

Advent 2020

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | Christmas 2020

Sermon 1, The Christmas Promise: The Darkness Will End and the Son Will Govern, Isaiah 9:1-7

Proposition: The darkness will end and the Son will reign.

- I. The Depth of Israel's Darkness, chs. 6-9
 - A. Hardened Hearts, 6:9-10
 - B. A Political Conspiracy to Enthroned a Usurper, 7:4-6
 - C. Foreign Invasion, 8:7-8
 - D. Magic-Based Policymaking, 8:19
- II. The Brightness of God's Light, vv. 1-5
 - A. Exalt the Humbled Land, v. 1
 - B. Save the Darkened People
 1. Shine Light on Them, v. 2
 2. Multiply Them, v. 3a
 3. Make Them Joyful, v. 3b
 - C. Break the Yoke and Rod of Oppression, v. 4
 - D. Burn the Boots and Cloaks of War, v. 5
- III. The Agent of God's Light, vv. 6-7
 - A. A Given Son, v. 6
 - B. A Governing Son, vv. 6b-7
 1. His Rule
 2. His Name
 - a) Wonderful Counselor
 - b) Mighty God
 - c) Everlasting Father
 - d) Prince of Peace
 3. His Peace
 4. His Kingdom
 5. His Judgments and His Righteousness
 6. His Eternal Rule
 - C. A Zealous LORD of Hosts, v. 7d

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Isaiah 9 is a prophecy for our time. As we move toward Christmas, I want us to look first at the promise of Christmas. That promise, of course, is that a son will be given to the human race as our Savior. This is actually the only place

in the Bible that our Lord is given the title “Prince of Peace.” Next week, we will look at the imperative of Christmas, summed up in the angels’ command to “fear not!” But we can only stop fearing when we have grappled with God’s promise to send a son who will put an end to darkness and govern the world rightly. What I hope to show you this morning is that the darkness will end and the Son will reign.

I. The Depth of Israel’s Darkness, chs. 6-9

The first thing I want you to see is that the glorious promise of Isaiah 9 was not given to people enjoying themselves on the beach. It was not issued over the loudspeakers at Disneyland. It was made, rather, at a terrible time. Militarily and culturally speaking, things were a disaster in Israel at the time of this prophecy. Let’s just look at a few of the problems Isaiah highlights and see if any of them sound familiar.

A. Hardened Hearts, 6:9-10

The first problem, and really the biggest problem facing Israel was the hard hearts of its people. In fact, their hearts were not just hard, but hardened. God had specifically commissioned Isaiah, in a passage quoted in all four Gospels and in the book of Acts to explain Israel’s response to Jesus, to go and harden the people’s hearts by proclaiming the truth to them. Unsurprisingly, it worked! The people of God had their hearts hardened in the wisdom of God as a punishment for continuing to reject and despise His commands to them.

They had eyes. They couldn’t see, though. They had ears, but couldn’t hear. They had hearts, but couldn’t feel. And all of that was a consequence of their unclean lips and foul hearts! God had consigned them to disobedience until their sin emptied and desolated their entire land. Brothers and sisters, in our post-Christian America, are there some hard hearts? Do you ever lament the hardness of the heart inside your own chest? Do you believe that if God is righteous, then we and our fellow Americans certainly deserve a judicial hardening?

B. A Political Conspiracy to Enthroner a Usurper, 7:4-6

But the hardness of their hearts was far from the only problem facing Israel and Judah. They were literally dealing with a conspiracy, backed by foreign military power, to take the Davidic king off the Judean throne and replace him with some usurper, Ben-Tabael. Brothers and sisters, some of you see good reason to believe that a usurper is likely to take the throne in our land. Well, so it was in Isaiah’s day! The traditions and constitutional procedures, the rule of law in their society, was threatened by enemies foreign and probably domestic too.

As I said, the prophet did not deliver this oracle about a son in response to olive oil getting cheaper, or some other good news about commodity prices. He gave it in response to the worst news his country could possibly deal with.

C. Foreign Invasion, 8:7-8

In addition to this, another enemy loomed on the horizon. Northern Israel and Syria wanted to install Ben-Tabael on Judah’s throne; Assyria was going to invade and fill the whole land with their armies. That’s actually why Israel and Syria were not really a big deal. It’s as if we were faced today with a coalition of Britain and the European Union, and then China determined that it was going to invade them and us simultaneously. (Obviously, the parallels are hard for us to

grasp because we live in a military superpower. Judah was not even one of the great powers of its day. If you think about the size of force Campbell County could field, and imagine all of South Dakota and Nebraska as our enemies, you would be looking at something more comparable to what Judah was facing in Isaiah's day. Essentially, our county is a little fish and it is never going to be able to take on two whole states, even if they are puny states.)

You think a foreign-backed usurper is scary; imagine full-blown invasion.

D. Magic-Based Policymaking, 8:19

And to top it all off, some of the brightest minds in the Judean administration were trying to get help from mediums and wizards. They literally had magic-based policymaking. Not evidence-based. Not even ideologically-based. No. Just "Ask a local magician" and do whatever he recommends. They were talking to the dead to try to get some policy help. They were asking peeping, muttering wizards and other experts in the occult.

Brothers and sisters, this is the situation Isaiah was up against. This is what was commonplace in Judah in his day, around 700 years B.C.

II. The Brightness of God's Light, vv. 1-5

And it was in that milieu that he delivered the prophecy that is our main focus this morning. In that darkness, the darkness of hard hearts, usurping politicians, foreign invasion, and magical thinking, Isaiah announced the light of God.

A. Exalt the Humbled Land, v. 1

The gloom will come to an end. The power of God will pierce this present darkness. How? Well, it will begin in the northeastern part of Israel, in this little territory called Galilee of the Gentiles. This territory is mentioned only five times in the entire OT apart from this place. It was the Campbell County of Israel. It was out in the sticks, far from being anywhere significant. It's not Jerusalem. It's not Judea. It's not Ephraim. It's not a city that you've heard of, a territory whose name you instantly recognize.

In college, I was talking to a friend from California about my visit to England when I was in high school. I said that the English would ask where I was from, and I would say "Colorado," to which they would respond "Where is that?"

My Californian friend said, "Everyone I've talked to abroad knows my hometown: San Diego."

Well, Galilee isn't San Diego. It's more like Gillette. Where is it again? What happened there? Well, in this obscure corner of the promised land, God's light will dawn. Previously the tribal territory of Zebulun and Naphtali was the back end of beyond. It used to be nowhereville. But now it has become glorious; the name "Galilee" occurs 65 times across the gospels and Acts. Every one of you knows this name. And you all associate it with the ministry of Jesus Christ. God's promise, then, is to take the obscure and make it glorious.

B. Save the Darkened People

And the promise is not just for the land. It's also for the people.

1. Shine Light on Them, v. 2

First of all, He is going to shine a light on them. This is one of those passages that is deadened by explanation. Isaiah said it better and more clearly than I ever will! As pleasant as light is, you know what he means here. God will not let His people stay in darkness forever. The darkness of invasion, usurpation, magical thinking — it's all going to be dispelled by the light of the coming Son. Death casts a shadow, but light erases shadows.

2. Multiply Them, v. 3a

God is going to make the people many. We love growth. We love multiplication. We enjoy seeing children grow up and have families of their own; we love seeing this church full every Sunday. God is going to convert more people. This will be a result of the coming of Jesus!

3. Make Them Joyful, v. 3b

And in their growth, they will be joyful. This joy is described with two similes: The joy of harvest, and the joy of conquest. Both are forms of gain. When the crop you labored over so long pays off, that feels good. When the enemy who fought you so hard finally yields and you get to help yourself to his stuff, that feels amazing too.

Brothers and sisters, do you know the joy of this promise this Christmas? Even as we reckon with the same kinds of problems that Isaiah did, are you able to see how wonderful it is that the son has been given? Do you know this kind of joy every day, and especially every Christmas time?

C. Break the Yoke and Rod of Oppression, v. 4

Because God is not only giving light and joy and increase; He is also going to break these two tools of oppression. One is the yoke. That is a device you hook on an ox so that it can pull a plow or some other implement. A yoke metaphorically means anything that binds you and channels your labor for someone else's benefit. God will smash the yokes. He will destroy the things that force you to labor for an oppressor.

The other described here is the rod. This is a cane or stick — basically a tool for striking and inflicting pain. It is a junior version of a club. Its purpose is not to crush, like a club. It is merely for bruising and hurting, like a whip does. God will break the rod of the oppressor too.

What does this mean? Ultimately, of course, it means the New Jerusalem. Are we justified in seeing an application of this passage in moves to ban cruel and unusual punishment and moderate the length of the working day? I think so. But though such things are a legitimate application (“God hates oppressors and cruel rods, so I will too”), the real fulfillment of this promise is set in a distant day, when the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God.

D. Burn the Boots and Cloaks of War, v. 5

In that day, God is going to burn every boot and cloak of war. We would call this “tactical gear” in our day. The uniforms, the military clothing, those omnipresent tan boots that we've all seen our soldier friends wearing after their return from Iraq and Afghanistan — God says all of that will be thrown in the fire. It will no longer be needed for warfare. In other words, this is another way of saying what Isaiah said a few chapters ago about beating one's sword into a plowshare. The arrival of the Prince of Peace will put an end to war.

Why is this? How can this be? Because God is sending a son to us.

III. The Agent of God's Light, vv. 6-7

The source of God's light is His Son. Notice that vv. 4-6 all start with "for." The last one of them, v. 6, provides the climactic reason for the assertions in the previous verses. What guarantees all the promises of the first five verses, promises made in the teeth of experience, likelihood, and human hope? The answer is this gift of a Son.

A. A Given Son, v. 6

The Son is given to us. As we get ready in our household for our new baby girl to be born, I'm naturally thinking a lot about birth. And specifically, I'm holding onto the phrase "give birth." Why is birth something we call "given"? Because it is quite literally a gift. It is something our baby girl will experience. She will get born. And that birth will be a gift from her mother to her, the first and greatest of all birthday gifts. Well, the Son of whom the prophet speaks is a given Son. He is God's present to us. I talk about this all the time in sermons and at the Lord's Table because I don't think we realize what it means to say that God gave us His Son! God gave us His Son. Unto us a Son is given.

Jesus is for you and for me. He is a gift from the Father to the church. At weddings we ask "Who gives this woman?" But at the marriage supper of the Lamb, I suppose we will have to ask "Who gives this man?"

We don't have to fear political conspiracy, foreign invasion, magic-based policy, or anything else. Even hard hearts can't withstand the rule of the Lord's Anointed. Even the disastrous darkness that overspread Judah in Isaiah's day was no match for this gift.

B. A Governing Son, vv. 6b-7

Why? Obviously, because of the character of the one given. What was He like?

1. His Rule

Well, the first thing Isaiah tells us about Him here is that the government will be on His shoulder. He will free our shoulders from yokes and rods. And on His shoulders He will take up the difficult matter of the government.

"Servant leadership" does not mean that the leader does whatever the people he's leading tell him to do. Not at all. Servant leadership means that the way the leader serves the community is by leading them. He gives them organization, structure, something to do and somewhere to go. That is a service that he provides. Well, the service that Jesus selflessly undertakes is to rule. Governing is what He does.

2. His Name

Who is this Son? He is given four names, each of the pattern adjective-noun. The four names are such that only God Himself could rightly bear them.

a) Wonderful Counselor

Isaiah 28 tells us that Yahweh is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom. The counsel that this Son gives is the most wonderful counsel imaginable. Indeed, we can safely say that it is the counsel of omnipotence. Will a wonderful counselor be able to move against invasion, usurpation, magical thinking, and all the rest of it? Of course He will!

b) Mighty God

For He is the mighty God. This title, more than any of the others, makes it clear that we are not talking about Hezekiah or some other prince of David's line. We are literally talking about God Himself, the mighty God who created and sustains the universe.

God is giving God to us. God is giving Himself to us. Why do we hang lights on the trees and give each other gifts? Because God gave the greatest gift of all at Christmas.

c) Everlasting Father

Furthermore, this Son who will be given is the Everlasting Father. This does not mean that the Father and the Son are the same person of the Trinity. Rather, it is a reference to the Son as the "father" of His seed. Put another way, we could say that many or most Christians quite literally call Jesus "Father" in praying to Him when they say confused things like "Father, thank you for dying on the cross for us." In that regard, I am not far wrong in saying that Jesus is called "Father" far more often than He is called the rest of the names here put together.

Not only is he the Father of a numerous seed; He is eternal. From everlasting to everlasting, He is God.

Again, the short-lived Syro-Ephraimite crisis, the political disasters of the day, the hard-heartedness of short-lived people — all of those things are less than nothing to the Lord who made Heaven and Earth and who endures forever. Can you trust that and live in light of His eternity during your crisis of the moment?

d) Prince of Peace

Finally, Jesus is the Prince of Peace. This is one of His most beloved titles, even though (as I noted) it appears only here in the Bible.

What of that fact that countries filled with ostensible disciples of Jesus Christ often seem no more peaceful than countries without them? Well, that doesn't change this title. The peace He brings is a peace at the very end, when the historical process has worked itself out completely. But until then, He promised not peace but a sword. He is not the Prince of Immediate Peace.

3. His Peace

Nonetheless, there will be no end to the increase of peace under His rule. What does this mean? It means that when the Kingdom comes, we will have infinite peace. When His Kingdom has not yet come, we won't see that perfect peace. Yet, with Assyrians at the gates, we are called on to believe in it anyway. That was Isaiah's declaration in his own day, and it's still true today.

4. His Kingdom

The same goes for this Son's Kingdom. It too will increase, from nothing to infinity. This is not a statement in favor of "big government," but in favor of Jesus' government. We don't have to walk in fear because of the political machinations of our time because we have a better government coming!

5. His Judgments and His Righteousness

That government, when Jesus' rule is perfected, will be characterized by judgments — legal rulings in favor of the victim and against the perpetrator — and by righteousness. Righteousness is actively doing that which is right. Jesus judges rightly. Jesus also acts rightly. This will take

place within David's Kingdom. By this, the text does not mean that Jesus will someday rule the territory of Ancient Israel and nothing else. Rather, it means that He will rule the Kingdom of God. David and Solomon were earthly rulers of that Kingdom. They held their place on the throne temporarily — just 40 years apiece. But Jesus will rule the Kingdom of God not for forty years, but for forty forever.

6. His Eternal Rule

The prophet says so in so many words. From the time that the Son is given until forever, He will sit on David's throne ruling God's Kingdom. Everything that God is winning back from Satan's dominion, Jesus will rule. And He will rule it not just for a time, but for always.

C. A Zealous LORD of Hosts, v. 7d

How will this happen? Through the zeal of Yahweh of Hosts. God is called the "God of Hosts" many times, especially in Isaiah. It is a reminder to us of the size of His heavenly armies. He is not the god of an army; He is the God of Armies (plural). And His zeal is the overflow of His love for and delight in Himself and therefore in His people and His creation. He zealously will accomplish every one of these promises. He already gave the Son. Can you doubt that He will carry through the rest? Brothers and sisters, receive and believe the Christmas promise. God is for you in His Son. Know Him as everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. Amen.