

## A Child is Born Isaiah 9:1-7

Surely no gloom to her to whom distress. That's the literal translation of verse 1, which has no verbs. But it's poetry, and that's what makes it so powerful – being free from many of the normal rules of grammar, it can pack a big emotional punch. So even though different translators have tried to explain verse 1 in different ways, we can be certain of this: someone is in great distress, but in spite of it, there is no reason to be gloomy.

Okay, so what sort of distress could Isaiah be talking about? If we look back at the previous chapters, we can get a good idea. In chapter 7, as we saw last week, King Ahaz of Judah was afraid of being invaded by two kings in lands to his north – the king of Israel and the king of Syria. However, instead of trusting in God to save him, he sought an alliance with Assyria, an even more powerful country.

Unfortunately for Ahaz, this strategy would backfire in a big way. For in chapter 8 verses 7 and 8, Isaiah predicted that the Assyrians would eventually turn on the kingdom of Judah and invade it. Comparing the Assyrian empire to the Euphrates river that overflows its banks and swallows up the land around it, Isaiah predicted that the Assyrians would flood the whole land of Judah. And all that ended up happening during the reign of Ahaz' son Hezekiah.

But before that would happen, during Ahaz' own lifetime, the Assyrians would invade the northern kingdom of Israel, the area Isaiah describes in chapter 9 verse 1 – Zebulon and Naphtali and the land beyond the Jordan. Indeed, the Assyrians would put an end to the kingdom of Israel, and carry all its people off into exile. Isaiah thus predicted that the area around the Sea of Galilee would come to have many reasons to be gloomy indeed. They would be in desperate need of a deliverer.

But there was another reason that the people were living in such darkness – they kept rejecting the Word of the Lord that Isaiah tried to speak to them. For example, in chapter 8 verses 12 and 13, it seems that many of Isaiah's listeners didn't take kindly to his predictions that foreigners would invade the Promised Land and conquer the people of God. They thus accused him of taking sides with their enemies, in effect conspiring with the Assyrians. Because of their unwillingness to hear His Word, the Lord had become a stumbling stone, an offense to His own people.

So, if they weren't interested in what the prophets of the Lord had to say, where did these opponents of Isaiah look for truth? Chapter 8 verse 19 tells us that they placed their trust in the magic of sorcerers. They sought to find the truth from mediums who said they could communicate with the dead.

In contrast, Isaiah was calling the people to look to the Law of Moses and to the testimony of God's prophets, but the people would not listen to him. Because they did not seek their God, the people had no light in them. They lived in the darkness and the confusion of their own self-imposed ignorance. It's no wonder they were distressed and gloomy.

Now, I know we don't face exactly the same problems that these ancient Judeans faced. The Assyrian empire is long gone, and I don't think any of us visit those kooky palm readers who advertise along the sides of so many highways. But I wonder if we don't make some of the same sorts of mistakes those ancient Israelites made, albeit in more subtle ways. I wonder if we don't sometimes find it easier to look to political parties or government programs rather than to the Lord for safety and deliverance. I wonder if we don't look at times to our science and our technology for truth rather than to the Law and the Testimony we find in God's Word. I wonder if, where it comes to our day-to-day decision making, we are really any more loyal to God and His prophets than were the people in Isaiah's day.

For where did their rebellion get them? The last two verses in chapter 8 give us a chilling, and shockingly contemporary description of the psychology of sin: "They 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. And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness."

Is all that really true? Well, Gallup has done a survey comparing Americans' mental health in 2019 and 2020. And it should come as no surprise that men and women, Republicans and Democrats, white folks and black folks, married folks and single folks, and people of all ages report a decline in wellbeing during this year of riots in our streets, of chaotic, contentious elections, and of a worldwide pandemic. But you know, there was one group that reported an improvement in mental health, even during this terrible year – those who attend worship on a weekly basis.

And so we can see that even today, those who seek fulfillment anywhere but in the Lord will eventually find themselves empty and hungry. Even today, those who turn away from the only One Who can really solve their problems are doomed to a life of bitter frustration and of the darkest despair – needing a deliverer and needing enlightenment but refusing to accept the only possible source of help and truth.

But that's why chapter 9 is such good news. For Isaiah tells us that it is precisely the place which first felt the wrath of the Assyrians – the land of Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee and the land of Gilead beyond the Jordan – it is the place of the greatest darkness which will first see the light. It is those who have gone through the greatest suffering, those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death on whom the light will shine.

Now, we know that this prophecy was fulfilled some 2000 years ago when Jesus began to spread His light, conducting most of His earthly ministry in the very same place Isaiah described – in Galilee of the Gentiles. Isaiah described Him as the Wonderful Counselor, and as Jesus walked among us He did tell us wonderful things about God. He also told us the all-too-unpleasant truth about ourselves – that no matter how good we think we are, we are all sinners in need of the Savior, the Messiah that the angels announced to the shepherds near Bethlehem.

So, maybe you are in need of that Wonderful Counselor today. Maybe you feel like your life is spinning out of control. Maybe you are confused, bewildered at the social and political

changes taking place all around you. Maybe you can't make sense out of all the conflicting truth claims bombarding you from every side. Maybe you've been trying to figure things out for yourself but you feel like you've lost your way, like you're stumbling through an unfamiliar room in the dark.

If that's the case, then hear the good news. For just as in the days of Isaiah and just as on the night when the glory of God broke in upon the Bethlehem shepherds, the light often shines most clearly in those places where the darkness is deepest. If you know you need the light of Christ, if you know you need wisdom to make sense out of the world, then rejoice, for unto us a Child is born. Rejoice, for in Jesus Christ, the Wonderful Counselor has come.

But just like the people of Isaiah's time, we are not only in need of the light, in need of the truth. No, if we are honest with ourselves, we will also admit our need of a deliverer. Yes, they may have looked to the Assyrians to help them, only to find themselves invaded and besieged by those very forces in which they had placed their trust. But haven't we also found ourselves in danger from some of the very things in which we have sought refuge and safety? Some most obviously seek solace in booze or pills, only to find themselves enslaved to addiction. Others look to their jobs or careers to find meaning in life, only to find frustration and disappointment.

And none of those things, however powerful can ultimately save us. For how many people have lost jobs during these COVID shutdowns? How many have placed their faith in physical fitness, only to find themselves sidelined by sickness? How many have looked for reassurance to their bank accounts or retirement checks, only to find themselves one hospital stay away from bankruptcy?

No, in our increasingly chaotic, frightening world, it is easy to fall into the trap of despair, thinking that justice will never be done, that wickedness will always prevail. It is easy to lose hope, or even to become angry that God doesn't immediately step in and make things right. It's easy to turn away from God and to turn toward sin and self, only to find the anger and bitterness, the hunger and emptiness so common in Isaiah's time – and in our own.

But the good news is that Jesus is not only the Wonderful Counselor. He is also the Prince of Peace, ruling on the throne of David and over his kingdom, establishing it not only with the soundest judgment but also with the purest justice. The good news is that Christ has come to bring the joy of victory, victory over sin and death, into the lives of those who are the most downtrodden and oppressed. The good news is that those who have a relationship with Christ will be filled with the joy of harvest, the joy of having more than enough. Instead of living in the fear of oppression, the people of God can rejoice, just as people do when a war is over. Instead of suffering the poverty and indignity of conquest, the good news is that the people of God will one day divide the spoils of our enemies.

For the good news is that unto us a Child is Born. The good news is that the Prince of Peace will one day destroy any reason for anyone to go to war. One day, every warrior's boot, every bloody uniform will be destroyed, burned up like the wood in our fireplaces on a chilly winter's morning.

Oh sure, Woodrow Wilson may have promised that World War I was the war to end war. After signing a treaty with Hitler, Neville Chamberlain may have promised us peace in our time – only to find World War II breaking out a year later. But it will be the Prince of Peace who will finally accomplish what they and so many other politicians have promised, for of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.

But how will the Wonderful Counselor and the Prince of Peace bring us all these blessings? Because He is also the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father. The amazing truth is that the Child Who was born to Mary, the Son of David Who reigns on His throne, is also divine. That's how He can bring us truth, a truth that never changes or fails, shining His eternal light into the darkness of our rebellion and confusion. That's how He can deliver us from bondage to sin and death, multiplying the nation and increasing its joy.

For make no mistake – this truth and this deliverance are completely a work of the Child Who is born, the divine Son of David. We can't save ourselves by our own purity or strength. We can't figure things out through our own intellect and wisdom. No, as the last verse of our passage says, it is the zeal of the Lord of hosts, it is the passion and the determination of the God of all the armies of heaven which will perform this.

That's why we can rejoice during this Christmas season, no matter how great the darkness may be around us – it is God Who has caused the Child to be born. That's why we can rejoice, no matter how powerful the forces of wickedness may seem to grow – it is God Who has placed the government, the authority over all creation on His own Son's shoulder. No human rebellion can possibly resist His power. No resistance can possibly overcome His truth. And He is determined to bless His people with the safety and justice we so desperately need.