

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

THE SETTING

By the time Isaiah served as a prophet in Israel, deep darkness had taken root. Isaiah is the longest prophetic book in Scripture, and more than half – 39 chapters – focuses primarily on the darkness of the people of Israel. Yahweh intended to punish them for their idolatry and disobedience. From the beginning of the nation, idolatry had been Israel's most serious sin. He had punished them for it again and again, and they never learned.

God chose the descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be His own nation. The phrases Peter joins together in First Peter 2:9-10 originally applied to Israel (and applies to all who believe in Jesus Christ):

9 But you are **A CHOSEN FAMILY**, a royal **PRIESTHOOD**, **A HOLY NATION**, **A PEOPLE FOR** God's **OWN POSSESSION**, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; **10** for you once were **NOT A PEOPLE**, but now you are **THE PEOPLE OF GOD**; you had **NOT RECEIVED MERCY**, but now you have **RECEIVED MERCY**. (**1 Peter 2:9–10, 2022 LSB**)

Israel's great sin was idolatry. She rejected Yahweh, the One True God, and embraced the false gods of the nations.

11 “Has a nation changed gods though they were not gods? But My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.” (**Jeremiah 2:11, 2022 LSB**)

Even pagans were faithful to their false gods, but Israel committed idolatry again and again. They never had any reason to abandon Him. He was always faithful to them. He blessed them when they obeyed and cursed them when they disobeyed. But they were so in love with the world that they despised their God.

Some were faithful, we know. But it's important to recognize that Yahweh kept them faithful; they didn't keep themselves.

5 In this way then, at the present time, a remnant **according to God's gracious choice** has also come to be. **6** But **if it is by grace, it is no longer of works**, otherwise grace is no longer grace. (**Romans 11:5–6, 2022 LSB**)

So Isaiah 8:21-22 describes the state of Israel in her darkest moment:

21 And they will pass through the land hard-pressed and hungry, and it will be that when they are hungry, they will be angry and curse their king and their God as they face upward. **22** Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be banished into thick darkness. (**Isaiah 8:21–22, 2022 LSB**)

TRANSITION: But into the distress, darkness, gloom of anguish, and thick darkness of God's judgment comes a brilliant beam of light.

THE PROMISE OF SALVATION

Isaiah 9:1

1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. (**Isaiah 9:1, 2022 LSB**)

All mankind is under the anguish of eternal judgment. The “thick darkness” of Isaiah 8:22 was not something invented specially for unfaithful Jews; it is simply the judgment of God on unfaithful, rebellious mankind. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had a unique place as God's nation. They alone had God's revelation and Law. But they despised that revelation and rejected Him. They chose to leave the light and return to the judgment faced by all mankind.

But, beginning in Galilee, God's glory was going to shine.

THE GREAT LIGHT

2 The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in the land of the shadow of death, the light will shine on them.

Symbols always point to something much greater than the symbol. My little, ten-carat gold wedding ring points to a wonderful marriage of 41 years and counting. This is especially true of biblical symbols. The imagery of darkness is not just a dimming of light; it is the thick darkness of the judgment of God. The light

that will shine will not just be a candle to make vision possible. It will be the glorious, blinding light of God.

The glory of God was going to burst forth from Galilee, illuminating both Jews and Gentiles alike. The spiritual darkness which overshadowed that land would be dispelled by a coming light. Seven centuries into the future, the Son of God would be born in Bethlehem but grow up in Nazareth. He would begin by preaching exclusively to the Jews; some Gentiles did hear Him, but He was sent first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24). We need to keep the phrase of Romans 1:16 in mind: “to the Jew *first*, and also [or *then*] to the Gentile.” The Gospel was not preached *exclusively* to Jews, but it was preached *first* to Jews.

UNIMAGINABLE JOY

Isaiah 9:3

3 You shall multiply the nation, You shall make great their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence
As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. (**Isaiah 9:3, 2022 LSB**)

Who does the work? God. He will multiply the nation. He will make great their gladness.

Abraham’s descendants would be increased: “You shall multiply the nation.” God promised Abraham,

17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. (**Genesis 22:17, 2022 LSB**)

The Lord is doing this even today as He saves sinners. Those sinners are not just of the seed of Abraham but also of the faith of Abraham (Romans 4:16). God is able to raise up children for Abraham from rocks in the field (Matthew 3:9); He doesn’t turn stones into people, but He does convert Gentiles into Abraham’s children.

Their joy would be magnified beyond measure. Two pictures of rejoicing are used.

The first picture of rejoicing is the joy that comes after an abundant harvest. I think we can forget all the economic theories; every society is an agricultural society. After all, if we have to raise food to eat. Industrial machines and information technologies don’t create food; agriculture creates food. An abundant

harvest should cause everyone to rejoice.

The second picture of rejoicing is the joy that comes from victory over enemies. The people of Israel were used to armed combat. They had been in battles since the day they crossed over the Jordan to occupy the promised land. Battles raged off and on through the time of the judges, through the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, and only increased after the kingdom was divided. War was not a sporting event. Victory was not about bragging rights; it meant that your family and home were safe, at least for the time being.

GOD IS THE VICTOR

Isaiah 9:4-5

4 For You shall shatter the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their taskmaster, as at the battle of Midian. 5 For every boot of the booted warrior in the rumbling of battle, And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:4–5, 2022 LSB)

Isaiah 9:4 emphasizes that the victory is accomplished by Yahweh and not by His people. Why are those who live in the thick darkness of God's judgment under His judgment in the first place? Because of their own sin and idolatry. Is there anything that sinners can do to save themselves?

Most people assume that judgment works like this. People do good and bad things as they live. When they die, they are judged by God, who weighs up or counts their good works and bad works. If their good works outweigh or outnumber their bad works, they will go to heaven. If their bad works outweigh or outnumber their good works, they will go to hell.

What the Bible says is that sinners are already under the judgment of God. All HAVE sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Good works can't save anyone, but even if they could, it's already too late.

But God DOES save sinners by grace and through faith. He saves them through His own Son.

TRANSITION: Here's what the Scripture says about the Son of God.

THE SAVIOR

Isaiah 9:6-7

6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. **7** There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of Yahweh of hosts will accomplish this. **(Isaiah 9:6–7, 2022 LSB)**

What are we told about the Savior?

First, God was personally involved. He didn't sit at a desk in far-off heaven and pardon our sins. He took on human flesh. Isaiah sees into his future; we see it in our past. A Child was given; a Son was born.

35 The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. **(Luke 1:35, 2022 LSB)**

Second, Jesus reigned from the beginning. Even during His earthly ministry, the government was already on His shoulder and still is. Jesus didn't start with the human kingdom of Israel and make it into God's Kingdom. He came to establish a Kingdom that had never been on earth before. It is a Kingdom that is still forming. That's why the Lord taught us to ask the Father to bring His Kingdom (Matthew 6:10).

Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor. There is no greater wisdom than the Word of God, and Jesus Himself is the Eternal Word of God. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Jesus Himself IS Truth (John 14:6). The Bible tells us everything we need for life and godliness (Second Peter 1:3). The Bible IS not just true, it is Truth (John 17:17).

Jesus is the Mighty God. He is the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son. He possesses infinite and unhindered authority and power. Jesus was remarkably gentle and peaceful during His earthly ministry. He came as the Lamb of God and treated people with gentleness. But He is leading the war against the forces of Satan, and He will one day return as the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Mighty God who will defeat the rebellion of Satan and his demons and of wicked humanity as well. All rebellion will be forcefully ended.

He is the Everlasting Father. This is not a denial of the Trinity or confusing God the Father and God the Son. Jesus IS a sort of Father to His people, with the love, strength, and provision of a father. But these words

are better understood as “Father of Eternity,” and that is more likely the meaning here.

Jesus is the source of eternal life for His people:

21 “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. (**John 5:21, 2022 LSB**)

27 “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; **28** and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish — ever; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. (**John 10:27–28, 2022 LSB**)

John writes “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” (John 1:4). It is Jesus who gives us living water, which springs up within us to eternal life (John 4:14). Jesus has eternal life within Himself, and He gives it to whom He wishes (John 5:21, 26), which is everyone the Father has given Him (John 17:2). When Jesus gives eternal life, it remains for all eternity. It cannot be lost or stolen or taken away. (John 10:28).

And Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Jesus was certainly a peaceful man. He acted peacefully and experienced the perfect peace of God, even in His suffering. But beyond this, Jesus rules His people now in peace and by peace. He has reconciled us to the Father.

21 And although you were formerly alienated and enemies in mind and in evil deeds, **22** but now He reconciled you in the body of His flesh through death, in order to present you before Him [**God the Father**] holy and blameless and beyond reproach — **23** if indeed you continue in the faith firmly grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. (**Colossians 1:21–23, 2022 LSB**)

He is not a screaming drill sergeant who abuses his recruits into mindless obedience. He is a tender Shepherd who lovingly cares for His own and gently guides them into maturity.

BRINGING IT HOME

The old hymn says,

The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin:

The Light of the world is Jesus!

Like sunshine at noonday His glory shone in:

The Light of the world is Jesus!

Come to the light, it's shining for thee!

Sweetly the light has dawned upon me!

Once I was blind but now I can see:

The Light of the world is Jesus!

We are all born into the darkness of sin and the certainty of judgment. Jesus described hell as “outer darkness.” That outer darkness is the inevitable destiny of every human being. There is only one way to be saved from the judgment of God, and that is through the grace of God given in Jesus Christ. We are commanded to repent of our sins and believe the Gospel. The Spirit of God promises to transform our lives so that we are no longer dominated by sin but instead increasingly grow into the character and conduct of Jesus.

As Christians, we are so used to this message that it no longer stands out to us like it once did. Perhaps that's one reason the Lord permits sin to maintain a presence in our lives until we are glorified. The knowledge that we remain helpless and powerless against sin breaks our pride and self-sufficiency, humbles us before the Lord and other people, and keeps us at the foot of the cross always.

Jesus came to bring light into the darkness. He came to take our fear of judgment and give us the hope of eternal life.