

Who Will End the Violence? Isaiah 9:4-6

These days, our headlines are full of violence. There have been a number of news items about domestic strife and race-based violence. On the international scene, we read of ongoing brutality by Islamic terrorists. The question on many of our minds is this: Who will stop the violence? As we come to this Sunday after Thanksgiving, and look forward to the Christmas holidays we are looking for hope. But is there really any hope?

The diver placed his ear against the hardened steel of the submarine's hull to catch the faint sound. More than 100 feet below the surface, he recognized the desperate Morse code message tapping out "Is there any hope?" As darkness fell on that Saturday, 8 days before Christmas 1927, two lookouts on the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Paulding* had spotted a periscope breaking the surface just off their bow. Within moments, the cutter struck U.S. submarine, S-4, which was coming to the surface after routine drills. It tore a two and one half foot hole in the side of the sub, sending it to the bottom. The collision happened within sight of Provincetown, Massachusetts, near Long Point off the extreme tip of Cape Cod.

Most of the men on the sub rushed aft and were drowned within minutes. But some sailors made their way forward to the torpedo room and survived the initial collision. In response to the survivors' pleas, the diver tapped out, "How many?" and the reply came back, "Six." The captain of the *Paulding* sent out an urgent distress message; rescue boats responded immediately but were hampered by a nor'easter and strong currents. During these efforts, divers tapped out messages to and from the trapped men – including messages from their families. With their oxygen thinning, the trapped men kept repeating the one important question, "Is there any hope? Is there any hope?"

Every thinking person in our society is asking the same question today. Is there any hope for our society? If so, who will put an end to this violence?

As Christians, we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture to answer our questions about life. We learn, for instance, in 2 Peter 1:3-4 that the Lord has given us everything that we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of the One who has called us to glory and virtue. He brings this about through His magnificent, precious promises. And there is no greater promise than the promise of the Christ! But our news is full of characters such as

“Jihadi John.” He is a Muslim Westerner who brags about the greatness of Islam as he beheads his captives on camera. Does our Bible really have a response to this? Do we have relevant answers?

The Brutal Assyrians

Commenting on the Assyrians, one author noted that “It is as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know.”[i] By the 9th century B.C. these brutal people had consolidated their control of Mesopotamia, beginning at their capital of Assur on the west bank of the Tigris river. In the ancient world it was understood that to resist the Assyrians meant that your city would be reduced to rubble and your fields and orchards would be devastated. By the mid 9th century B.C., the Assyrians were threatening Israel and Judah[ii] (Isaiah 8). Carved stone reliefs from the time show Assyrian soldiers impaling their captives high up on sharpened stakes as a warning to the populace. A stone monument in the British Museum shows Assyrian warriors counting a pile of heads from those whom they have conquered. The violent methods of the Assyrians were so effective that the Babylonians and Persians copied their brutal techniques. One author referred to the Assyrian violence as “calculated frightfulness.” [iii] So when you read about “Jihadi John” and the like, you realize that things haven’t really changed all that much, have they? (By the way, the Prime Minister of Britain recently announced that they believe their airstrikes have killed “Jihadi John.”[iv])

God’s Providential Control

In Isaiah chapter 8, we find an important reminder about God’s control over human events – including brutal regimes. The Lord promised that He would send the brutal Assyrian invaders upon the land, but that they would not capture Jerusalem (Isaiah 8:7-8). The Lord also promised that He would punish Assyria for their brutality (Isaiah 10:12). Why does God do this? What should this teach us and how should we respond to this lesson? Solomon commented on situations like this in Ecclesiastes 7:14, “*In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after Him.*” So, it is absolutely essential that we use all of these events to draw even closer to the Lord. Our heartfelt response to this wicked violence is found in Isaiah 8:13-14, “*Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread and He shall be for a sanctuary;*”

As we approach the Christmas holiday celebrations, we ought to note that Messianic prophecies (such as Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 9:6-7) are God's divine answer to all this human violence. We can "consider Him" and take our sanctuary in the fear of God, the Lord of hosts. So, for the remainder of this message, let's examine Isaiah 9:1-6 to see how God sets the days of prosperity and adversity "one over against the other" to demonstrate His glory. He shows us His glory in *four stunning contrasts* to give us heavenly hope.

Four Stunning Contrasts to Give Us Heavenly Hope

**1. God shows us His light in the worst of our darkness.
9:1-2**

As we learned last week, the area of northern Israel had been steeped in wicked idolatry. Through invasions and immigration, the area was populated by people who did not know the one true God. Things were so bad around the city of Nazareth that Nathanael inquired, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" But God delighted in placing His Son, the Light of the world, in that place of deep darkness. He is still doing the same today. The Savior of the world came to die for the darkest sins of men and to save us.

**2. God shows us His strength in the worst of our weakness.
9:3-4**

To demonstrate His unique glory, God shows us His strength when we are at our weakest. Paul learned this in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. He taught us in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 that the Lord *uses "the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty,"* so that *"no flesh should glory in His presence."* One of the clearest examples of this is the story of Gideon. Using fewer and fewer men (so that they would not take the credit, Judges 7:2), God brought an astounding victory over the Midianites (Isaiah 9:4). 300 men defeated 135,000! God showed His strength at odds of 450 to 1!

3. God shows us His promised hope in the worst of our fears. 9:4-5

The nightly news zooms in on marching jihadists and their blood-soaked victims. The first phrase in verse 5 describes this violent behavior. But it goes on to remind us that one day the weapons of war will be burned up forever. The prophecy in Ezekiel 39:9-13, is

reflected in Psalm 46:9-10: “*He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; He breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; He burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.*” Who will end the violence? God’s Messiah, the Prince of Peace, will bring this murderous violence to an end, once and for all! So, to our adversaries, we say, “We will” hope continually” in God (Ps. 71:13-14).

4. **God shows us His greatness in His small child. 9:6**

When you stop to consider these stunning contrasts, it makes perfect sense that God would send His only Son as a little child. A baby fills a home with joy, but he is a defenseless infant who must be protected. So, here is a weak one to confound the mighty. God showed us His wisdom in the way He guided the wise men (Matthew 2:11-12) to go back another way. He demonstrated His power in sending Joseph and Mary away from Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16) before Herod vented his murderous rage. And all along the way, He has been showing us heavenly hope. Yes, there is hope.

The conditions around the wreck of the S-4 were so dangerous that rescue operations had to be called off on Christmas Eve. In their last tapped out message, the six desperate survivors once again asked, “Is there any hope?” On being told of the impossibility of rescue, the doomed men tapped out, “We understand.” But today, through Jesus Christ, we understand that we do have hope, because of Christ’s birth at Christmas. He will bring an end to the violence. While society struggles under the burden of the bad news, let us share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Let us share hope.

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[i] Belibtreu, Erika, *Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death* http://faculty.uml.edu/ethan_spanier/Teaching/documents/C6.0AssyrianTorture.pdf Editor, H.S. (2002;2002). BAR 17:01 (Jan/Feb1991). Biblical Archaeology Society

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Lauinger, Jacob, *Extreme Violence Under the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, April 23, 2015, Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, abstract accessed at <http://www.jccgw.org/event/extreme-violence-under-the-neo-assyrian-empire/>

[iv] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/14/world/europe/jihadi-john-mohammed-emwazi-david-cameron-statement.html>

Immanuel, God Dwells with Men

Immanuel, God dwells with men
The Miracle of Bethlehem
For God gave us His Son, His Lamb
The sacrifice for sins of man
To save poor sinners, just like me
To save for all eternity
To bring His new adopted sons
To glory through His Promised One

How wonderful, this Counselor
The Mighty God and heaven's door
The Everlasting Father: Christ
Who paid our sins most awful price
For unto us a Child is born;
The Son we greeted with our scorn
But His great reign shall never cease,
The everlasting Prince of peace

This King of kings and Lord of lords
Is Jesus Christ, the Living Word
His government shall never end
Through peace that He alone extends
Because He died for sins of men
And conquered death and rose again
So, He alone can end our strife
The Christ: the Way, the Truth, the Life.

