

REJOICING IN THE BIRTH OF CHRIST
(SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2013)

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 9:1-7; LUKE 2:1-20

INTRODUCTION

The ministry of Isaiah lasted at least 40 years, from approximately 740 B.C. – 700 B.C. Isaiah also recorded the death of Sennacherib in 681 B.C. The period shortly before this was one of great prosperity and expansion for both Israel and Judah due in part to the weakness of Syria and the non-intervention of powerful Assyria. But these days of luxury and prosperity were not built on a foundation of righteousness and would not last for many years longer.

In 745 B.C. the powerful Tiglath-pileser III became king of Assyria. He extended the influence of Assyria to the west into Syria and Israel and Judah. And in about 735 B.C. the king of Syria and the king of Israel fought against Ahaz, king of Judah, so that he would join with them in a defensive league against Assyria.¹ Part of this story is found in 2 Chron. 28. In 2 Chronicles 28 we read about the wickedness of Ahaz. In conjunction with his wickedness we read about two devastating defeats at the hand of Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel.

And yet because of God's covenant faithfulness, He was not finished with his rebellious and unfaithful people.

It was during these very difficult days that Isaiah delivered to King Ahaz the first Messianic promise in Isaiah 7. King Ahaz was told to ask for a sign that the power of Syria and Israel against Judah would be broken. But Ahaz in his unbelief refused to ask for a sign. In response to his arrogance, Isaiah delivered the familiar words of Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

Foolishly, Ahaz did not trust in God and accept this sign of the coming Son, but rather sought the help of Assyria, an account we read in 2 Kings 16:7-9. Ahaz was saved by the Assyrians but in exchange he became essentially a slave of Assyria and was bound to pay tribute to them.

2 Kings 15 also describes how the Assyrians conquered significant portions of Israel's territory in the north, especially in the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun.

The first 12 chapters of Isaiah can be summarized under two parts, both related to the message of the gospel. There is the theme of judgment and the highlighting of the sin of Judah and

¹ New Bible Dictionary, s.v. Isaiah, p. 512. (3rd Edition, 1996)

Israel. There is also the proclamation of God's work in bringing salvation to His people and the removing of their guilt.

In the midst of great darkness and hopelessness you are called to rejoice in Jesus Christ.

1. GLOOM AND DARKNESS AND THE GREAT CHANGE TO LIGHT AND JOY, v. 1-3

It might be difficult for us to relate to the themes and feelings of this chapter: hunger, rage, darkness, anguish, and gloom. For both Israel and Judah, apart from their respective captivities, this was one of the lowest periods of either nation. The ease and prosperity that had recently been enjoyed just 20-30 years earlier was vanished. The darkness was also one of desertion and emptiness. Both Israel and Judah had lost many people in the recent conflicts. Entire villages were likely deserted. And the even greater darkness and sadness was the spiritual darkness that was over both Israel and Judah.

There is an interesting picture you perhaps have seen, a satellite photo of North and South Korea taken at night. The difference between the two Koreas is astounding. You can identify the large cities in South Korea that shine brightly at night. But in North Korea there is only one pinpoint of light, which identifies the capital Pyongyang. Otherwise the entire nation is bathed in darkness.

Verse 1 specifically mentions the **gloom** and distress in the land or tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. These areas in Northern Israel were the farthest from Jerusalem. They were the first regions to tremble before the power of Assyria. These areas also became despised regions.

Once Congressman Charles Rangel was discussing the disproportionate amount of aid given by the Federal Government to Mississippi. In commenting on this he said, But who really wants to live in Mississippi?

And this was also the attitude concerning the areas of Zebulun and Naphtali. During the days of Christ, Nathanael said to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was one of the cities of Zebulun.

As we continue, I should make comment concerning the grammar and translation of this passage. In Hebrew, there is not the same use of tenses like there is in English. In Hebrew the concept of time is expressed differently in terms of actions already completed and not yet completed. The **perfect** refers to actions that have been completed, so in that sense they are part of the past. The verbs used in this passage are for the most part perfect verbs. This is why in our English versions most of the verbs are expressed in the present perfect. But we need to

keep in mind that Isaiah was describing still future events. And yet for Isaiah, these events were certain to happen, **and so in this sense they had already occurred.**²

The KJV and NKJV versions read in the middle of verse 1, “**And afterward did more grievously afflict or heavily oppressed her.**” The verb translated as heavily oppressed can also mean to make glorious. The translation depends on the context. Other versions read, “but in the latter time he has made glorious the **way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations or Gentiles.**” The three regions mentioned at the end of the verse correspond to the three regions that were established by the Assyrians after they conquered the northern part of Israel.³

Verse 2 repeats the theme of darkness. **The people who walked in darkness.** The reference here is again especially to the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, though all of Judah and Israel, could have been described as walking in darkness. That very powerful description certainly could apply to our own age. **The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.** Light and darkness are of course familiar metaphors used throughout Scripture, from creation until consummation.

When was the ultimate fulfillment of verses 1 and 2? According to Matthew’s gospel, the ultimate fulfillment of these first two verses came during the ministry of Jesus. In Matthew 4:13-17, we read:

Matt. 4:13 And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, **14** that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: **15** “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: **16** The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.” **17** From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Now I don’t know if Isaiah’s message would have been understood entirely as looking forward to the coming of Christ when he first spoke these words. We don’t know a great deal of the history of these regions after they came under the total control of Assyria for a time and then

² See Comments by Edward J. Young concerning this and the NET Bible, note 16 from Isaiah 9.

³ IVP OT Background Commentary, Isaiah 9:1. Three administrative districts were established: Du’ru, Magiddu and Gal’aza. These three areas are mentioned in Isaiah’s text: Galilee of the Gentiles (Magiddu province), the way of the sea is the Du’ru (Dor) province. And along the Jordan is the Gal’aza (Gilead) province.

under other foreign powers. But we can say that for over 700 years these words would have been used by God to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. Whether or not there was by faith a great deal of understanding of these prophetic words at the time they were given, they were used by God to shape the hope of His people, though it seems that few were ever given the proper understanding of them.

As you know, Israel was and is a small nation, less than 1/5 the size of the state of Illinois. The Assyrian empire in contrast probably grew to a size at least 100 times that of Israel. The Persian empire was even larger. And the Roman empire expanded even more. One of the promises given to Abraham was that he would become a **great nation**. The verb used in verse 3, multiplied, is the same verb God used in speaking to Abraham, “**And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.**” The imagery given to Abraham and repeated throughout the OT was the descendants of Abraham would become like the number of the stars or the grains of sand.

The words of verse 3 would have been familiar sounding words to God’s people. This was the simply the promise given to Abraham. Along with this great promise is the added blessing of joy. The joy of harvest. The joy of dividing the spoils of war.

We are somewhat spoiled in our own day. We don’t always have to wait for “harvest” time to really enjoy good fruits and vegetables. And we certainly get things easier than waiting for the victory in the next battle. But these two elements would have been readily understood by Isaiah’s listeners.

As was true of verse 2, the ultimate fulfillment of this verse was not until the time of Christ and the days of the apostles after the ascension of Christ. It was during those days that the nation of Israel, in the sense that it represented the church, was greatly expanded. Acts 15 is one passage that shows how the ultimate fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham and repeated in Isaiah 9:3, were eventually given fulfillment. There is continued fulfillment of this verse in the many Jews and Gentiles coming to faith in Christ. And is it not the case that the greatest earthly joy is always found in knowing God ourselves and in seeing others brought to that same knowledge.

Luke 15:7 I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.

2. THREE REASONS FOR JOY, VV. 4-7

Starting with verse 4, the next three verses all begin with the word “for.” The great reason for this great joy, expansion, and transformation, is explained in these three verses.

First, verse 4 speaks of the breaking of the yoke of slavery and oppression. The words yoke, staff, and rod all speak of tools used to make animals or slaves do their work. And certainly these would have been familiar images for God’s people going back to their slavery in Egypt and probably even in more recent days. But of course again, the real slavery is spiritual slavery. The even greater oppression is that of rebellion against God and of sin. Sin and Satan are by far the cruelest masters even in pleasure and in wealth.

The end of verse 4 speaks of the deliverance from this bondage and oppression as in the day of Midian. This is a reference to the great victory of Gideon and his 300 men who triumphed over the vastly larger army of Midian. As we know, God only allowed Gideon to fight with 300 men so that it was clear to all that the victory was not the result of either Gideon or his men, but rather God had given Israel this great victory.

Second, verse 5 speaks of the blessedness of peace following deliverance. This is the only place in the OT where this word *sandal* or *boot* is found. It is equivalent to one of the common Babylonian terms for sandal or shoe. Most of the soldiers in the Assyrian army would have marched barefoot. Their cavalry however were equipped with knee-high soft leather boots.⁴ Perhaps this is why the text in verse 5 speaks of noise or literally an earthquake or a shaking. A noise or shaking caused by many soldiers on mighty horses. **But** rather than be taken simply as plunder, these boots and the garments which have been rolled or dragged in the blood of the slain will all be instead burned. The weapons of war will no longer be needed because there will instead be the rule of the peace of God that comes through the birth of a child.⁵

Third, in verses 6-7, we are given the ultimate reason for the joy and light that would come. In the midst of great darkness, death, and loss, the ultimate hope would be in the birth of a male child, a Son. Doesn’t this third reason really stand out? Verses 4 and 5 make good sense in terms of the situation faced by Judah. There will be release from oppression. The instruments used in warfare will be burned in fire. But then the third reason – a Child is born? How does this bring joy in the midst of such calamity?

Literally verse 6 reads, **For a boy or male child has been born to us, a Son has been given to us.** As I noted earlier, the grammar of the verb speaks of this future birth as having already taken place. There is even in the grammar an emphasis on the historical nature of

⁴ IVP-Background Commentary, Isaiah 9:5.

⁵ Edward J. Young, p. 328.

Christ's birth though it would not come for another 730 years.⁶ It is also interesting to note that although the word for child used here means a male child, it is still emphasized that this male child is a Son. Why? This language connects this child with other important references throughout the OT that are developed even more in the NT.

Psa. 2:7 “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.

Is. 7:14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son

Isaiah in 3:4 had spoken that in judgment on the nation, God would give them children for rulers. But here the Child is not merely a politician or bureaucrat, but the one who holds and bears all government on his shoulder. Recall the words that Christ spoke to Pilate in **John 19:11**, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.”

Verse 6 reads, “And His name will be called...” The reading given in our Bibles gives a fairly straightforward reading of these verses. But I will mention that there is quite a bit of controversy concerning not just the number of names, but their meaning, and also whom they most properly apply to. This controversy involves not just Jews but also today Muslims and compromised Christians.

I think the best accounting of the names is to see 4 names or titles that are given to Christ in this verse. Christ was never called any of these names in His life. Rather these names are His attributes and expressions of His deity and humanity.⁷

Wonderful Counselor – The meaning of these words is far deeper than one who gives good advice or even comfort. Another translation reads, **Extraordinary Strategist**. The word for Wonder is a term frequently used in the OT to speak of God and His incredible acts, especially in delivering His people and in his ability to do that which is beyond our imagination. It is difficult to capture the power of the word, especially in our language. The meaning of Counselor is also very rich. It is especially in Isaiah, where the counsel or plan of God is often expressed. In the words of one theologian, “The plan of Yahweh consists in the radical carrying through of the holiness and the clear manifestation of the glory of Yahweh in his people,

⁶ Edward J. Young, p. 329.

⁷ According to E. J. Young, the Vulgate has six names. The KJV and some older versions have five names. Young and other modern versions have four names.

among the nations, and on earth, i.e. in the realization of his claims to sovereignty.”⁸ In the NT, God’s counsel is seen especially in terms of the careful plan that led to the death of Christ on the cross.

The name Wonderful Counselor then speaks Christ’s sovereignty over all history, which is beyond our capability to fully grasp, where all things have been ordained so that His Will and Plan are accomplished.

Mighty God - Some want to turn this into a name stripped of its deity and transcendence, a god-like hero. It is true that the plural for God, *Elohim* can be used to refer to men. But in the singular as is used in Isaiah, *El*, is only used in reference to God. Isaiah 10:21 settles this matter even more clearly.⁹

“The remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, To the Mighty God.”

Ancient religions commonly made a close transition between man and god. But this certainly was not the Jewish idea. God and man were not ever on the same plane. There is no usage here in these words of humanity simply being like deity or advancing up to become deity.¹⁰

The name Mighty God then speaks of Christ’s heroic actions as the God-man during his life on earth and His continued actions as the Warrior described in Rev. 19, the one out of whose mouth goes a sharp sword to strike the nations, which He rules with a rod of iron.

I see then especially in these two first names the emphasis on power, strength, and the accomplishment of what has been planned and in the next two names the emphasis on the comfort and peace that He brings.

Everlasting Father – This can be understood as, “One who is eternally a Father.” In reference to His people, the Messiah would be a Father to them. The idea here is that of **Psalms 103:13**, “As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him.” There is of course no confusion here with God the Father. The NT emphasizes repeatedly the compassion of Christ, without using this exact title, especially in terms of restoring those who had fallen. The actions of Jesus with the women taken in adultery come to mind. Go and Sin no more! Think also of the firm but kind restoration of Peter after his denial. Feed my sheep!

Prince of Peace – There is also in this title so much that could be said, as the word *Shalom* is used in various forms some 267 times in the OT and 92 times in the NT. The priestly blessing in Num. 6 ends with the greatest of blessings, “The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,

⁸ NIDOTTE, s.v. Counsel.

⁹ Edward J. Young, p. 335-336.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 337.

And give you peace.” The Prince of Peace is the One who ultimately brings peace having satisfied the just demands of God’s Law and turned away God’s holy wrath.

Rom. 5:1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 7 concludes this great section. The Messiah’s reign, established on justice and righteousness, will certainly be perpetual. Of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end. It is interesting to note that peace and government are mentioned together. Most governments attempt to find their increase through war and not through peace. This is also a lesson for earthly governments who engage in expansion through other means. They will be destroyed.¹¹

Also note, that the reign begins with the birth of the child, who sits upon the throne of David.¹² This passage advances the promise given in 2 Samuel 7:12-17. That prophecy told that there would be a Davidic throne and a successor.

16 And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.

Here we see that it was the Child who was the true fulfillment of this prophecy.¹³

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this. Judah was in desperate straits. Assyria threatened not just northern Israel, but Judah itself, a threat that would continue for nearly 30 more years or so. This zeal or energy designates the deep love which God has for His people. It is His jealousy on their behalf. God’s honor will be vindicated.¹⁴

CONCLUSION:

In the midst of great darkness and hopelessness you are called to rejoice in Jesus Christ.

- 1) Gospel Assurance
- 2) Assurance that God’s work will continue
- 3) Personal assurance that our work is not in vain in the Lord

¹¹ Ibid., p. 343.

¹² Ibid., p. 343.

¹³ Ibid, p. 344.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 345.

4) We must always bow before God who sees the big picture while we only see very little.

Closing Hymn: 163

Benediction and Commission –

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.