

For unto us a child is born

Isaiah 9:1-7

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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.

(Isaiah 9:6-7)

Every Christmas these verses are read in most churches around the world, but what do they mean? To whom are they given? What is the need that demanded such a great promise? If we are not careful, we hear the verses and are satisfied with their apparent meaning, without knowing the greater significance.

When studying the Bible one of the most important questions to answer is what did these verses mean to the original hearers? This is true of these verses as well. Let us now look at the historical situation that these precious words of Christmas were spoken.

In the years after Israel entered the Promised Land, they were first led by judges, and then eventually by King Saul, King David and King Solomon. After King Solomon's death a problem arose and the nation of Israel split into two factions. The northern kingdom was made up of 10 of the 12 tribes and kept the name Israel. The remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, were the southern kingdom that came to be known as Judah. Jerusalem was the capital of Judah. Although both Israel and Judah struggled with worshipping other gods, Israel, the northern kingdom, grew in its wickedness to a greater degree.

During this time, around 720 B.C., a man named Isaiah was one of the prophets that God used to speak to the people of Judah. In Isaiah 7-8, we read how *"Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it."* *"The heart of Ahaz (the king of Judah) and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."* These were very dark days in the lives of Judah.

God, speaking through Isaiah, told those of Judah not to fear. Judah would not be conquered. He then warned the people of Judah, *“If you are not firm in your faith, you will not be firm at all.”* It reminds us of James 1:6-7, *“The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”* It is in faith that we stand firm in the face of trying times. It is as we draw near to Christ that we are given the faith that is required to trust in God.

To make matters worse, many of the people of Judah had turned away from the provision of God and were now envious of the leaders of Israel and Syria, who worshiped foreign gods and who had gained worldly success. Isaiah 8:6-8 tells us:

“Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah,⁷ therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks,⁸ and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.”

The “waters of Shiloah” were the pure, clean waters that came from the small spring that was located outside of the city of Jerusalem. It was symbolic of the pure, simple, but living water that God had provided for the people of Judah. Many of Judah had decided that the sufficient provisions of God were not enough, and longed for the godless things of the world that the northern kingdom and Syria had to offer. Because of this the Lord was going to bring against them the “waters of the River”. This word “River”, when capitalized, was referring to the great Euphrates River. It belonged to the great pagan nation of Assyria.

God was going to use Assyria to conquer both Israel and Syria. And because most of the leaders and people of Judah were also turning to the godless things of the world, Assyria would also come and sweep across the land of Judah and bring much destruction. This was a fearful prophecy.

The Assyrians had various gods, but their principal god was Ashur, who was a god of war. Because of this, every act of war was considered an act of worship. They were known for their gory and bloodthirsty acts. Historical records tell us:

“In strife and conflict, I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword . . . I captured many troops alive: I cut off some of their arms [and] hands; I cut off others their noses, ears [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.”¹

We find Nahum’s description of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, in Nahum 3:

“Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey! ²The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! ³Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies!”

¹ Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death, By Erika Belibtreu.

They were a people greatly to be feared.

Verse 8 then concludes this paragraph stating that all of this is going to happen in *“your land, O Immanuel.”*

For many this is hard to understand. Immanuel means, *“God with us”*, but how can God allow this to happen? In their hearts the people had rebelled against God. They had chosen to be devoted to the things of this world and pagan gods. They had chosen a godless life and now they were facing the consequences of a godless world.

The first threat was Israel and Syria. Isaiah then declared that they might put on their armor, devise plans together, or make threats, but it would not succeed because *“God is with us”*.

The Lord then warned Isaiah not to fear what his people were fearing, but to only fear the LORD of hosts. Isaiah was to fear God and not man. In that, God would become Isaiah’s sanctuary.

How many times do we need to be reminded of that? It has been said before, “If you fear God, you will fear nothing else. If you don’t fear God, you will fear everything else.” This is not a fear as one fears an abusive father or a bully at school. It is a fear like we see in Mark 4. Jesus and his disciples are in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. They are caught in a fierce storm, to the point that His disciples, who had been professional fishermen and who knew how to handle a boat, were afraid that they were going to die. Jesus then stands and speaks to the storm and all becomes calm. Then, in Mark 4:41, we find these words describing Jesus’ disciples: *“Overwhelmed with fear, they asked one another, ‘Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?’”* It is an overpowering fear and sense of awe, of one who has no equal. But, glory to God, He is trustworthy and good.

Isaiah then gives and guards the testimony and the teaching to his disciples. Isaiah declares that he will *“wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in Him.”* This is a faith and hope put not in the seen, but the unseen. Not in the present, but in the promised future. In the days ahead, when the people of Judah seek advice from those who speak to the dead, they should be redirected back to the teachings and the testimony of God. If they refuse, it will be because they have no light in them. They will then suffer distress and hunger and be enraged and speak against their king and their God. They will look to the world and its gloom and be thrust into darkness.

We, too, must follow this teaching. As Psalms 119:11 guides us, we are to hide God’s Word in our hearts. In times of trouble, do not turn to the world for solutions. Turn back to God’s Word. For those who repeatedly refuse to turn to God in the midst of trials, it may be a sign that they do not believe and belong to God at all. Those without the light of God will walk in darkness, distress and gloom. They then will be enraged, turn their faces upward and speak against both God and king.

This was the bleak outlook for the people of Judah to which Isaiah spoke. Their first fear was defeat from the hands of Israel and Syria. The second threat was now the fierce Assyrian army that was unstoppable in this time of history. Destruction and doom were all they could see.

In the midst of their darkness and utter fear, they turned to the world for solutions and found nothing but more desperation. But for Isaiah and the remnant of true followers of Yahweh, they

found sanctuary in Immanuel, God with us, trusting Him even in the midst of the coming doom. Living in the midst of a sinful people, they, too, would experience the corporate consequences of sin.

Isaiah then prophesied of a new day that would eventually come for the people of God. A new day that would last forever (Isaiah 9:2-5):

“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. ³You 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.”

The day would come when the darkness would be driven back. A great light would shine. The nation would grow and so would their joy. God would break the yoke that had burdened them, the staff that was used to strike their shoulder and the rod that was used to beat them. God would bring the victory just as he had for Gideon against the Midianites in Judges 7. The Midianites and their allies had been camped in a valley. It described them as numerous as locust and their camels could no more be counted than sand on the seashore. Gideon led 300 men against this vast army, armed with only trumpets and clay pots with torches inside. On that day God had brought a complete victory in such a way that only He could take the glory. God would once again come to the aid of Judah and bring about an awe-inspiring victory that only He could accomplish. But how would this victory be won? An army? A political strategy? An alliance? No . . . a child.

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For them, and all believers that would follow, the child would be born and intentionally given as a gift from God (John 3:16). In these two verses we find a description of the character, the works and the kingdom of the coming Messiah. This Messiah would reign as the King of kings and Lord of lords, bearing the full responsibility for His earthly kingdom. His name would be called **Wonderful Counselor**, for He would be the source of divine and extraordinary wisdom from a heart of compassion that will be able to sympathize with our weaknesses, since He, too, would be tempted in every way, and yet would not sin. This was great news for those who were uncertain and confused.

He would be **Mighty God**, all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present. This was amazing news for those who were weak and desperately in need of rescue. This Messiah would be **Everlasting Father**. This would be a blessing for those who needed an authority-figure, a caregiver, a provider, a shelter and a warm embrace. This Messiah would be a **Prince of Peace**. He would bring well-being at a heart level and restore life to how it was intended to be. It must have been such a relief for those who were in need of peace with others and peace with God.

These are divine titles. The Lord is *“wonderful in counsel”* in Isaiah 28:28. God is referred to as *“Mighty God”* in Isaiah 10:21. God is referred to as *“Father”* throughout scripture, and only He is everlasting.

This child would grow to govern an earthly kingdom that would know no end. He will sit on the throne of David, as promised, forever. It would be characterized by peace, justice and righteousness from now and forever more. This will be accomplished because of the zeal of God.

Once again, God was showing Himself to be sufficient for our every need as He spoke into the brokenness of the people of Judah. A day was coming, but for now they would have to believe and wait on the Lord.

This promise has come true to one extent, at Jesus’ birth, but at the same time we still await the second coming of Christ. This is our Advent. How are you at waiting? Many of us find it difficult. We have microwaves, fast food, Amazon Prime, Netflix. We now do in minutes what used to take days, and yet we still are impatient. To grasp these verses we must understand waiting of a different kind.

In these verses God is promising a Messiah that the original hearers will never meet. The Jews will wait 700 years for His coming. Before His birth, they will endure the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Thankfully, they saw the world in a more corporate way. Even though they might not experience the benefits of the Messiah, they rejoiced in the fact that their people, their descendants would one day revel in His glory. This was the hope that carried them forward in even the worst of times.

God did not have to share this prophecy this far in advance, but He did. It gave the Jews something to live for, a hope for a better day, knowledge that God had not forgotten them, and an assurance that in the end everything would be made right.

In much the same way, we, too, await the coming of the Messiah. On that day, all sin will be put away, all wounds will be healed, justice will be served, and righteousness will reign. Darkness will be driven back, fear will be removed, conflict will cease, and peace will reign. Until then, may we live expectantly, knowing that it is only a matter of time until Christ returns and everything is made right.

Discussion questions:

1. What from this sermon did you find interesting or meaningful?
2. Isaiah said, *“I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in Him.”* Can you relate with any of this sentence? Can you remember a time that you had to wait on God?
3. Some from Judah were not content with what God had given them, so they turned to the things of the world. Why do you think Christians are tempted to seek the things of the world?
4. Isaiah was instructed to not fear man, but to fear God. Why do you think we fear the opinions of others so much?

5. The child will grow up to be “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Which of these do you need most right now?
6. How should it affect the way that we live, if we are eagerly waiting for the return of Christ?
7. What do you need to remember from this sermon?
8. What do you need to do about it?
9. How can we pray for you about that?