
The Gospel at Advent – Light in Darkness

Isaiah 9:1-7

Russ Kennedy

What a time of year this is. There is heart lifting beauty. There is crowded, hurried busyness. There is the lilting music of the season. There is much talk about gifts and giving, family and fun that warms our hearts.

There are the myths of the season. Santa and his reindeer bringing gifts to the good. The grinch getting crunched because of his grouch. Frosty the snowman... Well, you get the idea.

There is the music of the season. Intermingled with soaring truths are sentimental longings and utopian dreams. White Christmas, I Saw Mama Kissing Santa Claus, Happy Xmas (War is Over) all jockey for space in our ears and hearts with sweeping symphonic arrangements of great Christian carols.

It is very important for us in the sentimentality of the Christmas season to have some real and important context for one of the most significant Messianic texts.

Into this terrible blackness, light will begin to dawn. This has been a strange Christmas message, has it not? But consider Isaiah 9:1-2.

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.

What is the great and deep darkness in which they have lived and walked?

The prophet Isaiah begins to paint a terribly dark picture. Here is the appalling state of their depravity, sin and rebellion. It will soon bring about the terrible tragedy of their ruin (Isaiah 8:5-22.)

The darkness and depravity is evident in their coming judgment. Isaiah has used a metaphor evoking the rising swell of an ocean tide or a great tsunami, their destruction will come and overwhelm them. They will be judged with Assyria's coming (v.5-8). Against His own people God will bring a Gentile nation. They had refused the sweet waters of Shiloh so God would bring the raging torrent of Ninevah. It would race across Immanuel's land with a swift and devastating sweep.

It is even more shocking given Assyria's boasting (v.9-10). They boast that all resistance and counsel will fail and fall. Nothing will stand in their way. In a horrifying poem God's voice warns Israel through Nineveh's swagger.

The darkness is also evident in the warning words of correction (v.11-22). God has shown them their way, their bent, their character. They do these things because this is the way they are. They are living out of their hearts and are now subject to both the correction and the chastening of the Lord.

They had failed to recognize the Lord and acknowledge Him for who He is (v. 11-15). They refused to see the Lord as holy and sovereign. They were warned that the Lord Himself will become a stumbling stone, a trap, a snare. They refused to repent, to recognize the Lord with the result that when the Messiah came, they were blinded to Him.

They had also failed to respond to the Word (v. 16-20). They were summoned back to the centrality of the Word of God. In order to be Christ centered, you have to Scripture centered, since the Scriptures are centered on Christ. But Israel had gone astray because they had sought other words of authority, guidance and insight. In a tragic betrayal of the way God spoke to them, they sought out false prophets and false wisdoms.

Their final failure was to submit to God's providences in His chastening of them (v. 21-22). These verses anticipate their going into exile and their ruin. There is the immediate chastening and the long term consequence. Instead of real repentance which accepts the consequences for sin and embraces God's chastening, they are angry. They rail against God and lift their faces in defiance.

Into that darkness a light shines. Here is once again the great turning point. In the former time, God brought contempt on Israel. In the latter time, He will bring glory to the Gentiles beyond or beginning in Galilee. Here is a reference to the Old and the New. The former days are coming to an end in the tragic ruin of Israel's judgment. The latter days will dawn in increasing glory in the triumph of the Messiah's rule.

For the Gladness of His People

(v.2-5)

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.

Luke 1:79 and Ephesians 5:8 and 14 clearly refer to this passage, locating it first in the ministry of Christ and in the identity of Christians. This beautiful poem coming in the ugliness of sin reflects the beauty of Christ's coming in the darkness of His day. It then sets the scene for a growing walk in the light as God's people. When the light comes and where the light must live and walk and worship, there will be ever increasing joy and gladness.

The Great Change**(v.2-3)**

There has been the great change. In the darkness the light shined. In the ruin God multiplied the peoples. In the hardness and sadness, God has caused joy to rise. See then the union of rising light and increasing joy. The brighter our enlightenment, the greater our gladness. In the darkness, when the light of Christ shines brightest, the joy of God's people will swell the highest.

But it is a God-initiated light and joy. It is not manufactured in the intellect. It is not created in the emotions. The effect of seeing and the experience of gladness is the giving of God; it is His sheer grace. Yet the joy is over seeing the harvest and sharing the spoil. It is full when the harvest is brought in and the battle is won. It is joy and gladness that comes when the long season of toil and trouble is over. For Israel, though few would see it, and for us as grace enables it, the coming of Jesus is the focus of the bliss.

The Grand Cause**(v.4-5)**

So, their joy is not just happiness but deeply rooted in God who does good for His people. There is a grand cause, a joy producing "for".

God will deliver from slavery (v.4). The slavery of national and ethnic Israel points to their spiritual slavery. God delivered them into and God will deliver them from their slavery. But that deliverance in the change from the former days to the latter days will move in focus from the physical to the spiritual. It will encompass the deliverance for all of God's people from their slavery to sin.

He will destroy their enemy (v.5). In a battle metaphor, Isaiah enfolds into the enemies of Israel the enemies of God and His people. So there will come a day when the enemy of our souls and all his minions and servants will be brought down. All the instruments of their dominion and their persecution will be destroyed.

By the Greatness of His Person**(v.6-7)**

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.

The joy that will rise in the dawning of the light rejoices in the greatness of the person of Christ. Notice the "for" that is parallel to the deliverance from slavery and enemies. This brings us hope and gladness. But that deliverance is by the child born and the son given.

In His Coming***(v.6a)***

Our joy will be in the One who is great in His coming. He will come to us and for us. The glory of God is wrapped up in the good He has determined and designed for His people. And to us he comes in two important ways that are both expected and extraordinary.

HE WILL BE BORN AS A CHILD. He will come in all the normal ways of being human. He will not suddenly appear in time and space and history full grown. He comes as a child. He will grow up in a neighborhood. He will be in this world as we are in this world, except without sin. As a child he would be born into the covenant line. He will be traced to through the lineage of David.

HE WILL BE GIVEN AS A SON. He will be more than merely human. Whether or not Isaiah's audience would have understood that, Paul in Romans 1, following the rhythm and meaning here, identifies the one who is coming as Divine. He was already the son, the Son of God. So in his human birth, he does not become a son, but rather is a son who is given.

In His Character***(v.6b)***

Our gladness will be in the One who is great His character. The greatness of His character is exhibited in His rule and in His reputation

HE WILL BE GREAT IN HIS RULE.

The words are meant convey a grand majesty, a glorious sovereignty. The government will rest on Him with all the fit and rightness of the regent's purple mantle. In our western democratic governments, we hear these phrases with a sense of distance. The power, pomp and pageantry that accompany a mighty and magnificent monarch need to be clear in our eyes. Our hearts should be able to swell with awe, fear and holy love when we hear of the Lord Jesus Christ arrayed in purple robe of rule, the rod and staff in His shepherding hand and King of Kings and Lord of Lords emblazoned on His crown. This One is our shepherd, our brother, our groom, the lover of our souls.

HE WILL BE GREAT IN HIS REPUTATION.

These words are most familiar to us in the season of the year and what brought me to this text. His name shall be called by this list. We are clued here that this is not merely a name, like Joe or Hank or John. The name is in the singular. So, names in the Old Testament often are loaded with meaning. Not only did parents call a person by their name, but their name was a wrapper for their character or a message to the people. But here, the name he is called is the equivalent of speaking of one's reputation. This is what He will be known for and what He will be known as. Through His name and reputation His sinning people are confronted and His repenting people are comforted.

But even more, His rule will be marked by the variegated fame embodied in these wonderful phrases. I am deeply indebted to Warren Wiersbe for his helpful essays entitled, *His Name is Wonderful*.

Wonderful Counselor

He is known as the wonderful, exceptional counselor. He comes to the world and to His people, not as one merely making suggestions as to how to live, but as one with the authoritative interpretation of life. His counsel is not about helping us cope in life, but about helping us please our God. He is wonderful in the sense of being exceptional

or distinguished. That is to say, He is all that true, God-pleasing counsel points us to. So, the One who majestically bears the rule will be known for speaking for God.

Jesus comes as the wonderful Counselor. He is the very counsel of God; He is God's Word. By Him and from Him and through Him comes the counsel that fuels our joy in God. For this to be so, He will be the counselor of hearts. He will not merely speak to what he sees on the outward, but deeply understands, interprets and transforms the heart.

Mighty God

He is known as the mighty God. This child born who is a son given to us will have the fame and reputation of being the mighty God. This will not be an idle boast. It will not be an exaggerated but unfounded claim. This will not be the dazzled folly of idol worship. His reputation as the mighty God will be upheld. His heavenly Father endorses it. His mighty miracles and holy deeds employ it. His own words and works explain it. His saving death and rising life expand it. His heavenly intercession exercises it. His husbandly care for his bride expresses it. His kingly rule exhibits it. And one day all will exclaim it. In that day His consummation will excel in it forever.

Everlasting Father

He is known as the everlasting Father. Now how can this be? How is the son given as the eternal father? Are not God the father and God the son different persons? Isaiah does not mean for us to hear this as "the son is the everlasting father" thus undermining the truth of the Trinity. He is known as the everlasting father in two senses.

He is the unchanging source and origin of all. Jesus used this sense when he accused the Pharisees of being liars just like their father, the devil. However, through His person and by His power and according to His pattern, His people are transformed from the old persons they were into the new person they are becoming.

He is all that God the Father is, manifested. Here is an extraordinary mystery. While Jesus is a separate person in the Godhead, He is in no way different from the Father in His essence. He is functionally different. But He is the out-ricing of the Father's glory, of all the Father's attributes. He told His inquiring disciples that if they had seen Him, they had seen the Father. Seeing Jesus is seeing all the Father is. Jesus is the outward of what God the Father is the inward. Jesus is the Father's glory.

Prince of Peace

He is known as the Prince of Peace. This is why on the evening of His birth, the angelic heavenly host glorify God by saying, "Peace on earth among men..." Jesus is the peace of God. He has come to end the warfare of the enemy by triumphing over him through His death and resurrection. He has come to end the warfare in our souls by transforming us through His Spirit and grace. He has come to bring peace in His people and peace among His people. He has come as the Prince of Peace in the midst of turmoil and trouble. He will rule and reign in heavenly peace throughout all the ages.

In His Coronation

(v.7)

What a majestic sentence exalts the glory of the Messiah's triumphant rule.

What - it will increase without end throughout all the rolling spans of eternity in an every enlarging expanse of power and peace.

Where – it is installed on the throne of David. In the resurrection, the earthly has been brought up to the heavenly, Jerusalem into Mt. Zion. The Son of God and the heir of David, the Lord Jesus, is now enthroned in heaven from which He rules as His kingdom grows until the final subjects are gathered in. Then He will bring that rule into the New Heavens and New Earth where justice and righteousness will be unalterably established.

When – from the time of the coming of the King as a baby born and a son given, from this time the kingdom is inaugurated and is even now, today increasing. Then in the consummation there will be a final acknowledgment of the One who has been crowned. Every tongue, even eternally judged sinner's tongues and Satan lying, deceiving tongue, will truly confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the father.

How – the zeal, the infinite passion of God for the upholding of His own glory will accomplish this. Make no mistake; there is no open future unknown to God. What Isaiah has said here God knows will surely come to pass. He knows it because of His omniscience and because of His omnipotence. He has sovereignly declared it to be so and is passionately exerting His energy to bring it to pass.

Reflect and Respond

Christ has come as light in darkness – will you turn from the tragic and terrible ruin of your sin and return to Him who is the light of the world?

There is no Christ centeredness where there is no Scripture centeredness. In this season where token acknowledgments are given to the Bible and therefore passing recognition of the majesty of Christ, let us respond with affirming joy the Word and Spirit who spotlight the glory of Christ.

The brightness and wonder and majesty of gospel, of the great message of our Redeemer and Ruler, are obscured in sentimentality. But when we recognize the awful depravity of our sin, the terrible darkness of our world, the tragic decadence of much of what passes for Christianity, then the true beauty, holy sweetness and glorious joy of our Lord stands forth as a bright light.

His name shall be called; His reputation will be upheld, in our desperate need. In the ignorance of our sin, Christ is heard and heeded as our wonderful counselor. In the helplessness and hopelessness of our sin, Christ is received as the mighty God. In the temporal frailties and tragic fallenness of our world, Christ is known as the Everlasting Father. In the warfare in our souls and rebellion of our Christ, Christ is ruling as the Prince of Peace. Is this how He is heard to you? Is this how He is received by you? Is this how He is known to you? Is this how He is ruling over you? This is what the child given and son born actually means.

The light that came on that dark night has now dawned in the hearts of His people. It is a rising of dawn among all the people groups of the world. It is growing as His elect are called out to salvation over time and in all places. Of the increase of His power and His peace there will be no end. On David's throne He has set His crucified and resurrected Son to establish His kingdom and enlarge His dominion. It began with glory veiled in flesh and will be magnified through glory dwelling in His people. It will increase until the New Heavens and Earth. It will flow out like light from Mt Zion, the New Jerusalem in an ever increasing and expanding horizon of glory and gladness, forever.

This will happen because, the passion of God for His own glory as seen in the wonderful face of His Son and reflected on the worshipping faces of His people, guarantees it. Soli Deo Gloria.