

They Testify of Me (Part 2 of 4)

'Unto Us a Child is Born': The Light of Christ in the Darkness of Life

Isaiah 9:1-6

Mark Vroegop

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. ⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (Isaiah 9:1-7).

One of my favorite Christmas specials is the 1960s animated version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. I'm sure that you are familiar with the plot of this classic Dr. Seuss film, but permit me to review the basics for you:

The Grinch, a bitter, grouchy, cave-dwelling creature with a heart "two sizes too small", lives on snowy Mount Crumpit, a steep, 3,000-foot high mountain just north of Whoville, home of the merry and warm-hearted Whos. His only companion is his faithful dog, Max. From his perch high atop Mount Crumpit, the Grinch can hear the noisy Christmas festivities that take place in Whoville. Annoyed and unable to understand the Whos' happiness, he makes plans to descend on the town and deprive them of their Christmas presents, Roast Beast, Who-hash and decorations and thus "prevent Christmas from coming." However, he learns in the end that despite his success in taking away all the Christmas presents and decorations from the Whos, Christmas comes just the same. He then realizes that Christmas is more than just gifts and presents. Touched by this, his heart grows three sizes larger; he returns all the presents and trimmings and is warmly welcomed into the community of the Whos.¹

The turning point of the storyline comes when the Grinch has a perspective change. He suddenly realizes there something more to Christmas than what he realized. Here's how Dr. Seuss (as only he can write) makes the point:

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_the_Grinch_Stole_Christmas!

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store? What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more?²

Christmas specials are usually about a perspective change. These secular books and films have picked up on an important theme in the narratives surrounding the Christmas story. Whether it's Charlie Brown, Ebenezer Scrooge, or George Bailey, there is something about Christmas that demands a reorientation – even a renewal – of hope. Unfortunately, the secular message during this season, with the exception of Charlie Brown, misses the essence of that hope through the birth of Jesus Christ.

Advent is a season of looking back to the birth of Christ with the hopeful anticipation of His second coming. It is meant to be a season where our spiritual perspective is reoriented, a time for us to remember that **the future will be as bright as the past has been dark**. The advent of Jesus Christ is a signature moment in biblical history where we see God fulfill His promise and bring hope to people who are in darkness.

One of the clearest examples of this perspective change is found in Isaiah 9. We are taking the weeks leading up to Christmas to reflect on some of the best Old Testament narratives that speak about the coming Christ. And I want to show you the way in which the promise of a coming child was designed to be a perspective changer, encouraging the people of God that that the future will be as bright as the past has been dark.

The Darkness of the Present

In order to appreciate the beauty of what is found in Isaiah 9, you have to understand what is happening in biblical history. It is a dark and scary time for the people of God. There are threats and challenges from multiple angles.

We get a sense of this in the first verse: *"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... (Isaiah 9:1a).*

If you look back to Chapter 8 you will see that it is even worse. The picture is bleak.

²¹They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward. ²²And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness (Isaiah 8:21–22).

What is going on here? You need to know that the book of Isaiah records God's words to His people who had become rebellious against the one true God. They had forsaken the Lord, despised the Holy One of Israel, and were utterly estranged from Him (Isa. 1:4). The result was a

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_the_Grinch_Stole_Christmas!

season of discipline from the Lord: "I will turn my hand against you and smelt away your dross as lye removes all your alloy" (Isa. 1:25). God was weary of the waywardness of His people, and He intended to awaken them from their spiritual slumber by means of suffering. This discipline will come at the hands of other nations, specifically the Assyrians.

Isaiah served the Lord during the reign of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Uzziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah were renown for being great kings. They feared the Lord, and while they weren't perfect, they were able to lead in a way that was spiritually helpful to the people. Ahaz is on the throne when Isaiah 9 was written, and he is a terrible king.

The looming threat for everyone in the Middle East was Assyria. In Isaiah 7 we learn that Ahaz heard about an alliance that Israel and Syria made in order to protect themselves against Assyria and force Judah to join them. Isaiah 7:2 says "the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook like trees..." The Lord desires to encourage Ahaz regarding His promises and His protection so He tells him to ask for a sign, but Ahaz hypocritically refuses. Therefore, the Lord tells him what the sign will be. It is a rather famous passage:

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

This promise was designed to show the people and Ahaz that God was going to protect His people. They needed to trust Him. But they refused.

Ahaz chose to become a servant of Assyria instead of trusting God. Rather than trusting in God's protection and listening to the word of God through Isaiah and even God Himself, Ahaz chose to fear his circumstances and take actions on his own, which proved disastrous.

Let me tell you where things go from here. Eventually King Ahaz's solution to the threat from Israel and Syria will become a vassal state of Assyria. Judah became someone else's servant even though God told Ahaz to trust Him. Ahaz begged for military help, and in return he took silver and gold from the temple and gave it to the Assyrian king as tribute. After the King of Assyria defeated Israel and Syria, Ahaz visited his new master and observed an altar which was located in Syria, an altar to their god called Hadad. He was so impressed with this altar that he ordered the priest to build him a replica and replace the bronze altar in the temple area. Ahaz's lack of trust had now drifted into a full-scale religious syncretism (see 2 Kings 16:1-16).

If things weren't bad enough, in order to pay for the annual tribute, Ahaz deconstructed much of the temple equipment and gave it to the King of Assyria. The effect was that the temple of God was closed! Listen to the devastating statement in 2 Chronicles 28:24:

²⁴ And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and he shut up the doors of the house of the LORD, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 28:24).

Assyria was taking over! Ahaz was so afraid of Israel and Syria, but the nation was struggling to survive under this pressure from a foreign power. Ahaz thought he was so smart in appealing to

Assyria because he was scared, but now they are in real trouble. God had warned them. Here's what he said:

⁶ "Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah {Syria and Israel}, ⁷ therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, ⁸ and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel" (Isaiah 8:6-8).

So Judah is in a very dark spot, and it is going to get worse. Isaiah 9 is written in the middle of this devastating season where the King of Judah refuses to trust in God. That is why there is "gloom of anguish" and "thick darkness." There are looming and scary threats. Spiritually, things do not look good, and the more that Isaiah calls people to repentance, the harder they become (Isa. 6:9-10). The political and spiritual leaders are selling out, and Assyria's power is only growing. It feels like the waters of trouble are rising.

This setting is really important because Isaiah attempts to persuade the people of Judah that God is worthy of their trust. They shouldn't fear or make proud, self-dependent decisions which factor God out of the equation.

And to convince them to trust God now, Isaiah tells them about what God is going to do in the future. Don't miss this because this is where we see the perspective change opportunity that I talked about earlier. Isaiah desires to convince them that the future is going to be as bright as the past has been dark.

Isaiah 9 and the situation surrounding its writing are very relevant for where we live today. On a personal level, 2012 may have been a very hard or difficult year for you. Personal loss, the consequences of sin, spiritual struggles, a job loss, or painful conflict may make you "Scrooge-like" in your demeanor and maybe in your soul. On a national level, there are many things which could cause us to fear. As you read the news, it is hard to ignore scary terms like the "fiscal cliff," the acrimony in Washington, the growing threat of conflict in the Middle East, the erosion of biblical values in our culture, and the decline of the influence of the church in our culture. Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, believes we are witnessing a significant moral shift as evidenced in our national voting patterns.³

So how does Advent relate this personal and cultural reality?

The Brightness of the Future

Isaiah's message is about the brightness of Judah's future. There will come a day when God will defeat all of Judah's enemies, and He will provide a ruler unlike any other – especially Ahaz! Isaiah tells the people of God this good news in order to motivate them to trust God now. He wants to change their perspective about the present by telling them about what God is going to do in the future. In other words, the promise of future grace helps them with what they presently face.

³ See <http://www.albertmohler.com/2012/11/07/aftermath-lessons-from-the-2012-election/>

There are three reasons why the future looks bright:⁴

1. Light will shine in darkness (vv 1-2)

The first two verses establish the contrast between the darkness of the past and the light that will come. Isaiah talks about the future as if he's presently living it. And it is a future that is remarkably different from the gloom of the past.

¹ 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. ² 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 (Isaiah 9:1-2).

The areas that are mentioned here (i.e., the land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali) were regions most often affected by foreign invasions and which were often most guilty of foreign worship and influence. This area was also called "Galilee of the Gentiles," and Matthew refers to Isaiah 9 in Matthew 4 when he talks about the launch of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. Clendenen in his commentary on Isaiah tells us about the significance of this area:

"This verse surprisingly predicts that the least likely area of Israel, the far northern section that was the most militarily oppressed and the most influenced by pagans, will in some way be honored by God when he sends a new 'light' in the future."⁵

Light will shine in the darkest of dark areas.

2. Victory will come (vv 3-5)

Verses 3-5 tell the people about a great victory that is coming and the joy which will be a vital part of their experience. Their gloom will be turned into great rejoicing – the kind of celebration associated with prosperity, growth, and triumph in battle.

³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil (Isaiah 9:3).

Further, this victory will be surprising, and Isaiah uses the triumph over Midian as an example of what this will be like. Judges 6-7 records the story of how Gideon defeated the oppressive army of the Midians with only 300 men armed with weapons, trumpets, and lamps. Despite their small numbers, God gave them victory.

⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian (Isaiah 9:4).

And the result will be the utter defeat of the enemy, pictured in the burning of the bloody war garments of the enemy.

⁴ Clendenen, E. R., *Isaiah 1-39. The New American Commentary*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 234.

⁵ Clendenen, 238.

5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire (Isaiah 9:5).

Even though Assyria looked strong and the threats from the north were real, there was going to be a day when God's people would experience stunning and surprising triumph. Victory will come.

3. A son will rule forever (vv 6-7)

The promises of a bright future reach their climax with the announcement of a son in the line of David who will rule and reign forever.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder... (Isaiah 9:6a).

The promise of future deliverance and peace is rooted in a person. We, of course, know who Isaiah 9 is referring to: Jesus Christ. God's deliverance of His people will ultimately come from a son who will be given to them from God. What's more, He will take upon Himself the mantle of care, protection, and rule – the government shall be upon His shoulder.

Next we read four different titles which serve to magnify the greatness and power of this righteous ruler:

- Wonderful Counselor – He will do wonderful and miraculous things combined with the skill of wise advice.
- Mighty God – He is ascribed divine authority and empowerment.
- Everlasting Father – His rule will be benevolent and father-like in its care, and it will be everlasting in its scope.
- Prince of Peace – He will be the one who brings about the long-awaited peace.

Clearly He will be an amazing leader who will personally provide the light for which the people of God are longing. But we also learn about the nature of the government which He will lead.⁶

- There will be no limit to his peaceful influence – “of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end...” (Is 9:7). No one will be able to challenge His authority or stop him.
- He will reign on the throne of David and reestablish His kingdom – “on the throne of David and over his kingdom...” (Is 9:7). He will fulfill the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7.
- He will rule with justice and righteousness – “...to establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness...” (Is 9:7). Everything about His rule will be right!
- He will reign forever – “...from this time forth and forevermore...” (Isa 9:7). There will be no possibility of His reign ending. It will be an eternal dominion.

⁶ Clendenen, 240.

It seems purposeful that there are four names and four descriptions here. The future ruler will be a divinely given gift with power and authority beyond what anyone has seen, and his reign will be characterized by the kind of peace and righteousness for which God's people longed.

In fact, this list is so glorious and beautiful, that one might be tempted to say, "How is this going to happen? It seems impossible!" And our text ends with the answer to that question. However, the answer is designed to give God's people the ultimate encouragement: "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." God himself is going to accomplish this. The promise of hope is rooted in the very essence of who God is.

Looking to God for hope was the main issue that Isaiah was driving at in the first place, and it is so fitting that the text would end this way. In the midst of difficult and dark circumstances the people of God are urged to look to the future for a son who will bring all the peace and joy for which they are hoping. Their deliverance is not going to come from political alliances, from military victories, or from shrewd politics. God is the only one who can really give them what they need.

A new day will dawn. And in the meantime, they are to trust in God. Since God promises future grace, they should trust him now.

The Joy of Past and Future Grace

The people of Judah were told to look forward to the advent of this future king and hope. We know the story of what God did through Jesus. We know about the fulfillment of the plan of God. We know that a virgin did conceive, that God did send a son. We know about the angels who said, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. . . you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (Lk. 2:12). When we read Isaiah 9, we know how God kept His word. The Old Testament is a beautiful tapestry of God's promises which are fulfilled in Christ. Looking back you can see the amazing plan of God.

We also know what God accomplished through Jesus. We know the story of cross – how the Son of God willingly suffered a death He didn't deserve in order to bring forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation. The Prince of Peace died for our sins in order to make peace with God possible.

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him... (Colossians 1:19–22).

For those of you who have repented of your sins and received Christ, you have "tasted and seen the goodness of the Lord" (Ps. 34:8). You know that joy that comes from placing your trust in God. You know the beauty of believing the promises of God. You know that even though your past was filled with all manner of evil and wickedness, Jesus saved you, forgave you, and cleansed you.

What's more, you know what the Bible says about the future. The Bible promises that one day Jesus is going to return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, defeat the devil once and for all, and bring all His redeemed people into the new heaven and new earth. One day in the future God will say "I make all things new" (Rev. 21:6), and He will reign forever and ever.

The people of God in the Old Testament were challenged to trust in God and to believe in Him since one day He was going to change everything through a son who would be given. Their perspective needed to change about the present circumstances in light of their bright future.

We have the benefit of knowing what the fulfillment of that promise looked like. We have the experience of seeing how God kept His word, and we know what the ultimate fulfillment looks like. We know that no matter how dark life and circumstances look, our future in Christ is bright beyond belief.

So if you are here today and life has become incredibly hard, or if there are circumstances which are causing you to be afraid, just listen to the promises of God rooted in Christ:

- *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33).*
- *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:6–7).*
- *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).*
- *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:37).*
- *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (Hebrews 12:3).*

The promises are given to us who know about the advent of Jesus and who know how the story of redemption is completed.

Isaiah 9 shows us, yet again, that God keeps His promises. It comforts us in that we see God's gracious deliverance of His people even when things look very dark. It gives us hope because we see that God is worthy of our trust.

It doesn't matter what the darkness is around you. Your future in Christ is brighter than the darkness of your past. The advent of Jesus Christ, promised in Isaiah 9, is a perspective changer. It calls us to trust in God no matter how dark life becomes.

The advent of Jesus Christ is a spiritual monument that invites us to believe that God keeps His word: "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com