time of hundreds and hundreds of years of waiting. Waiting for Messiah to come. Waiting for the Light to Dawn. Waiting for deliverance, for salvation. The other thing Advent does is remind us that Jesus is coming again. God’s people waited almost 2,000 years between the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12 that his offspring would bring blessing to the whole world and the birth of that promised offspring, and the church has now waited almost 2,000 years since Jesus left, ascending into heaven and promising to return for us. Seeing how God’s people watched and waited can equip us to watch and wait well.

This year, instead of looking at several different Old Testament passages that speak of the coming of Messiah into the world, we’re going to spend our Advent in just one passage, Isaiah 9:1-6. This will allow us to focus more intently on specific aspects of Jesus’ character and His coming into the world. Because

we need to make sure that we never become so superficially familiar with the story of the coming of Jesus that we would develop contempt for the wonder of His coming. And as the years of His absence continue, we must pray that God would deepen our affection and longing for Him, day-by-day and year-by-year, and that's what I'm praying He will do for each of us through the message of Isaiah 9 this year.

A. The People Who Walked in Darkness

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“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

The first thing we see that the coming of Jesus into the world means is the dawning of the light into the darkness. But what does that mean for the world and for our hearts and lives?

I. People Walking in Darkness

Gloom. Anguish. Contempt. These are the first words used to describe the condition of God's people in Isaiah 9. These words describe well what it means to walk in darkness. When you are in the dark, you cannot see. You are easily overwhelmed by fear. Darkness, biblically, is a lack of light, and light stands for all truth, righteousness, and joy.

The first place we see the presence and power of darkness in the Bible is at the very beginning:

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.
– Gen. 1:1-2, ESV*

Formless, empty, and dark. This was the state of the world before God spoke and light entered.

If you've read much of the Old Testament, it's not hard to see the darkness that dominated the people of God before the coming of Jesus. Certainly, we can see some flashes of light at times, when God led His people out of Egypt and parted the Red Sea, when David led God's people to victory over the Philistines, when Solomon built the Temple, when later kings like Hezekiah and Josiah brought reform and revival of true worship to God's people.

But overall, the story and the situation was pretty dark, and it's not hard to see why: The constant sin

and faithlessness of God's people kept them in chains of darkness – gloom, anguish, contempt, formless, empty and dark spiritually. No sooner had they passed through the Red Sea than they sinned by complaining against the Lord. A year after He delivered them by wiping out the entire Egyptian army without any of them having to lift a finger in battle, they refused to believe He could defeat the powerful enemy in the Promised Land and so were cursed with 40 more years of wandering in the wilderness. Right after good kings brought reform and revival, bad kings arose who brought idolatry and injustice.

They were a people walking in darkness, without the light of God to truly guide them from the heart. They were stubborn, rebellious, wayward, foolish, idolatrous, adulterous. God disciplined them in love repeatedly, bringing them into subjection to enemies so they would see their sin and cry out to Him, and they would – temporarily – make earnest pleas to the Lord and pledge loyalty to Him, only to break their vows as soon as the dust settled from the powerful deliverance the Lord brought.

2. People Living in a Land of Darkness

Isaiah 9 is speaking to a very specific region of God's people. Isaiah speaks of Zebulun, Naphtali, and the land beyond the Jordan, and he sums up the whole region as "Galilee of the Gentiles." So, while the words of this prophecy do certainly sum up the situation of all of God's people for centuries before Jesus came, the focus is specifically on this region of Israel for very good reason.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve sons of Jacob, two of the tribes of Israel, and when the Promised Land was divided up by God, these tribes got land in the far north, around the Sea of Galilee. In 1 Kings 9, we read that Hiram, the King of Tyre, had supplied Solomon with great quantities of cedar and cypress timber and with gold for the Temple, and in exchange, Solomon gave King Hiram twenty cities in Galilee. Hiram didn't think much of these cities, saying, "What kind of cities are these that you have given me?" Contempt. Galilee had been held in contempt for so many years.

These twenty cities being given to Hiram, king of Tyre, is also the origin of this region becoming "Galilee of the Gentiles." For settlers from Tyre, Phoenicians, moved into these twenty cities – it probably became a good area for the kings of Tyre to send their less-desirable subjects, as is so often the case with colonies throughout world history. Later, these northern regions, this land of Galilee, would be the first area to be invaded and conquered whenever Israel's enemies, who always came from the North, invaded the area. The Syrians were followed by the Assyrians, who completely conquered all of the Northern Tribes of Israel. By the time Isaiah gave this prophecy, the Galilee area had been conquered and re-conquered so many times, the population was a mix of various peoples, reflected in their mixed worship practices and cultural habits. If all of the people of God were tempted to adopt the ways of the surrounding nations, worshiping their gods and following their customs, Galilee was the worst of them all.

So, this land was oppressed, afflicted, idolatrous, unfaithful, and everything else reflected in the meaning of the word darkness, gloom, anguish, and contempt. The real heart of their problem, though, was that they could never see the real heart of their problem. They always thought the invading armies and

foreign occupiers were the real darkness and oppression; they failed to see that their own sin held them in deeper, stronger chains and oppressed them far more than any invading army, and was in fact the cause of God's discipline of them in the form of the invading armies.

What about us? Do we walk in darkness? Do we live in a land of darkness?

In our natural state, apart from the grace of God intervening in our lives to bring the light of salvation in Jesus, we are no different from the people of ancient Israel. We are prone to sin and idolatry. We are prone to imitate the ways of the nations, to walk according to their priorities and values, and to seek to serve our own interests rather than worship and glorify the God who made us. And we, too, are tempted to think that our biggest problems are outside of ourselves, rather than deep in our hearts.

Thankfully, in the Bible, darkness never has the final word. After the darkness, God shines His light. This is the consistent pattern of God's work.

B. Have Seen a Great Light

God established this pattern of light coming in to pierce the darkness in the opening of the Bible, right after what we read earlier from Genesis I:

² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. – Genesis 1:2-5, ESV

The Apostle John, in the opening of his Gospel, intentionally echoes the language of Genesis I, where the Word of God and the Light of God penetrate the darkness:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
– John 1:1-5, ESV

The powerful pattern of God's work is easy to see: Both in creation and in redemption, God speaks His word into the darkness and light penetrates the darkness in a way that the darkness cannot overcome. This pattern of God's work reminds me of Psalm 119:130, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.”

If we want to know what the Bible means by “light,” it is the more powerful opposite of and solution to the darkness. So, darkness is ignorance, sin, shame, agony, despair, and ultimately death. For Jesus, to be condemned eternally is to be shut out in “outer darkness.” Ultimately, the darkness is caused by an absence of light. The Light then, which flows from God Himself, is truth and the knowledge of the truth,

righteousness, honor or glory, joy, hope, and, ultimately, life. If to be condemned forever is to be cast into “outer darkness,” then to be fully redeemed is to be with God forever, “who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light.” (I Tim. 6:16, ESV)

I. What Light?

But, to get back to our text here in Isaiah 9, what light is Isaiah prophesying will dawn and shine?

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. — v. 2*

This light is said to be Great, in magnitude and power, to be able to penetrate to those in a land of deep darkness, shining on the guilty, oppressed and agonizing people of God. Such powerful light must, of course, come from God Himself, but I believe such a powerful light must be God’s own light, the light of the world. Later, when we look at the four names of the Messiah from verse 6, we will see that the Promised One to come could be no one less than God Himself. And I think that for this light to have the full power of greatness to penetrate the darkness and deliver God’s people, it must be God’s own light, the Light of the World, which is what John 1 tells us:

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. — John 1:9-13, ESV

2. How Did It Shine on Them?

How did the light of God come and shine on the people living in this area Isaiah prophesied? Well, very specifically, Jesus was raised and came of age in Nazareth in Galilee, so He was known as Jesus of Nazareth, the Nazarene, and He ministered mainly in and throughout Galilee. This area was where He did most of His teaching and performed most of His miracles:

This is exactly what we read in Matthew 4, at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, right after He was baptized and then tempted in the wilderness:

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:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,

*the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
 the people dwelling in darkness
 have seen a great light,
 and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
 on them a light has dawned.”*

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

— Matthew 4:12-17, ESV

And Matthew, especially – but all the Gospel writers, really - shows us how Jesus shone as the light of the world through His powerful teaching, which was full of truth and which unfolded the righteousness of God to the people. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount laid out God's righteous standard for His people, and His parables told them of the nature of God's kingdom and of salvation. Then, His miracles not only validated His rightful claim to be Messiah and the authoritative nature of His teaching, but they also powerfully shone God's light: setting the demon-possessed free from their shameful oppression and bondage, healing the outcast (like lepers and the woman with the issue of blood), giving sight to the blind, and even raising the dead. Jesus intentionally sought out those who were known to be unclean, living in shame, deeply oppressed in bondage, and He healed them so powerfully, that everyone could see that He had the power to penetrate the darkness and set the prisoners free.

He also openly confronted the deceitful, hypocritical teachings of the Scribes and the Pharisees, who sought to hold people in bondage and exercise power over them. He did this at times by openly healing people in synagogues on the Sabbath day, in direct defiance of the religious leaders. At one famous healing, four friends tore a hole in the roof of a house and lowered their paralyzed friend on a mat down in front of Jesus, and Jesus spoke to the man, saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” And then, He healed the man, just to demonstrate that He indeed had the power to forgive sin. Later, when a notoriously sinful woman came and anointed his feet with oil and washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair, Jesus scandalized the religious leaders by openly proclaiming that this woman, whose sins were many, was forgiven all of them, and this is why she loved Jesus so dearly.

Jesus spoke to the heart of the problem of darkness, our sin, when He spoke these powerful words of forgiveness. He also addressed the many effects of the darkness, when He released people from bondage and oppression. The one thing He did not do, that He refused to do, was to lead a political revolution to overthrow the oppressive Romans, who deprived God's people of their freedoms and rights. Why? Because Israel was wrong to believe that Rome was the greatest oppressor and that political liberation was the greatest need, and Jesus would not reinforce this error and leave them in deep bondage, deceived into thinking they were free. Sin, Satan, and death – these are what hold God's people in true and deep darkness. This is the power of darkness Jesus came to break.

Ultimately, to free His people from darkness, Jesus had to become sin and enter into utter darkness Himself. On the cross, Jesus became sin for His people, and darkness covered the face of the land for hours in the middle of the day. God's just wrath against our sin was being satisfied, and when He had fully paid for all of sins with His precious blood, He cried out, “It is finished!” and gave His Spirit into the

hands of His Father, while His body was committed to the darkness of the tomb. Three days later, the Light of the World shattered the darkness of death forever when He rose again from the dead, having secured immortality for all of God's people, eternal life in eternal light.

3. How is It Shining on Us?

What about us sitting here this morning, over 2,000 years after the birth of Jesus and almost 2,000 years after His resurrection from the dead? Jesus didn't just come into the world so He could shine His light in Israel 2,000 years ago. No, His light must shine in our hearts today. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 4:5-7:

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. – 2 Cor. 4:5-7, ESV

We believers in Jesus, in and of ourselves, are nothing but jars of clay. We do not proclaim ourselves. We are not self-righteous, and we need to make that clear to the world. But God, the same God who spoke light into the darkness of the world in Genesis 1, has chosen to shine His light in our hearts to give us the knowledge of His own glory, as seen in the face of Jesus Christ our Savior, the Light of the World.

This is what it means to be saved, to have the light of God penetrate our hearts and deliver us from the darkness, as Paul says in Colossians 1:

giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. – vv. 12-14, ESV

C. Walk as Children of Light

And so, I have just two questions for you this morning:

1. Has the light shone on you?
2. What difference is the Light of God making in your life?

Has the light of God shone on you? Have your sins been forgiven? Has your shame been covered? Have you been set free from bondage to sin and from the fear of death? Have you trusted in Jesus and received from Him what He alone can give, the gift of complete forgiveness and eternal life? If not, come to Him today. Do not delay, but come to the light of the world, trust in Him today?

If you have been transformed by the light of the world shining on you, what difference does it make in your life? Two things should characterize us, if we have had the light shine on us and in our hearts: We

should walk in the light and we should walk as children of light.

I. Walk in the Light

Walking in the light means having fellowship with God and living our lives with Him:

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. – 1 John 1:5-9, ESV

Fellowship with God and fellowship with one another. Not covering our wins but openly confessing them and being forgiven. Walking in truth and striving after righteousness. Being cleansed by the blood of Jesus. These are the characteristics of those who are walking in the light. If the opening of God's word brings light, we need to be in the word. If we are to be confessing our sins, we need to be in prayer. And we need to be in fellowship with one another. The word, prayer, and fellowship – these are the heartbeat and lifeblood of walking in the light.

2. Walk as Children of Light

And then we are called to walk in the world as children of light. It's not that we have light in and of ourselves, but we reflect God's light, as the moon shines in the night by reflecting the light of the sun. Ephesians 5 calls us to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (v. 1, ESV) and "Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord." (v. 8-9, ESV) It then warns us against being foolish and living like the rest of the world and instead calls us to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

I'll put it this way, to keep it simple: You can either imitate your heavenly Father and demonstrate what He is like to the world, or you can imitate the world to fit in and be walking in darkness. The world is ignorant of the ways of God and is living in open rebellion against God. They need to see the light of God, reflected in us. We must not fit in.

The Light of the World has come into the world, bringing truth, righteousness, forgiveness, eternal life. Has He shone in your heart? Are you walking in the light and walking in the world as a child of light?